

Conversations in Pühtitsa

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*You won't perceive the meaning in these lines,
Nor will you grasp love's tender hand's designs,
Unless you stand alone in quiet thought,
Amidst the grief your lonely heart has brought.*

*Love will not enter, nor will you feel its glow,
Its warmth remains a stranger here below,
Until you dare descend into the depths,
Forbidden to the flesh – where crimson rests.*

Conversation One

When we gather, I want to share what weighs on my heart, what it experiences, and what it mourns. Perhaps these feelings and sorrows won't resonate with you, but I still open my inner world to you and share the thoughts and emotions that fill me.

In our lives, we often encounter the painful reality of those who have recently lost loved ones. The death of someone close plunges our soul into grief. If these emotions persist, despondency may set in, accompanied by visions or voices. The gravest danger arises when we begin to trust these visions and attempt to communicate directly with the deceased, rather than turning to God. Sometimes these spirits claim peace in the abodes of the righteous, urging us to leave them undisturbed. However, at other times, they express distress, beckoning us to their aid. What makes this perilous is that demons may exploit these visions, posing as benevolent spirits from God. And then, gradually, they exert pressure on our psyche, transforming tranquillity into anxiety, leading us deeper into delusion. Unfortunately, many priests fail to recognize or comprehend these spiritual afflictions. Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite warns, "Daydreaming is the devil's bridge into the human soul." Therefore, we must reject any form of visionary experience, no matter how convincing it may seem. It is crucial to understand that as sinners, our prayers and closeness to God don't justify trusting dreams as divine revelations or sources of solace.

God reveals His will through many avenues, avoiding the realm of dreams to protect us from delusion. We should dismiss such experiences and warn others that the Church does not sanction placing trust in dreams. Divine communication through dreams is reserved for those of exceptional spiritual depth, immersed in constant prayer and contemplation – something rare indeed. Beware! The devil, whose name 'satan' translates to 'enemy' or 'opposer,' all the time opposes our fulfilment of God's will. If we fail to fulfil God's will, we cannot humble ourselves. Consequently, we are unable to acquire the state into which God can enter, and our lives will be in vain. The

absence of humility presents a significant issue because even dedicating our entire life to fasting, prayer, and good deeds for Christ's sake, without fulfilling God's will, precludes our salvation.

Have you heard about Father Dorimedont's polemic with Father Sergius Rybko from Moscow? Father Rybko, a priest and avid follower of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, has authored numerous books on women's monasticism and various spiritual matters. He argued that spiritual guidance is currently lacking and advocates for living according to the Gospel, the teachings of St. Ignatius, and the Holy Fathers as the path to God. In contrast, Father Dorimedont insisted that the patristic path remains steadfast and will endure until the end of time. He asserted that the traditional model of salvation through the relationship between novice and elder must always be upheld. Even if some monasteries don't practise this form of spiritual formation, it doesn't negate its importance or relevance. Father Dorimedont advocated obedience as the simplest path to God, where very little is demanded of us. In monasteries where the 'elder-novice' model thrives, novices simply integrate into this structured environment, and that's it – they're already facilitating the salvation of their souls. Such a practice is common on Mount Athos but regrettably rare in Russia, even in the pre-revolutionary era. Only a handful of monasteries, such as Optina Hermitage and Glinskaya Hermitage, followed the 'elder-novice' model. These monasteries maintained a lineage of spiritual elders, where each successor took on a novice who would eventually become an elder themselves upon their spiritual father's passing. This continuity ensured the preservation of their spiritual tradition and facilitated their path to salvation.

We already talked about this, but let's go over it again: there is inner obedience – which means purifying the mind, purifying the heart, and getting rid of our own desires and speculations. External obedience also plays a role in this. However, if a person's external obedience destroys their inner world, causing them to become angry, humiliate, insult, and hate their neighbours, they cannot be saved. In such cases, external obedience does more harm

than good. External obedience without internal obedience can destroy a person. Therefore, external obedience must always be supported by internal obedience. We dedicate our whole lives to achieving inner obedience. If we fail to acquire it, then we have lived our lives in vain, and it doesn't benefit anyone.

Problems in Greek monasteries on Mount Athos very often arise among novices and monks who lived for some time in the West, as the spiritual atmosphere there is much worse than in Greece, which damages those people to some extent. Their most basic damage is their opinion. Moreover, conflicts occur, namely between those who lived in the West. All starts from imposing one's opinion, like "It's better to do it this way" or "I'd do it this way", and after that, it goes on and on – starts a fight, after which there is no peace. The elder admonishes the brothers, separates them, undresses and dresses them again, tonsures them, but nothing helps. Hellenic Greeks may quarrel, or a Greek from Germany may quarrel with a Hellenic Greek. But if a person (even if he has internal damage, that is his own opinion) sees that the one with whom he quarrelled has no evil thoughts and doesn't hold any grudge against him, then he will rant for a few days, and then he'll calm down, and peace and love will return. But here, when they quarrel with each other, they both get angry and if one starts failing at something, then the other develops gloating and malice, and this sowing of evil remains. They understand in their minds that it's bad, but they cannot do anything about it.

And this problem lies elsewhere. An elder gives them a task – externally, they complete everything, but at the same time, they start scrolling in their heads all the events that are taking place in their monastery and the world, that is, they have their own opinion and view on them. Thus, they are stewing in their own juice and decide for themselves what is good and what is bad. They don't care what the elder tells them and always remain stuck to their opinion, which is why they cannot taste this obedience from him. And when the elder gathered us (he usually gathered us when some events were happening or for conversations), he addressed those who came to the monastery after 30–40 years: look at those novices and monks who have lived

here for a long time, and learn from them. If the monastery functions normally, if there is love and obedience, then the person who comes there learns not only from the elder, but also comprehends monastic science by looking at those novices who perform obedience and coming into contact with their inner obedience and inner world.

I have already spoken and will tell you again about monastic obediences. Obedience of an ecclesiarch (a churchman) is considered difficult because he never gets enough sleep. If the service starts at 2 AM, he has to get up at 1 AM. At 1:30 AM, he already rings the bell and lights all the lamps. After this, he walks around the temple three times, striking the semantron¹: the first time 15 minutes before the service, the second time 5 minutes before the service and the third time right before the service. The service ends at 7 AM. He needs to put out the lamps and leave only the main ones burning, and more or less clean up the temple. At about 8 AM, he closes the temple and goes to bed. He hands over the key to the gatekeeper and at the gate, another monk reports for duty. By 8 o'clock the pilgrims begin to wrap up – they go to the front desk, drink a cup of coffee, eat a couple of pieces of Turkish delight, and leave. If someone has to go far, the brothers give them olives and bread. When the groups arrive, the gatekeeper opens the temple, shows them the icons, and tells them a little about everything.

Let's return to the obedience of an ecclesiarch: at 8 AM he goes to bed and at 9 AM his obedience continues until 11 AM when the prayer service begins. Every day there is a prayer service to the Mother of God (it's not held only on Saturday and during the All-Night Vigil). The prayer service lasts about half an hour and at 11:30 AM there is a lunch meal. After lunch, everyone works again until 2 PM and then rests until the service. At 3:30 PM the evening service begins, after which everyone goes to the second meal (but if it's Monday, Wednesday, or Friday there is no second meal). Then, after a short break, Compline begins with the Akathist to the Mother of God. The service ends at 6 PM. The ecclesiarch tidies up the temple again and goes to rest at about

¹ a long wooden carved board that gives a sound like a gong when struck with a mallet

7 PM. In his cell, he has to fulfil the prayer rule and at 8-9 PM, he can go to bed. He sleeps until 1 AM, and so every day, it never changes.

The rules of the monastery are the following. An elder once gathered everybody and said, "If you have finished your obedience, you go and help your brother. That is, you cannot go to your cell and rest there, while someone else has not finished their obedience. And when the brethren finish their obedience, and there is still some time, they don't go to rest in the cell, but still do something. Thus, this ecclesiarch would always make some fruit juice for the elder. He would come into the refectory and ask, "Father, bless me to take the apron, bless me to take the knife" – he always took a blessing for everything. I remember how one of the older brethren humbled him: he took him by the hand and led him around the temple saying, "That lamp doesn't burn well, in that one there isn't enough oil." I thought, what would he do? But he waved his hand. He was clearly minding someone else's business, but he removed the lamps and added oil to them. He did everything calmly and went on to perform his obedience. Not only that, but he was never irritated but very humble, and the elder even set him as an example. During the Great Lent, all the carpeting is pulled out of the church and washed with water from the water cannon. The soapy water is removed with mops, and then the brethren roll the carpeting up and carry it on their shoulders to the third floor and hang it on the balcony railing. During fasting, they eat only once a day so they have no strength, and it becomes difficult to do this kind of work.

I want to tell you about temptations that may come on Mount Athos. There are practically no external temptations, but primarily internal ones that occur when a novice accepts the devil's thoughts. One brother came to an elder, attached to him in soul. Among the main obediences, this brother had obediences in the library. The library received modern publications, not only Orthodox but also, for some reason, zealot ones. He also looked through that literature and became interested in the ideas of zealots. And the elder, in turn, was on good terms with Patriarch Bartholomew. And this brother began to be tormented by a thought: "Everything is wrong in our monastery. We have retreated from Orthodoxy, and the whole truth is only in

zealotism. The elder wants to become a bishop and is establishing relations with the Patriarch of Constantinople to further make a career for himself as a bishop. He expressed all those thoughts in a letter and left it to the elder. He became very irritated and one day, in such a nervous state, he approached the proto-hegumen², threw the keys to the temple on the table, and said, “That’s it, I can’t take it any more, I’m leaving.” Dressed only in what he wore, without any belongings or documents, he left to wander the Mountain.

At that time, the elder was in Constantinople. He arrived the next day and was informed, “That brother has fled from our monastery and left a letter.” During the meal, the elder was worrying, as he had diabetes. He said, “He wrote that I’m preparing for the episcopate, that the Patriarch loves me so much, and that I am fawning on him. Why would he say that?” The brother had been gone for five days, and the brethren asked, “Shall we go look for him?” Then, all of a sudden, on Friday, a monk who lived on the top of the Mountain called them and said, “Your brother is at my place. Last night we were at the service, and tomorrow we are going to you by ship.” The elder replied, “Good, we are waiting.” Then, after the evening service and the meal, following the Athonite tradition, the eldest monk exited the refectory first and stood by the doors with a blessing hand raised. The other brethren followed, bowing as they passed him (first the eldest, then younger ones). By that time, the monk from atop the Mountain arrived with the escaped brother, and the brethren gathered around them. The elder turned around and saw the runaway brother in tears. He fell at the elder’s feet and started crying, “Elder, please forgive me!” The elder lifted him up, but he still continued to cry and fall at his feet. The brethren were also crying, exclaiming, “He has returned!” The elder embraced him and brought him to the refectory. He seated him and told me, “Father Raphael, bring something to feed him.” He started to eat, but couldn’t get enough. He kept eating and eating and couldn’t stop talking for a long time. All the brethren had already left the refectory, but he was still telling his story.

² the first after the hegumen

“As I left the monastery, all of a sudden, something happened to my head – like *clap* and my mind was gone... I undressed myself completely like Adam and headed to the top of the Mountain. I did not know the path, so I had to go through the bushes (Without knowing the road, it takes around two days to reach the top). I’ve never been at the top, though I’ve lived on Athos for 20 years (When he came to the monastery, he had never been anywhere else. Maybe he only went to the nearest monasteries for patronal feasts, but he never went anywhere else). I got a severe sunburn and hurt my body in the bushes. But the hardest things were hunger and thirst. I did not eat anything for four days.” He was eating, telling the story, and showing his sunburns and scratched shoulders, “Here, father, look.” As he approached the church of St. Panagia (the temple stands at an altitude of 1.5 kilometres, and there is a well there), he fell to that well and kept repeating, “Neraki, neraki!”³ He drank the water and started his way to the top (it’s 2033 meters up the rocks and there is a beaten path so technically it’s easy to get there). Soon, the monk who called us came there and saw him, He gave him some food, and then he felt better. They climbed down together, then went onto the ship and sailed on the ship to the monastery. This brother was still a little crazy for a week. The elder said that after the meal, he was given a bit more food and even vitamins. For a week he was taking vitamins, eating, and sleeping intensely. That is the story. On Mount Athos, these spiritual laws apply one hundred per cent. A little later, he came to his senses. During the night service, we were sitting on pews and praying. He approached the elder and began to say something to him, but the elder shouted at him. Looks like his zealot thoughts have remained in his mind, they won’t go away that quickly. Those thoughts were bothering him for a long time, but in 3–4 months he finally calmed down. This is how a person may enter a state of delusion and get damaged through thoughts and trusting them.

On Athos, there is a big monastery called Esphigmenou. They have around 120 people: 70 people labour in the monastery

³ “Water, water!”

and the rest live in their own cells. Zealots can be noticed right away – their inner world is reflected outside: the sense of their righteousness and superiority over the “lost” makes them a little sloppy and proud, although they are generally good people. I once went to the Esphigmenou monastery and had a meal with them. I sat down at the edge of the table, and a plump zealot monk sat next to me. When the sweets were brought, he gave me his treat. The Greeks themselves are kind and hospitable they will feed you and give you something to drink. The meal was over. The brethren stood up, hegumen in the front, and began to pray. The refectory was so shabby, and then cats, four or five, were sneaking into it. The red cat went straight inside. The brother in charge of the refectory saw the cat, grabbed it by the collar, and put it outside. The prayer ended, and the hegumen went out of the refectory and raised his hand for the blessing.

I’ll tell you another story. A novice from the Valaam monastery came to Athos. He was in his 40s. Initially, he came to the Serbian monastery, Hilandar, which is close to the Esphigmenou. He got a place there, lived there for a month, and then the brethren told him, “Sorry, your visa has expired, you need to execute documents.” Other monasteries did not offer him a place. But when he came to the Esphigmenou, he was allowed to stay. He asked there, “Are you a zealot?” He replied, “Yes, I will be a zealot.” Then they baptized and anointed him again. In that monastery, they have a kind of their own school. Every day they remember the “retreat” of Patriarch Bartholomew. He doesn’t understand Greek, but they still talk to him with signs, show him pictures, etc. Every day they say that the patriarch is so-and-so. The novice doesn’t really understand, but he tries to. He has lived there for two years and was tonsured as monk Theodosius. Once upon a time, Russians visited the Esphigmenou Monastery and had a chat with the locals. And then, it occurred to Father Theodosius that something was wrong. He went to the hegumen. There used to be hegumen Euthymius, but he passed away, and a new one was chosen – Father Methodius. And so Father Theodosius came to Father Methodius and said, “Elder, I don’t feel comfortable with zealotism.” The hegumen replied, “Father Theodosius, strengthen Orthodoxy.”

Father Theodosius replied, “Bless me.” A week passes, and he again comes to the hegumen and says, “Elder, I don’t quite like the idea of zealotism”. He heard the same reply, “Father Theodosius, strengthen Orthodoxy.” Then Father Theodosius said, “Elder, bless me, I will go and take a little rest from this life. After Easter, let me go to Karoulia. I will stay there for some time alone, refresh my mind and relax.” – “Alright, off you go.” And they let him go.

Father Theodosius has come to Karoulia. On the Outer Karoulia, there is the Seraphim’s cell. To get to the Inner Karoulia, you need to go out from the Outer Karoulia in one place onto a camouflaged path. It goes through the courtyard of one of the cells and descends into the gorge, and then you go down the chains to the cliff. You will see a wire nailed to it. On one side, there is a cliff and a small path and on the other, there is sea. The small path ends and two wooden stairs are installed to descend the rocks, which are used to descend into the Inner Karoulia. Inner Karoulia is a small area among the rocks. There are cells, pieces of land, a small church, and the Seraphim’s cell. It’s located at the very end of Inner Karoulia. You need to go through St. George’s cell – the skulls of Russian monks remain there. If you go through it, you find yourself in a cave made of some red rock that goes straight to the sea. There is a balcony above this place – half of the cell is in this cave, and half hangs above the water. There is no roof, it’s decayed. So, he made himself a bunk out of boards. He went to bed without taking off his shoes and without undressing – that’s how he was asceticising. He lived alone and because of this spiritual delusion state, he began to suffer from suicidal thoughts. When these thoughts of throwing himself off the cliff started coming, he clung to the beam of the cell with both hands and ran inside the cave. He had a kitchen there, where he would drink tea and calm down. Then he boarded the boat and sailed to Father Raphael Berestov.

Fr. Raphael lived then in the Zograf cell of John the Apostle. Fr. Theodosius came to him, confessed, and lived there for a month. Then, those thoughts overcame him again and he, shaking with fear, went to Fr. Raphael. The hegumen of the Esphigmenou Monastery realized that Fr. Theodosius had moved away from the zealots, and

forbade him to take communion. Yet, this ban was not valid, he returned to the fold of the Orthodox Church. Then, he once went to Fr. Joachim in St. Panteleimon Monastery and told him that those zealot thoughts had been terrorizing him. Fr. Joachim replied, “My dear, you’ve been living in that heresy for such a long time and have fallen into delusion. Now you have to get back to a calm state of soul.” – “But how is that possible, father? I’ve lived on Athos for so long, I’ve been labouring so hard...” – “No, that all went to your detriment.”

Then, Fr. Theodosius lived a little more in Karoulia and, after that, moved to St. Panteleimon Monastery. He lived there secretly in a cell, then he moved to the Valaam Monastery, and now he is wandering somewhere in Jerusalem – that’s how he lived. There are times when a person accepts some thought from the devil, trusts it, and then the damage itself occurs. He realizes that he has been damaged only when he stops trusting it, and then the process of liberation begins, which is difficult and thorny because the enemy doesn’t give up that simply.

I want to tell you about another case when one monk trusted his thoughts. In the Koutloumousiou monastery, a monk, somewhere in his 50s, was asceticising there for many years. He had a head injury in childhood, so he would constantly drink pills. He was a kind person and once visited Russia. And once upon a time, a thought came to his mind, “You’ve been drinking pills for so many years, enough of that! You are already healthy, no need to drink them any more.” So, he stopped drinking them. At that moment, he left the monastery and started having problems with his head. He became kind of lost and started to be afraid of things. During the evening service, I was praying near the window in the church and saw him slowly sneaking along the wall and running behind the fence. Where and why he fled is unknown. The elder was back, and the brethren told him about that incident. All of his belongings were left. One, two, three, six months passed, but he was still gone. The brethren reported him to the police. In half a year in May, he was found close to the Monastery of Iviron in an abandoned cell. He was already dead, his body was half-decayed. The police came to our monastery and took two brothers to help them identify the body. When they came to the dead body, they managed to

identify the dead brother. The beard, clothes, and fragments of skin have remained. They wrapped his body in a blanket, brought him to the monastery, and read a burial service for him. According to an Athonite tradition, graves, and brick niches in monasteries are always ready. So, if some brother passes away, previous bones are dug out and washed in a basin with wine and essential oils and then put into a burial chamber. The brethren have freed up some space, put this monk in a tomb, and covered him with boards on top. Within three years, the dead body decayed completely. After that, the elder gathered all the brethren and said, “He was a good monk. He had good humility but bad death. I don’t know anything about him”. In 40 days there was a funeral service and the hegumen blessed the good meal and remembrance of the soul. This is how it was.

There are many similar cases known on Mount Athos. There, any accepted wrong thought leads to delusion, and the devil doesn’t back down that easily. In the Agiou Pavlou Monastery, where the Holy Gifts of the Magi are kept, live an elder of saint life and good brethren. And then, one day, a novice came to them, and they appointed him as a wake-up caller. His duty was to wake up the brethren. In the buildings, there is a long corridor and cells on both sides. He walks and knocks on doors with prayer: “Κύριε Ιησού Χριστέ ελέησόν με”, which means “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” And from behind the door, they answer: “Amen.” He always walked like this, and then one day he approached the elder’s cell and read the prayer in the same way, but the elder said nothing. He knocked on the door again, but the elder remained silent. Then the novice began to beat on the door with his fist, then with his foot, but with no result. “Γέροντα, πες αμίν! Γέροντα, πες αμίν!”, which means “Elder, say amen! Elder, say amen!” Everybody had already come out into the corridor at his knocks, looking to see what would happen. And then the door opens, and the elder says to him, “Hey you! Get out of here so I don’t see you any more!” Sometimes it happens that people come to a monastery with already damaged thoughts and don’t understand at all what obedience is. They have only their own will and stubbornness. Soon this novice left the monastery.

Three years ago, there lived one demonically possessed novice. One day this novice came into the temple, and he began to go into a frenzy, he started shouting something loudly and shaking the pews. Everyone got frightened and the elders fled. Only a church singer and a serving priest remained. The hegumen left for the mainland at that time. The singer was singing, and the priest was sitting in the altar. The rest of the brethren quickly ran away. Everybody was afraid to approach him, so he was doing there what he wanted. The elder has arrived. "Well, what shall we do? We have to cure him." They tied him up and sent him to Thessaloniki. Sometimes the devil reveals himself like that. I was told that in the same monastery, a year before me, one good schema monk, who had lived there for 20 years, one day packed his things and left. He was in his late 50s. The enemy doesn't sleep, and no matter how long a person has lived in a monastery, he won't cease to tempt him.

I also know about one Russian novice called Andrey from Moscow, where he played the piano in the restaurants – such a bon vivant. Then he repented and came to Athos, to Karoulia. Elder Alexander was still alive then, and Andrey was his novice. He wanted to practice asceticism, but the elder did not let him. He kept grumbling at the elder, "He keeps humbling me! I want to asceticise, but he forces me to eat or work." Soon the elder died and was buried. Then, Andrey started to live alone. He lived in the Ivion cell in the Inner Karoulia. He was not seen for three months, and suddenly Father Stephen (it was him who told the story) saw Andrey walking up the path. He shouted to him, "Andrey, Andrey!" But he did not listen and tried to flee instead. Father Stephen ran after him. He shouted to the fathers who lived in the neighbouring cells, "Catch him!" He understood that Andrey got damaged. Fathers from the upper cells ran out and caught him. They saw that he was mad. They tied him as tight as they could and fed him. But what to do with him? He can't live on Karoulia – life is hard there, and no one will cope with him. Finally, they decided to bring him to Karyes, the capital of Athos. There, one Greek cell in honour of the Apostles Peter and Paul sheltered him. It's near the Koutloumousiou monastery. They put him in the bed, and he, crazy, has laid there for three years. In three years he regained consciousness

and immediately asked to call the priest. They called the priest, he came, and Andrey told him about everything. When he was left without the elder, he began to fast and pray intensely. And then one night, when he was praying, he saw Christ in a fiery form and fell at his feet. Suddenly, he saw that he had hooves instead of legs. Andrey raised his eyes and saw that body transform into the devil. It was becoming a mist and began to enter him through the mouth. After that, he went crazy and could not recall how he climbed out onto the path through the chains. He confessed his delusion, took communion, and departed to the Lord. That is how people can get damaged through self-will, even in good deeds. You have to know such things.

When a person becomes a Christian, he becomes a warrior. He enters into a fight with the devil and defeats him with humility. Saint Isaac the Syrian said: "A person will be condemned not for not praying or fasting, but for living with the devil." The state of delusion is exactly living with the devil, which takes its roots in self-will and self-conceit. There is a line where a person still lives with God, but once he crosses it, he begins to live with the devil. This is the moment when he still feels the real world correctly, when pride and passions are sin for him and his soul rejects them. But if he crosses this border, then pride and passions become his life and "paradise.» A person goes into another state, which is life with the devil. You need to know these states and feel when you cross this border when life with God ends and life with the devil begins. You can cross the border between these areas many times. The main thing is that your soul should reach out to love, to the region of the Divine. Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov says, "You must remember those states of the soul that you experience." That is, you need to be an experienced person and go through the school of life. Only then will you learn to live, cut off evil, and acquire good.

Now that we've come to God, we are closer to fulfilling the second commandment – love thy neighbour. Reverend Mark the Ascetic said that love for one's neighbours is a "non-irritable" state. If a person has acquired this state of soul, it means that he has love in his soul. If there is irritation, then the commandment is not fulfilled. John the Apostle says that if a person manages to fulfil the second

commandment, he will be able to fulfil the first one. That is, if there is love for one's neighbour, there will also be love for God. Therefore, when we come to the monastery, we begin to get used to each other, since everyone has their own soul, their own opinion, and their own feelings. And accepting a person as he is, we begin to bear one another's burdens and cover them with our love. We must realize that there is another person nearby, who perceives the world completely differently, and be condescending to him, love him, and never impose our standards on him. Only when we acquire love for our neighbours will our soul be able to pray. Only then will it enter the realm of the Divine and will no longer leave it. However, a person won't acquire the true skill of prayer unless he overcomes this temptation and acquires love for his neighbours. The soul must go through this meat grinder of life. If we have dislike for our neighbours, then it's a big problem not only with this person but also with God. And then, our life passes fruitlessly – we live our days in vain.

If we want to pray, if we want to love God, then, first, we have to learn to love our neighbours. And vice versa – if we pray, but at the same time hate our neighbours, we can get badly damaged because at the same time, our ego is growing, but love is fading away. We need both prayer and love for our neighbours at the same time, and then love for God grows. But without love for neighbours, it's wrong to talk about any kind of success in spiritual life.

– *So, how do we learn to love?*

– When you learn not to pry into other sister's business.

– *But what if I don't love everyone?*

– If you want to be called a daughter of God, you will love everyone. But if you think you love everyone, but actually there is still someone who you don't love, you are not in the fullness of love.

– *But I can't love a person who makes me feel bad. So, should I live with this problem?*

– If you want to get rid of this, you will work on it because otherwise, God won't accept your prayer. All your feats (prayer, holy communion, confession) will be in vain.

– *Well, in theory, it's clear...*

– Good, then think about how you can improve. Not your sister, but yourself.

– *But I feel that I still have no love...*

– Start with prayer and the desire to be with God. You came to me and said, "Father, I have such a problem..." I tell you, "But what have you done to destroy that evil inside you?" and in response – silence. You still have to make some effort. If you want to destroy this bad state, if you want to learn to love, you'll do something. At least, you'll make a bow, or in your heart, you will say, "Lord, through the prayers of this sister, save me, a sinner." Or say the following prayer, "Lord, give me love for that sister so that I can love her as You love her." That is, ask for the love that God has for her. God cannot help but love. God loves even the most terrible villains. If you are a daughter of God, you will ask for the same love that God has.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us a commandment to love our neighbours (Matthew 5:44). Saint Silouan the Athonite could easily tell God's love from human love. What is human love? People do good to you, love you, and you love them back. But God's love is to love those who don't love you, do you understand? God said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The freedom of Christ lies in the fact that we can control our feelings and become who we want to be. Yes, this is perfection, this is a gift from God, but we must strive for such an understanding of freedom, and without Christ, we won't acquire it. I have to manage my feelings, and not the other way around, do you understand? Try to do love and not do evil. And one more thing – until we achieve the freedom of Christ, we cannot trust our feelings and live by them. When a person begins to live according to his still carnal feelings and trust them, he will be deceived, and instead of God, he will acquire the devil. The problem is that once you accept some thought, or some feeling, after that a lump of incorrect perception of what is happening spun up, and you are already hooked on the devil. He holds you for it and this lump begins to grow and will never stop. The devil, once he has caught someone, won't let him go. All drug addicts, if they don't quit drugs, die either from an overdose or something else, that is, you cannot joke

with the devil. And now this lump is rolling and there is no way to stop it. Only humility and a cry to God “God, save me, I am dying!” will help. Then this lump will stop, and after that, this lump needs to be untwisted back. How long did it last – a year, two, or ten? Now this time needs to be turned back.

– *But what if my lifetime is not enough to do that?*

– God will save you for your heart. If you were embittered and didn’t fight with that, you’ll go to hell. If you were angry at people, but you hated that state and fought against that with all your soul, you will be in Heaven. Will is very important for God and our place in Heaven is determined by it. That’s why it turns out this way: a monk lived his whole life in a monastery, and then lo and behold, he is not in Heaven. Where is he? He is in hell. But why? The problem is anger.

Anger becomes an obstacle to receiving Holy Communion. From the Gospel, we know, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24). Anger makes a person and his state of soul like the devil. But God is humble, and those who have a humble and meek heart become like Christ. Not a single thought, not a single sin, not a single delusion can be destroyed if the soul doesn’t humble itself. What is repentance? This is the acquisition of humility, this is the comprehension of the law of love – blame yourself, and justify others. If this law of love is violated, then a person won’t be saved. I violated it once or twice, and after that, my soul no longer functioned normally. If a person constantly justifies himself and blames others, he gets damaged.

– *Father, sometimes we don’t want to blame ourselves.*

– Yes, it happens when a person turns arrogant and his ego takes over, which leads to an emotional outburst and grievances. But when he calms down and comes to his senses, he will feel something is wrong and will seek peace in his mind and heart. But sometimes, somebody offends you, does evil to you, and you get offended by that. What happens in that case? You accept the devil’s thoughts regarding that person, and condemnation and evil enter your heart. What happened

outside, enters you through the loss of peace within you. When you break the law “blame yourself and justify the others”, evil enters you. The situation and time have passed, but this evil still remains in you.

However, when the soul begins to fulfil the law of love, then at first, it’s difficult, but in some time it becomes part of our nature. And then, when we get offended, we either justify that person or simply ignore that evil. That is, we become simple because the soul is simple by its nature and God is simple by His nature. And in this simplicity, we become like Him. If a person has some speculations, they are not from God because he lacks the simplicity and love that God gave to a man.

– *Sometimes, there are difficulties with obediences: I have to cook, but there isn’t enough food for it, even in the warehouse. Then we start to worry and even give up.*

– Then make a stone soup and that’s it.

– *But that was in the tale...*

– No problem, use the food that you have. The main thing is, don’t worry that you will be scolded, but at the same time be prepared for reprimands and sorrows.

– *But they’ll say, “Why didn’t you do it the right way?”*

– The Holy Fathers say that when everything is fine, be ready for bad things. Then, you won’t have any difficulties. Saint Isaac the Syrian wrote, “It’s one thing when a person receives crowns from his virtues, and another thing – this is a greater crown – when he suffers for Christ when he endures reproach.” And when the Holy Fathers were climbing the steps and performing some feats, they felt this grace and asked God to suffer for Him to endure some kind of reproach. Therefore, if you don’t want that, but it turns out this way, then you are suffering for Christ.

– *Like martyrs?*

– Yes, but it all depends on your intention. If you are scolded, but you get angry, you have retreated from God; if you are praised, but that makes you proud, you also retreat. Your intention has to be clear and dispassionate to those temptations that come from outside. For that, you always have to be spiritually sober.

– *But we always have our own opinion about any event, don’t we?*

– Mother Athanasia, we come to pure intentions when we live according to the law of love: “Blame yourself and justify the others.” It’s hard to follow, but when we make it a habit, it becomes normal. Once we came to the monastery, we would every day go to confession to Father Kirill or Father Cosmas. We received great benefit not even from the fact that we were confessing our sins and thoughts, but from the fact that we adopted their patristic spirit. Here, in the monastery, you can adopt this spirit of Orthodoxy from the older sisters and learn the law of love. Our soul is not stupid, it can accommodate it, the main thing is that you want it yourself. The soul learns to fulfil the law of love in two ways: by borrowing the patristic spirit from the older sisters and through repentance and work on oneself. Repentance is a change of your internal state, of your soul. It’s not simply saying, “Father, I have sinned.” St. Theophan the Recluse said, “Lord, I will never sin, even if I have to die, just save me and have mercy on me!” That is, in repentance, a person approaches the sacrament of death. His egoism dies, and a new man is born. When a person leaves this hell of the soul, he is resurrected, and a new thought of humility appears in him.

The sacrament of death, in a sense, is present in all church sacraments. And our soul must experience this contact with death, with the state of non-existence. We live with God, come into contact with His grace and experience that other world not when we die, but here on earth, when we die to our sins. When a person humbles himself in this withdrawal, God can help him, from which a cry of the soul is born: “Lord, help me!” When a businessman’s life is falling apart, he starts praying to God, going to church, and lighting candles. But the thing is that God helps that person when he humbles himself and understands his sins, when his soul turns around and says, “I have deserved it for my sins.” And His main gift will be that He will give Himself, and then everything that is needed for the body.

Drug dealers come to confession. They don’t use drugs, but they will definitely be punished. If they convert to Christ and if God starts to save them, they will be punished for their sins – after all, they have made so many people cry and curse them. And that’s the point where

a change in their souls should occur that is repentance. A person must refuse this “easy money” and move heaven and earth not to take the same path. And so everyone needs to make an effort on themselves to change and get rid of an evil habit. Just as a drug addict suffers pain all over his body during withdrawal, so during the formation of the soul a person is in great pain – this is constant nervous tension. Sometimes it happens that novices come to a monastery and begin to get sick. One elder told us, “Yes, it’s a normal state because life, nutrition, and everything changes.” A person starts to live differently – what he was allowed in the secular world, here he always has to limit and pull himself back. Physical illnesses also appear from nervous tension. This is all fine, this is how it should be.

– *Father, I read a piece of advice from Saint Paisios, “If you have been offended and a person sincerely asks for forgiveness, forgive him out of love for your neighbour. If they slyly ask you for forgiveness, for the sake of some goals, and harm to the soul comes from a person, then love him, but from afar.” But what if you don’t hold a grudge against a person, but at the same time you don’t feel love for him– is this even permissible?*

– It all depends on your state: if spiritually you are an infant, then this state is salutary and necessary, but if you remain in this state throughout your life, it is harmful.

– *But what does it mean ‘to love from afar’?*

– That’s when you treat a person well, but you don’t let them into your soul – a kind of indifference. When Saint Silouan the Athonite reached a high spiritual state, he loved everybody and was praying for the whole world. That is, we have to grow and not stand in one place. If you remain on one step and linger on it, spiritual life won’t tolerate that – there will be a movement back.

– *If people did some kind of evil like Nazis, and didn’t even look like people, how do you love them?*

– When German prisoners of war were being marched through Minsk, grandmothers ran out and gave these Germans bread and potatoes. They couldn’t understand what they were given, and then, when they opened those little bags, they started crying. Those

grandmothers had lost their families, their relatives, and loved ones, but they had love, and they gave their last belongings to the Germans. This is Divine love. Do you understand? Everything can be revealed, written, and told, but God can only be known with the heart, only with the soul. Only experienced knowledge of God can move a person to such actions. And another will not understand him unless he reaches such a state. This applies to everything: love for enemies, prayer, contemplation, and so on.

Sometimes it happens that people come to confession and I tell them something about contemplation and that we need to love each other. But in response, I hear, "Father, what are you talking about? I can't live like that, that's a difficult level for me." And they are right. First, a person needs to fulfil at least the external laws, and then begin to cleanse his heart. And more will be asked of monastics because we have dedicated our lives to serving God to acquire love for God and people in its entirety. It would seem that a person has renounced everything he has no family, no children, no home, he has nothing. But that doesn't stop the devil from catching him in little things. As a result, a person becomes indifferent to spiritual life.

– Father, how can we become more involved in church life and save in our time? It feels like you're alone, you have no one to rely on, and you don't know whether you'll be saved or not.

– A person involved in church life is the one who feels God's spirit and His will. Sometimes you read a book and feel there's something wrong with it. You can't explain it, but you sense the lie. Or some event, be it a vision, a myrrh-streaming or something else – the same thing, your spirit feels where there's a trick and where everything's holy. We need to protect in us this spirit of love, this spirit of God. But we can do it only with humility and meekness. And our salvation is possible. Although it's difficult and there are many temptations, it's feasible. Do you remember how St. Anatoly (Potapov) of Optina had a vision? He saw a broken Church ship, the fragments of which were scattered across the surface of the water. Then the thought flashed through his mind, "That's it, the Church is lost..." And then he heard a voice, "Even upon these ruins, salvation is possible." So do we feel

that we can be saved on those ruins. The Church ship (the spiritual relationship between an elder and a novice) has been destroyed, and now it seems practically impossible to restore it, which is why there are so many problems both in monasteries and in the world. Nevertheless, the Lord gives us everything for our salvation.

– Many people think that life in a monastery is a romance, and the longer you live there, the more interesting it gets.

– When the romance ends, begins life, and that's the hardest thing.

– But no matter how hard it is, you don't want to return to the world – there's a different life.

Now I want to say something different. Before the revolution, when monasteries functioned normally and nothing was destroyed, they also performed educational functions. Even teenagers would come there. But now, it is assumed that when a person comes to a monastery, he is already formed. That is, there must already be a Christian and even, to some extent, monastic embryo in his heart and the person must be ready to endure everything. Each generation of monastics has its own temptations and goes through its own tests. But the common test for all is when our faith in God is tested by various temptations. Yes, it is precisely faith because only with faith can a person purposefully go through the entire monastic path and not weaken.

How does faith become hardened? By patience and sorrows. When 18-year-olds went to war, they were still children, but when they came back, they were already adult men. While going through the crucible of anger and sorrow, a person matures. So in a monastery, by going through difficulties, a novice becomes a monk. The main thing is, how we perceive those difficulties. When a person goes through this path, the first thing he learns is patience. And after that, he learns love, humility, and everything else. We cannot obtain any other virtues without patience because Divine Providence for us is being accomplished in patience. And we will never fulfil the will of God if we don't learn to be patient. If we endure hardships, we preserve our good thoughts and our good heart, and thus we upgrade our souls. If you put a person with someone who he doesn't want to live with, his soul will become more courageous.

– *Father, God has been sending me temptations for many years with the same person. How much longer should I tolerate him?*

– You won't succeed without patience, you will not... You have to be ready to remain patient, even if it lasts until the end of your days.

– *Father, but are there any cases when one should not remain patient?*

– When a person gets damaged, he starts losing patience. However, there is a limit to patience. Look, God gives us challenges according to our strength and never harder than we can overcome. We always have to endure something, be it a couple of days or a year, but we have to endure and shouldn't immediately give up. If you humble your thoughts with your feelings, and it lasts you for a month, and then you feel that you can't stand it (you become angry and easily irritated), then your soul begins to break from this. This is the point where you no longer have to endure it.

– *But what shall I do?*

– Change the situation.

– *But how?*

– Both in Divine and human's way: pray, go to your hegumen. Do whatever you can to change the situation and push through. Otherwise, you'll get spiritually damaged.

– *You can suffer so much that you lose sleep and end up in the hospital.*

– Yes, it's truly so. There have been such cases of misunderstanding patience. So many people have been sent from Athos because of getting mentally damaged from physical and psychological overload. You need to inform your spiritual father or the hegumen about that. If we are not heard, then we need to go to another monastery with a more gentle rule. There is no need to be shy and set yourself up with false thoughts. Because if you get damaged, they will tell you, "It's your own fault. And why were you silent for all this time?" I'll say it once again, patience can be different. If you feel that you have the strength to endure, then do; then this is God's will. When your patience begins to break down, then don't. Not when you have bad thoughts and start getting angry – no, but when your psyche can no

longer stand it and nervousness appears, then you need to change the monastery. If a bad thought arises from an incorrect structure of the soul, then impatience only reveals the ulcers of your soul. To a greater or lesser extent, many are in a state of spiritual delusion, so perhaps it is not for nothing that novices in monasteries are sent to the barnyard. Physical labour helps to purify the thoughts and at the same time doesn't let the beginner go deep into himself.

– *It's very difficult for me to determine the boundaries of what you can reach and what you cannot reach, where you can still endure and where you no longer need to.*

– That's why I'm telling you, don't keep anything to yourself. If you feel that you are losing peace in your soul, then don't remain silent. Go and reveal everything to your spiritual father or the hegumen.

– *Sometimes during fulfilling obedience, some sisters create an unhealthy climate. What should I do: try to bravely endure that, or complain?*

– Of course, you should complain. That's the situation, you understand? Because they commit a sin that destroys the peace in the monastery and the inner peace of the sisters. It's a sin not against a person, but against the unity of sisters, therefore it must be stopped. Just tell the bosses about it and let them decide what to do.

– *So it turns out the older should stop that, not the novice?*

– Yes, the novice can only inform about the problem, but it is the elders who make a decision, and the novice must be ready to accept any decision of the elders. Either leave everything as it is and endure, or try to change something. But never expose sisters to their weaknesses, this is the path to becoming the pride and getting damaged. I remember we had a novice in the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius. He fulfilled an obedience at the front desk. I walked up to him and asked something, but he wouldn't say a word. He would come to the refectory for a meal and eat really a lot. After overeating, he would puke right at the table and then continue eating again. He was silent not for nothing, but because the brethren would talk a lot. And he would eat until he puked because the brethren would eat a lot – that's the thought he had. Later, he ended up in a psychiatric hospital,

where he got treatment and everything seemed to return to normal. Spiritual damage comes from thoughts.

– *But can it happen to us?*

– It can happen to anyone. The main thing is to keep the spirit of love and have prudence. Endure what you can and start giving the SOS signal, when your inner world starts breaking down. On Athos, in our St. Panteleimon Monastery, many novices were damaged by non-compliance with these two rules. In love, the main thing is to preserve and increase zeal and repentance, and in patience (it always comes in obedience) to have wisdom and indifference.

– *Father, Athos is such a holy place. Almost an ideal one for a monastic life, but there are so many temptations.*

– Yes, you're right. Athos is perhaps the best place for a monastic life – it's isolated from the world, so there are practically no external temptations, but there are plenty of internal ones. The devil comes through thoughts, so without obedience and confessing your thoughts to your spiritual father, it's impossible to save there.

I'll tell you a little about the history of Russians on Mount Athos. Before the revolution, one of the main problems that existed there was nationalism. A story in verse by a Russian monk, "Wild Flowers," was once published as a separate booklet. This story took place in the Russian cell of the Holy Cross that belongs to the Karakallou Monastery. It was a huge cell of 70 monks, and in the monastery itself lived 80 monks. There happened such a story: the brethren were resting after the night service, and all of a sudden, they were raided by workers and Greek monks, who wanted to drive the Russians out. The cook did not sleep, at that time he was cooking. He went outside and saw men with stakes. He immediately sounded the alarm but was hit with a club and fell. The brothers began to run out of their cells. A fight broke out. At the end of the story, the author writes, "When they come again, we will take pokers and count their ribs." In Russia, this book is read, and it's considered normal, even though it was written with such anger.

There was also nationalism between Russians and Ukrainians. When New Athos in Abkhazia was built, there was a battle wall to wall between them. And that was totally horrible. Not for nothing did

the Greeks say that if it hadn't been for the revolution, then all the Athonite monks would've been damaged by Russians. After the revolution, the influx of Russians to Athos had stopped. There was no longer any help from Russia. Only then did they reconcile and feel that they were left alone. They began to live by their labour, and then the problem of nationalism disappeared. Simplicity and humility destroy pride. And after all these events, the elderly monks were truly holy people. The Greeks had an ambiguous attitude towards Russians: negative before the revolution and very respectful after it, when they already saw Russian elders in them.

When Russian elders began to die out, they would unite in cells in groups of two or four. It's known that not far from the Kazan cell, on Kapsala, there was once a numerous Russian cell of the Intercession of the Mother of God, in the end, there were two elders left there: one was 90 years old, a priest, and the other was 80. Fathers from the Skete of Prophet Elijah would bring them food and help with the housework. One day a 70-year-old hieromonk came, opened the door, walked in and saw that a 90-year-old elder was lying dead near the Throne, and another was at the lectern. They died together, after the Liturgy. At that time, the cell of St. John Chrysostom was half-ruined. On the ground floor, the shelves were made and there were skulls on the shelves there were probably about seventy people. The icon painters all died. At the top, there was one separate skull of novice Alexey, who died in 1892. His skull says, "Painter, sixteen years old, from Samara province." I don't know the cause of death.

– *Did they find out by the skulls what kind of life a monk had lived?*

– This is considered in our monastery: if the skull is yellow or brown, then the person was a saint, if it's white, he is saved, and if it's black or has not decayed, then it means he didn't please God and went to hell. The Greeks don't have such a tradition, only Russians do. Moreover, the heads of hegumens and spiritual fathers are kept in a special case and are all yellow.

– *Is it considered to be good?*

– Yes, it means they have lived a holy life. When I lived in the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, I remember how brethren dug up the

relics of St. Philaret his skull was dark yellow, and St. Innocent's was dark red.

– *But if the bones are black or have not decayed, what do they do to them?*

In three years remains are dug up, washed and placed in a tomb. Skulls are signed and placed on the shelves, and bones are placed in another place. There was a case in St. Panteleimon Monastery. Before the revolution, there lived a housekeeper. He was very active and did a lot for the monastery. But there was something that they couldn't agree on, and the housekeeper took offence at him. Some time passed, the housekeeper fell ill and was close to death. The father hegumen came to him and said, "Forgive me, father," but he replied, "I won't forgive you either in this or in the next century." And after saying those words, he died. Since he did a lot for the monastery, they buried him not with all his brothers in the cemetery, but near the wall of the gallery, behind the altar of the Assumption Church. Three years later they dug them up to wash the bones and put them in the ossuary with all the other fathers. But then, they saw that he had not decomposed at all, he was all black and watery. They buried him again. Three years later, they dug his body up, but it remained the same. Then the hegumen gave his blessing to pray intensely for him. The brethren started to pray and in three years they wanted to dig him up again. But a day before they had to dig him up, the wall near the temple, where the body lay, turned black from top to bottom. Then everyone saw this as a sign of God's will, and when they dug up the body, they threw it into the sea. In 1997, when I came to St. Panteleimon monastery, the wall was still black, but in 1998 it was cleared with a fire hose and sand and now only small specks are visible. If a person doesn't know this story, he won't notice anything.

And here's another story. One monk from Vatopedi monastery was fulfilling the obedience of an ecclesiarch. One day he stayed late in the temple, the evening meal passed, and everything was cleared from the tables. He came to the refectory and the cook told him, "The meal is over, there's no food left." The ecclesiarch became very angry, came to the temple, approached the icon of the Mother of God in

irritation, and angrily told Her, "I've been serving You for so many years, and You haven't even given me a piece of bread!" He grabbed a knife from his belt, with which he was cleaning candlesticks, and hit the Mother of God in the face. Blood sprayed from the scar on his face, he saw it and was dumbfounded. The brethren came, and he was staying there like crazy and didn't see anything. He became blind. A few days later he came to his senses and told the brethren how that happened. After that, for twenty years, until the end of his life, he was praying at that icon and before his death he regained his sight. When the brethren dug him up three years later, all his bones were yellow, but the hand with which he stabbed the Mother of God was black and had not decayed. The brethren left his hand for everyone to see as a lesson. Yet, in the 1990s, one of the pilgrims decided that it was a shrine, bit off a piece of it, and the hand crumbled.

– *But did the Greek himself suffer?*

– No, he was just very surprised.

– *Father, but how did the monk who stabbed the Mother of God come to such a thought? Just because he was hungry?*

– On fast days they have only one meal, plus the Greeks are very hot-tempered by nature. That's how the story happened.

– *And is there a scar on the icon from the stab?*

– Yes, here, on the left cheek.

– *And blood?*

– Yes, and blood was there, until one visiting priest touched it with his finger, after which it crumbled.

– *Father, I also want to ask you about patience. If you are trying to put up with something or someone but screwing up your eyes so that it ends faster, is it okay?*

– Yes, it's okay if it helps you. In a monastery, patience is always connected with obedience, that is, cutting off one's will. It's not for nothing that the Holy Fathers wrote, "If a novice doesn't obey but fulfils their own will, expel them from the monastery. If you don't drive them out, they'll be cursing you when they die." If you've been living according to your own will, the demons will be tormenting your soul, and you'll curse your mentor for not admonishing you.

This is a serious matter. Disobedience is understood as a situation when a person remains with their own feelings and thoughts – that’s when spiritual death occurs. Sometimes we may hear from people, “These nuns are really nervous.” To some extent, it’s true. When we start to fight with our passions, we become nervous because we fight with evil. At the first stage of spiritual life, you can become a bag of nerves. No love, only disappointment inside. However, people who live with their passions and don’t want to struggle with them, at first glance, seem sane and healthy, but in fact, they are empty inside and there is no peace in them. Over time, a novice, and every Christian’s soul, acquires an ordering when feelings are subordinated to thoughts, “I want to be like Christ, my God.”

– *When a person struggles with his passions, he must be honest with himself and not turn a blind eye to the evil that is in him.*

– Yes, that’s absolutely right, I’ll give you one funny incident from the life of the monastery. One nun made a flowerbed for the 104th anniversary of the monastery (at the entrance to the monastery, on the left side). And Yevgenia walked past, she was 8 years old at that time. And a thought suddenly to the nun’s mind, “A child is the voice of God.” She calls Yevgenia and says, “Look at the flowerbed! How do you like it?” The girl stood looking at the flowerbed and said, “Uh-uh.” Then, the nun frowned and said, “Okay, just keep walking.” And the girl kept running. The same thing in our soul – if we want to see something in ourselves, it doesn’t mean that we actually have it in us. Let’s keep humbling ourselves so that humility gives us true knowledge of ourselves.

November 25, 2005. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Two

The Lord has again gathered us here all together, again we see each other, we feel our unity, our community, our cohesion, and in this our Shepherd, our Lord, Whom we all love and for Whom we left everything and came here in this monastery. The

other day it was Meatfare Saturday, so the first thoughts that came to me were thoughts about That World, about us and about those who went There. Commemoration of the dead is a connection with souls who have departed to the afterlife. We commemorate the deceased with some kind of food – a candy or something else. If you eat this food to fill yourself up or to enjoy yourself, then you’ll never unite with the deceased person. This food shouldn’t give a feeling of gratification. Why is koliva boiled? It’s rather tasteless and often decorated with nuts or something else, but there is essentially no taste as such.

– *Father, when does the connection occur?*

– It happens when a person wants this love. This edible thing, be it candy, cookies or koliva is kind of the soul of the departed person, and you must be willing to connect with it and spiritually go to the place where it resides – whether in heaven or hell. You need this feeling to arise not only on the mental level but also on the physical because, besides the soul, we also consist of the body. So we partake of some food and it enters our flesh and blood. This act of connection comes from our desire and our faith.

– *You mentioned connecting with the dead. Isn’t it possible to connect with the living this way?*

– It’s possible. It’s the same thing because for God there are no dead and everyone is alive. Such a connection with our close ones occurs only through God, our faith and our love for Him.

– *May there be anything else after the connection?*

– What else could there be? This is what connection is all about – joy and love.

– *How important is commemorating people with food? Some people just submit a note and that’s it.*

– Well, why did your mother come to you?

– *To see me.*

– She came to you out of love. Why does a person connect with another person? Out of love. But here, connection through commemorating occurs not only on the spiritual level, like in prayer, but also bodily – by eating some kind of food.

There is a certain rule, both on Mount Athos and everywhere else: the Church commemorates the dead, and for the saints and the rest they cook and distribute koliva.

– *Father, when people bring food for the repose of somebody's soul to the memorial table, is it a donation for the deceased?*

– This is more of a sacrifice for the monastery and for the parishes, but not funeral food. There are rules of remembrance: you can't commemorate the dead with meat and with vodka. On Athos, they only give you koliva and a little red wine. We are now talking about the connection through food. There's a connection in prayer – that's the spiritual connection. And there's a connection when a deceased is commemorated during the Liturgy (the priest descends a particle of prosphora into the blood of Christ). When he is commemorated in God, it's completely another thing. And besides that, there's a spiritual-physical connection because without a prayer you won't eat the memorial food.

I want to move on to another topic and talk about sin. These two themes have something in common. The Old Testament talks about apples and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Some kind of connection occurred from eating the apple. A revolution took place inside Adam and Eve, which destroyed their former inner world. They lost peace with God, lost love and died from internal union. The point is not in the apple, but in the desire itself. The Holy Scripture says that Eve looked at the apple, and she had a bodily, sensual desire to taste the forbidden fruit. She knew about the prohibition, but at the same time, she had a desire to comprehend good and evil. She was seduced by the sight of the apple and tasted it. This is the very process of connection: desire, pleasure from the product, and the desire to know good and evil. First, there was a connection in desires and thoughts, and then she put them into action. If this hadn't happened, then the Fall of Man wouldn't have happened.

A sin begins from a desire. A sin becomes a sin when the heart connects to the mind. Saint Theophan the Recluse wrote, "When daydreaming appears, then you need to repent of it as a sin." At this moment, occurs a connection. That is, a person repents not of the

thought that occurred in his mind, but namely in the connection. The devil in Paradise was grovelling for a long time, and little by little, he brought the matter to an end, so Eve believed him. That's why St. Isaac the Syrian wrote that a person at the Last Judgment will answer not for not fasting or not praying, but for living with the devil. That is, we will answer for the connection with the devil. You must feel when this connection occurs, when the sin begins and when an alien, prideful spirit comes into the soul.

A person can be swayed by the devil through temptations. In the prayer the Lord's Prayer itself, some words guard us from that seduction. "And lead us not into temptation" (so that we don't connect with the devil) "but deliver us from the evil one." In this prayer, we ask God to destroy sinful wishes and thus avoid contacting the evil one. That's why he's called here 'a deceiver' because he deceives us with earthly beauty. Only when God saves us from that temptation, only then we are set free from sin and the devil. If a person has fallen under this temptation, he won't be freed from the devil until he destroys this seduction with the help of God, who helps him experience rejection from it.

– *Father, it's impossible to live without desires. For example, I walk and see some apples under the apple tree. And then, I think, "Mm, what sweet apples, let me pick them up!" So, does it mean I fulfilled my desire?*

– Yes, as soon as a person sins by desire, the devil immediately comes. I'd like to summarize what's been said. Sin is always preceded by false beauty and false kindness. Sin always looks fascinating. And when your heart accepts this evil sweetness, then sin appears in connection with the devil and in retreat from God's will. Sin becomes ugly and evil when you have tasted it, but before that, it was all 'good' and 'love'.

– *It also happens like this. One sister takes food, but you're like, "Thanks, I'm good", but in fact you are hungry. And then you agree, "Okay, I'll eat it."*

– Yes, it's a temptation. This is a sinful desire that arises in our souls. We need to pray that the Lord will deliver us from this desire. The Holy Fathers say so: you should not neglect small temptations because if you can't cope with the small ones, how will you cope with the big ones?

– *Father, I remember I used to eat tangerines by kilograms – there was such a need for the body.*

– Sure, eat and drink as much as you require. Everyone has their own measure. Another thing is when you're already full, but you keep eating everything with your eyes – that's already an addiction, and you need to fight it. When St. Paisios lived on Athos, he was attached to God with all his soul. And so that food wouldn't distract him, he did not chew the beans, but swallowed them whole, so that they would take longer to digest in the stomach. Of course, you don't need to do this but focus all your desires on God.

– *Father, what do I do if thoughts have already come to my head? I want to get rid of them, but they don't leave me alone.*

– When those little roaches appear in your head, there are two options: one is to crush them, and the second is to give them freedom. In the first case, you free yourself from them, and in the second, you become their prisoner.

– *Better crush them.*

– Yes, when a person has humility, then he can overcome pride.

– *Father, sometimes due to life circumstances, a person is lonely. There are no relatives around him, so he can't tell what happened, neither to priests nor to anyone. He's desperate. He sinned, went to a bar and got drunk, and then his condition gets even worse.*

– It's clear. Yes, it happens when there is daydreaming. When daydreaming begins to spin a person, the soul will not calm down until the person fulfils this. As soon as a person satisfies the desire, it calms down, and after some time it comes again. Dreaminess must be fought, but it can only be defeated when the place of the charming world is taken by another, God's world, and a person desires and loves it.

– *When these thoughts overwhelm him, he will drink and forget everything. And if he doesn't drink, he begins to torment himself, and then despair sets in. This is the worst sin, isn't it?*

– See, you are talking about how a person can't get rid of those roaches.

– *Yes, he has neither a friend nor a comrade nor a loved one...*

– That's a big problem, but God is ready to help us. When guys

come who have difficulties with drugs, alcohol or slot machines, you can help them if their souls are open. Because then, they'll speak out and God, with His grace, can fill that emptiness. If their souls are closed and those cockroaches are eating them, they'll go crazy if they don't please the roaches. The Gospel says that the Lord healed not only those possessed by demons, but also those possessed by passions – that is, those who were dependent on their passions. But if a person does not find such a way out for his soul, this disease can end in great ruin for him.

All the time we talk about spiritual delusion. It comes when a person begins to live not by God's will but by his own will, and all these desires accumulate. A person still has some passions and desires, but he somehow suppresses them. It endures for a year, two, or a maximum of ten years, and then there's an explosion. And then what he hasn't done in ten years, he begins to fill with these passions.

I remember going to Karoulia in 1997, where I saw Fr. Stefan, a Serbian, who lived there for about fifty years. I was struck by his eyes. They were somehow similar to the eyes of Father John of Kronstadt – similarly blue and sparkling, but at the same time they were somehow sharp and prickly. Not evil, but rather restless and lifeless. That made me feel uneasy. He was a respected hermit, but still, I didn't dare to go to his cell. He graduated from an agricultural academy in his youth, and he was very handy. In his cell and on his territory, everything was mechanized: there were different blocks and cables all around. If you pull on one cable, something moves out or, conversely, moves in. He had raw chicken eggs lying around for 30 years – he put them in a liquid cement solution. There was a small artificial pond in the yard. He would also put earth on the rocks and grow flowers there. He was very strong, though he was already in his seventies. One day he went to Ouranoupolis for some reason. Just at that time, a German female arm wrestling champion arrived there. It happened so that they began to measure their strength, and Father Stephen defeated her.

Once there was a fire in Karoulia – his cell and everything that was there burned down. After that fire, he got damaged, not because of stress, but because he had lost everything. He became kind of insane.

His brothers from Hilandar took him to their place, he lived there for a while and returned to the site of his former cell, made a booth out of cellophane and began to live there. Then he began to wander around Mount Athos and ride the ferry. His strength began to leave him, and mentally he became worse and worse; then they took him to his homeland in Serbia, where he died. The Serb brothers said that before his death he came to his senses, repented and went to God with a reconciled heart. This is how it may happen: a person has lived almost his entire adult life on Athos, but living by his own will, he was damaged.

There was another similar story. In the same place, on Karoulia, in the Ipatiev cell lived Fr. Nilus, a Macedonian, and Fr. Isidore from Estonia. They prayed and worked, but lived on their own, without a spiritual father, and in a couple of years Father Nilus was damaged. He then went to the mainland and Father Isidore came back to Estonia. On Mount Athos, monastic laws apply one hundred per cent, and it's impossible to live without a mentor. If you are left without him, you better go to the mainland, otherwise you'll die. Yes, the Holy Fathers said that your cell will teach you everything. That's certainly true, but on Athos, the conditions are close to those of a hermit. But you can become a hermit only if you have humility. Without humility, you'll die.

– *But we must be able to survive under any conditions.*

– Yes, it is so. But if the conditions under which you live seduce you, and you can't cope with yourself and start dying, but you tell yourself, "Well, can I do? Maybe God wants it this way," then you will be mistaken and fall into delusion because God doesn't want it this way.

– *How so? We don't choose that ourselves – we go there where we are told to go.*

– All is correct. You have to fulfil the obedience that you were given. But we're talking about something a little different. If the conditions in which you find yourself, physical activity, climate or something else have an unfavourable effect on your soul and body, you definitely have to tell the hegumen about that, and she will already decide what to do. Even when there's a lot of work, try to do only what you can handle. Don't pursue other sisters – they may be physically stronger or more skilled at that sort of work. Accept your inferiority

with humility and continue working slowly. The main thing is, don't give up the obedience.

– *Father Raphael, is it possible to run away so as not to cross paths with a weak person? When you know that you will sin by gossiping, can you escape that situation?*

– You are running away from that person not to avoid sin, but because you are weak. And you can run away when you realize that you have a quarrel with her and don't have that love, which could cover her weaknesses. Because of your weakness, the Lord sends you such a sister so that you don't think that you are so good. And don't worry about her weaknesses because God will handle them on His own.

– *No, I just get nervous when I meet her...*

– Realizing your weakness, your sinfulness, just go around her and that's it.

– *Father, what if a person doesn't suit you in spirit?*

– And what kind of spirit do you have?

– *Well, I don't know...*

– That's what I'm saying – we don't know our own spirit and speculate about someone else's.

– *I thought life would be easy in the monastery, but it turns out it's not.*

– It will be easy when you learn to humble yourself in front of your older sisters and yourself when you learn to tolerate yourself. But when you have your ego, then one person will be good and another will be bad, and you will be choosing who to speak with. When you get into the army and become a soldier, you don't pick who's good and who's bad because all are human. This misunderstanding or hostile feeling is our sins and our ego that has not yet been pacified. To understand whether another person suits you in spirit, as you say, or not, you need to not have your ego.

In your life, you encounter routine evil. For example, Eugenia went to the farmyard and broke her leg. She starts to complain, "Why did you throw here so many stones?!" This is also evil, but she's cursing so that this evil comes out of her. She'll swear like that and have a good cry, but then she'll humble herself and calm down. That's the easiest case, but here you need to have humility. If it

happened, so be it – everything's in God's hands. You are to blame for this bad thing, and you are angry only at yourself, but in this case, you quickly humble yourself.

However, there's another concept of evil: when a person meets another one and suffers some kind of slander or malice on his part. To cope with it, first, you need to understand that person. Why is it happening? Maybe I myself am the reason... Maybe I did something wrong. And if you look inside yourself honestly, you won't find any problems. If someone scolds you, it means they scold you for the right reason. Secondly, a person must realize that he tolerates this slander because he has hidden sins. There's one story in the lives of the saints. A merchant was put in prison unjustly and got annoyed. Then a saint comes to him and says, "This is happening to you not because you stole something, but because of this sin that you once committed. God has arranged it this way, and you're now suffering for your sin." We only suffer for our own. Thirdly, you need to understand the person himself – the state of his soul, what he is like, what his inner world is like. We must look at people not as a lump of some kind of evil, but as a creation of God that the devil has bound. From such an understanding, pity for this person appears, and you understand the state of their soul – how damaged it is. Here is one interesting episode. In the camp, it was announced that Stalin had died. Everybody's happy, but one man is staying and crying. They ask him, "Why are you crying? On the contrary, rejoice! The one who drove us here has died." And he replied, "His soul went to hell."

A man of God, who lives according to the laws of love, always looks at another person as enslaved by the devil and begins to mourn his soul. Just like a mother cries for her son – not because he's a bad person, but because he's moved away from God. She loves him and mourns his soul, she can beat him, but she'll never give up this love. If we loved all people with such maternal love, we wouldn't have any problems. All people would be our children. But, unfortunately, our love is selfish, we love only ourselves. Christ's love is like mother's love. It is the love of the Father – such love cannot reject His children, His creations, although they crucify Him on the Cross with their sins

every time. And we should have such love. If we don't have this maternal, sacrificial love, it means that we become embittered. People do something bad to us and we respond in kind. That's what the issue is. That's why in the first two cases we suffer for our evil, and in the third case – because we don't have God's love and can't cover other people's infirmities, which we don't even try to understand.

When Saint Paisios was talking about connecting with others in love, he mentioned that someone else's pain becomes your own. If you don't have empathy, you'll never love a person. The main goal of our coming to the monastery is to learn to love. And there will be no love without unity, understanding, and empathy for another person – this is the law. John the Apostle said, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). Therefore, everything is interconnected – one love is connected to another.

– *Father, please explain the last petition in the Small Litany.*

– "Commemorating our most holy, pure, blessed, and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God." We pray with all saints and commemorate those in God. God embraces everyone – the living and the dead. Mother of God is commemorated in the first place because Christ came to Earth for Her. For Her alone, His Mother, He would've created this world. And She's remembered not alone, but with all the saints, Her children in Christ, who have already departed, and those who are still alive. They are all remembered as one big family.

"Let us commend ourselves and one another" – we pray about ourselves too ("Lord, remember me too"), we commemorate and pray for each other, for all our neighbours. This prayer ends with words about us giving our whole life to Christ our God. Our prayer is effective when we give our heart and our entire life to God. God hears our prayer when we remember ourselves before God, like the thief, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42). That's the condition that we have to be in. God accepts our

prayers for other people when we love them and forget about ourselves. As Saint Paisios said, “God will hear you in your prayers if you are ready to sacrifice yourself for another person.”

I’ll tell you one episode. I once was in the Karakallou monastery. One Russian monk was fulfilling his obedience in the garage. He got to know that the brother who was doing his obedience in the gardens was planning to go away because of the hard labour. And then he started to pray tearfully for that brother so that Mother of God would leave him in the monastery. And then, an idea came to him, that out of love, they could swap their obediences. In the morning, he came to the garage manager – Fr. Joannicius – and expressed his desire for his brother to remain in the monastery. Father Joannicius gave the go-ahead and they both went to the hegumen. When they met, Father Joannicius said, “Elder, Father Philiter is leaving the monastery.” – “If he wants to, let him, I’m not forcing anyone.” – “Yes, but let’s apply *oikonomia* (that is, act out of love, condescendingly). Let’s send this Russian father to the fields, and Fr. Philiter will join me.” The elder agreed. When the Russian father found himself in gardens, he understood how hard that labour was. Ten days later he began to grumble, but The Lord had mercy, and he was soon transferred to another obedience.

I brought that example to explain that prayer is not just a petition about another person. Prayer is when you put yourself in someone else’s place. In this exact case, God showed the brother what the real prayer is like – are you ready to endure the labour, pain and emotional heaviness of another person? It’s not for nothing that the Holy Fathers said, “Praying is shedding blood.” We can talk about the real prayer for us and others only when we don’t have a single drop of selfishness and self-pity. If you want to pray for prisoners, cancer patients or anyone else, you have to stand in their place. But if you feel that you don’t yet have such love, then reproach yourself for your selfishness. Remember these people with sorrow for yourself, and the Lord will accept this small sacrifice of yours and help the suffering for whom you prayed.

– *Father, it’s known that St. John of Kronstadt prayed to God for people fervently, right to exhaustion.*

– Yes, saints are our teachers of prayer. I’d like us to be good students and not let our mentors down so that we would be with them of the same spirit and the same love.

March 4, 2007. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Three

Today we were in the icon painting workshop looking at a picture painted by a secular artist. She wanted to depict the spiritual life of the sisters, but eventually she depicted her inner world. What attracted attention was not so much the skill of the painter as her world view. The face of each of the sisters conveys tearfulness. Not even tears, but exactly tearfulness. She wanted to paint one of the sisters as withdrawn and thoughtful, but she portrayed her as empty. A person with such an unspiritual composition of the soul cannot capture a spiritual face. The idea of the painting is the holiness, the heavenly light, which is reflected in human thoughts. However, it’s clear that the painter, without realizing that, paints her inner world. Her idea is interesting and clear – she wants to grasp a specific character trait of every sister. The result was that one of the praying sisters turned into a crybaby, and the contemplation and withdrawal of the other sister turned into madness with bulging eyes. Even the obedience of superiors looks like a command, and the novices in this picture are like carefree children. Depicting venerable nuns to emphasize their long-term feat, she shows their fatigue. The only thing is, it’s not clear what type of fatigue that is – from work or life. So, in essence, the picture shows completely the opposite. That’s why the artist has to be of the same spirit with those whom he paints.

I don’t want to criticize this painting and say if it’s good or bad. I’m just sharing the feelings that I experienced. You can paint in different ways. There is *avant-garde*, which also finds its response if you understand it. Any icon and any painting transmit some feeling. When you take a photo, it also conveys your state. You come to the

Tretyakov Gallery and stare at the paintings of great artists because they lead you to the state of an artist. Same thing here – the painter was trying to convey that state, that’s clear. Any painter, any iconographer paints with his soul and reflects his inner state – namely with soul, and not with mind.

– *Excuse me, father. Please say something about my soul, like what am I in the soul?*

– I already told you that.

– *Well, let everyone know.*

– Why should everyone know? The main thing is that you know about yourself because others have enough worries without you.

These are my impressions, they are subjective. I’m not criticizing – it doesn’t matter to me whether are good or bad at painting. It’s just that an iconographer’s hand paints the faces of the saints, and an artist’s hand simply paints faces. That is, whether he wants it or not, he reflects not only the sacred but also the sinful. Perhaps any painting or an icon conveys the state and feelings that a painter or an iconographer has experienced. Because feelings first appear in the soul, and only then artists transfer them into some forms and images. God reveals the same things, but the experience of contacting them can be different and at different times a person perceives them differently.

So why am I saying this? We always talk about the state of holiness and the state of spiritual delusion. Within our lives, we comprehend both God and the devil. When we touch God, His grace saves us from evil, and we float like birds, defended from our passions. We live and feel God with our hearts. When God’s grace comes away from us, we embark on the path of struggle with our passions and the devil. And on this path, we need to have an experience of contact with the devil. That is, a person has to feel him not to fall into a state of delusion. And when a person has an experience of such a struggle, he will feel how this experience affects his soul through thoughts, feelings, laziness... Then, they’ll be rejecting the devil and thus saving their soul. But when we acquire the experience of recognizing and rejecting that demonic force, we can save the grace that God has given us. And then, the state of soul that we acquire will be strong. It’s extremely important

to acquire this state of soul because unfortunately, many monks fall, regardless of their age and spiritual growth.

So do your best to acquire this experience of feelings because we have a very long way to go to reach God because of our sins, our negligence, our lack of zeal for God and our lack of comprehension. You come to confess and ask me what sins you have to confess. You have to confess specifically in those contacts with the devil, although not always do they lead to sins, but simply settle down in your heart. You have to feel, analyse and have experience. The devil will never leave you alone and will always be planting thoughts in your head that you will either accept or reject. All the time, your heart will be experiencing what is there, inside – is it peace or anxiety? You have to work, you have to analyse, you have to be alive – that’s what confession consists of. Not only in saying your sins out loud, but also in opening your feelings and thoughts. Confession is given so that a person learns to recognize the correctness and incorrectness of his feelings. If some kind of anger or restlessness appears, or some thought bothers you, then you come to confession and say, “Father, this one’s disturbing me. Where did it come from?” You do this a couple of times, and then you already know whether that comes from God, from the devil or you yourself. Thoughts and feelings – that’s what we have to bring to confession. You’ve been confessing the same sins for years like it’s a learned text, but the real goal of confession is to warm up your soul, and then your inner fire and God’s one will together burn your sins and cleanse your soul. A confession is a two-way act of God and a man.

– *I confess roughly once a month, but thoughts come every day.*

– It’s clear that thoughts come every day, but the thing is that they are different. You can come to your spiritual father or a priest and tell him about the thoughts that disturb you. And don’t even pay attention to fleeting thoughts. Simply say, “Lord, please forgive me”, stay calm and keep working. You’ve come to the monastery, so you have to be able to do something. What do you learn – to make soup, to bake flatbread, to make cabbage cakes? What have you come to the monastery for? To learn obedience and through obedience, you learn humility, wisdom, and love.

Monastery is an institute. Here, not only do you have to work, but also get to know yourself. But if it's not possible to approach your spiritual father, then simply start keeping a diary for yourself so that you can understand and analyse where your thoughts came from and what you experienced. While confessing your sins, reading the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Fathers and talking to experienced sisters, you acquire the skill of distinguishing your thoughts: this one's from the devil, that one's from me, and that one's from God. You ask once, twice, thrice, and the lesson must be learned – what those thoughts are and where they come from. If the Lord gave you a confessor, use this opportunity. If you don't use it, nothing will happen. I understand that everyone is given their own talent. Everyone has their own damage – some have more, some have less, but this is why we were given the human mind to reject the bad and accept the good, and we also need to teach this wisdom to our spirit. The worst thing is when your years in the monastery pass, and you still haven't acquired such wisdom. That's a real problem.

We must have a thread, holding on to which, we will be looking for salvation, some kind of hope. There should always be an expectation of God in the soul of a Christian. The soul in Holy Scripture is depicted as a bride and is spoken of in the feminine gender. It is feminine in both Russian (душа [dushá]) and Greek (ψυχή [psihí]). Christ is always like the Bridegroom. The soul always reaches out to its Groom, to its Loved One. And this feeling should always be there. Any obedience that you carry out, any feat – small or large, occupational or spiritual – should develop, kindle this feeling of meeting with God, “I really want to see Him because this is my Beloved, and I live by Him.” Why are you praying? Exactly to have God in your heart and your mind. The Holy Scriptures say, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). And when a person loves someone, then no matter what he does, his heart always burns with the fire of love, and he always wants this meeting. The memory of a loved one always lives in him, and if this memory, this desire begins to be interrupted by some passion, some other desire – to eat, to sleep, and so on – that's the devil or our laziness.

I'll say a little more about the Liturgy, about the Eucharistic canon. In our theology, little attention is paid to the issue of understanding the Eucharistic canon. A few of the Russian liturgists touched upon it: Metropolitan Arseny of Kyiv (19th century), Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern) and Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. I probably can't name any more Russian fathers. Among the ancient fathers is St. Symeon of Thessalonica (XV century).

I want to share with you my inner feelings. The Eucharistic canon is the most important thing in the Liturgy because during it the Transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ occurs. The canon starts with the exclamation, “The Doors! The Doors! In wisdom let us attend!” That is, all those praying are called to attention and concentration, as the culminating, most crucial moment of the Divine Liturgy begins. At this moment, God's condescension towards people and people's ascension to God occurs.

Then, The Symbol of Faith is sung, which reflects God himself, only in dogmas. That is, God Himself is standing before us. What are the symbols of God? Gospel, Cross, and Creed. These are the main three symbols. In ancient times, during the singing of The Symbol of Faith, deacons would fan the Holy things with the ripidion (a liturgical fan). But nowadays, priests take the Aër, hold it high in the air and wave it slowly over the Chalice and Diskos. This moment of waving reminds us how the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters and warming the earth in which life was about to arise. If then God created this world out of nothing, now what is happening is not creation, but Transubstantiation, that is during the consecration of the Eucharist (Communion), the bread and wine are transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Now, when the Holy Spirit is hovering and fanning the Holy Things over the Chalice and Diskos, the mystery of Transubstantiation begins.

The deacon or the priest announces, “*Let us stand aright! Let us stand with fear! Let us attend! That we may offer the Holy Oblation in peace.*” When we would gather for krasma (a treat for the brethren), Elder Christodoul always announced, “Stomen kalos!” (Let us stand aright!) – that is, let's stand like warriors and be fully armed in spirit.

“Let us stand with fear!” – let’s be attentive and focused, like warriors who have properly grouped themselves and gone to battle. Here you need to collect all your thoughts and stand in your heart so that the mind doesn’t become distracted. In this state, no matter who you are and no matter what you do – whether you sing, read, or pray – you have to group all your forces because these words call for this. How was it during the war? From the sound of trumpets, a person would immediately group up and prepare for battle. Same thing here. “That we may offer the Holy Oblation in peace” – A person can bring the Holy Oblation, the Holy Gifts, to God only in a peaceful state. The canons of the Church say that if a person is not in a peaceful state, but in embitterment, then he cannot receive communion and cannot unite with God. He can be in the church, but he cannot meet Christ.

The choir responds with “*A mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise.*” This renunciation of evil, love of God, peace of soul – this is the state of peace, “the mercy of peace.” In this state of soul, the “sacrifice of praise” is offered, the sacrifice of thanksgiving to God – the Holy Gifts, which will subsequently become the Body and Blood of Christ. We are talking about them and about the human soul, about the fact that a person brings this piece of their soul to God, this is his sacrifice. The sacrifice of the soul is reflected in the Holy Sacrament. So here, too, our internal dispensation is reflected in the Offering of the Holy Gifts – bread and wine, which will be the Body and Blood of Christ.

Then the priest announces, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.*” Just as Moses entered Mount Sinai, received the Tablets of Stone there and prayed to God that God’s people could approach this mountain and not perish, so the priest asks God that the Lord would accept the people who are standing and praying around. By crossing the people of God, he gives the blessing to begin the sacrament of the Eucharist. Greeks don’t bless with a hand, but with the Aër, which symbolizes the grace of the Holy Spirit. After that, the choir responds, “And with your spirit” – the people wish the priest that he too would approach this sacrament in peace because he’s about to perform this great sacred rite.

“Lift up your hearts”, – says the priest, that is, let’s leave everything vain, let’s renounce everything earthly and try to direct our hearts, our minds to Heaven so that no vanity bothers us. “*We lift them up unto the Lord!*”, responds the choir – that is, we want to have the same aspiration that the priest tells us about – There, to the Above.

The priest proclaims, “*Let us give thanks unto the Lord!*” It is from this moment that the sacrament itself begins. Before this, with the preliminary exclamations of the priest and the choir, the people of God were preparing themselves. After this, the priest begins the ritual. Now he reads the secret prayers (in ancient times they were not secret and were always pronounced out loud). This prayer reveals that all those praying in the church – both priests and laity – must enter the parallel world, the world of the Heavenly Kingdom which descends to earth, into the temple of God, and we must feel it and enter this world, cross this border. What kind of parallel world is it? There, in Heaven, the Liturgy is performed constantly – Christ constantly sacrifices Himself to God the Father. The Apocalypse says that John the Theologian saw the Lamb slain and sitting on the throne of God the Father, and he saw that the sacrifice was being made there until the end of time, until the general Resurrection. Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity, He sacrifices Himself. We, the earthly Church, connect and enter into the Liturgy, which is celebrated in Heaven – therefore, there is always the same Christ on all thrones. There are many liturgies celebrated at different times and in different places on earth, yet Christ always remains One – we enter There, into that Liturgy, and at that moment two worlds come into contact and intertwine. According to the canons of the Holy Orthodox Church, a priest can perform the liturgy on only once a day. A day symbolizes a whole life: the rising and setting of the sun – the birth, death, and Resurrection of Christ, the entire fullness of His life. So the priest – Christ is in him – is born, dies and resurrects together with Christ. We must definitely enter the Liturgy, this heavenly Church.

During the Cherubic Song, the priest’s prayer is read that a passionate, nasty person cannot approach God. Therefore, a person with a guilty conscience and burdened with sins cannot unite with

Christ, and cannot enter there. It is not enough to be in church and pray; you need to be pure in soul to partake of the Heavenly Liturgy here on earth. So it is – some are present at the Divine Liturgy, but others are not. The fact that a person comes to the liturgy and stands praying doesn't mean anything. When I asked secular people what moved them most, they said the way how the choir was singing the Trisagion brought them to tears. Such a sensual perception of the liturgy is incorrect. The Liturgy must be experienced from beginning to end; there must be an ascension, a lifting off from the earth so that we enter the spiritual world.

Let's come back again to the Eucharistic canon. In the Russian tradition, the choir sings, "It is meet and right to worship the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Trinity one in essence and undivided." Greeks sing, "Ἀξιζοει καὶ πρέπει" (It is meet and right) – only the first words of the secret prayer read by the priest. In the Russian tradition, the meaning is slightly distorted. For the Greeks, it is more correct, since in the secret prayer, attention is concentrated on God the Father, and not on the entire Holy Trinity. We give thanks to God the Father for our life and salvation, for the service that He receives from our hands. And then in the same prayer, after thanksgiving, the gaze of those praying turns to those who are around God the Father: *"Though there stand by Thee thousands of archangels and hosts of angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim."* He is surrounded by the angelic world, and not only do they see themselves, not only the saints, but we also see them with spiritual eyes. It is important to understand what is happening and where you are.

Then the priest says, "Singing the triumphant hymn, shouting, proclaiming and saying." That is, we hear the voices of angels who are present around the Throne of God. They are dedicated to Him: singing like an eagle, shouting like an ox, proclaiming like a lion and saying like a man. They speak different languages and have different voices, but our mind perceives them as one thought. After that, the choir sings, "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Angels and cherubim

sing this victorious song that the Saviour has come to the world, the Son of God has come, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who delivered the human race from the devil, took upon himself all the sins of the human race and ascended to Heaven; He accepted the nature of man, united him with Himself, and sat down at the right hand of God the Father. After this, a person was able to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven after death and enter the realm of the Divine. This is not a third, some kind of new nature, but this is adoption, the reunion of God with man in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The priest says that he hears angels, and the choir replies to him.

The words "Singing the triumphant hymn, shouting, proclaiming and saying" are very reminiscent of the Cross itself, the sacrifice itself. While the priest pronounces these words, the deacon or the priest himself strikes the edges of the diskos with an asterisk four times. The star touches the diskos in the form of a cross: from top to bottom and from right to left. These are the blows of the hammer during the nailing of Christ to the Cross. When they serve at night, in silence, these blows from the altar are heard by those praying. The sacrifice is made, and we are united with it through remembrance of the Cross of Christ and entering into spiritual sacrifice. At the proskomedia, the priest remembers the bloody sacrifice with the words, "In the memory of the Lord and God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." And now, when the priest or the deacon strikes the edges of the diskos with an asterisk, that sacrifice is remembered again. We are connecting with Heaven and can enter this Heavenly liturgy, this parallel world through memories.

And again the secret prayer is read by the priest that the people of God thank Him for the fact that the Lord suffered for us. There is a remembrance of sacrifice through which we can unite with God. There is a remembrance of how Christ took bread into His hands, broke it, consecrated it and distributed it to His disciples. The hands of the priest bring the Holy Communion – bread and wine. But this sacrifice cannot be offered by man himself because it is offered not even by a priest or a bishop, but by Christ Himself. A sacrament is being performed – the heavenly world and the earthly world are intertwined.

During the Liturgy, the priest serves as a man, he is the primate before God, he has gone through ordination – a gift from God, but at some moments he is no longer a man but becomes God Christ – the divine and the human are united in him. And these gifts are no longer brought by man, but by Christ through the hands of a priest.

The priest says, “Take! Eat! This is My Body” in the first person. That is, it’s not the priest but Christ. And everyone who prays in church must pass these words through their hearts – everyone must participate in the Liturgy. There should not be a thought in your mind like “The priest is praying, transforming bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and I’ll just come, partake of a piece of communion and that’s it.” No, everyone is present and everyone makes this sacrifice. Understand that both the priest and each of you have Christ in your heart. Therefore, earlier, the priest proclaimed that we all need a peaceful dispensation to take part in this sacrament. And only those who remain embittered cannot enter the Heavenly Liturgy and join That world. When you are in a peaceful, sober, collected state, these words will pass through your heart, and you will feel that Christ lives in you. The priest (and Christ in us) says, “Take! Eat! This is My Body,” “Drink of it, all of you! This is My Blood of the New Testament.”

In the Old Testament, Moses sacrificed young bulls for the sins of the people. It was the blood of animals, and with it, people were sanctified and cleansed of their sins. And Christ came into the world and established the New Testament through His blood. A covenant is the establishment of new canons; Christ sheds His blood and places it in the New Testament. If in the Old Testament, they would kill animals and sprinkle people, the altar, and cleanse sacred places with their blood, then here Christ pours out His blood on everyone. Not only does He sprinkle it, but He immerses everyone in His blood. That is, it begins to flow in people and cleanses everything in their bodies and souls. After these words are spoken, the Holy Gifts – bread and wine – cease to be the former bread and wine, but they are not yet the Body and Blood of Christ. This sacred rite is similar to the creative act, as a result of which the Lord created man from the dust of the earth. The body of man was created, but without a soul, he wasn’t yet a man. The

same is here. These are bread and wine, body and blood, but not yet the Body and Blood of Christ.

The priest dares to bring them to God the Father – this is His, dear, “Thine own of Thine own we Offer unto Thee, in behalf of all and for all!” Just as at the creation of man, there was the council of the Holy Trinity, so here, at the Transubstantiation, this council is assembled. The Son of God turns to God the Father, “Father, these are Your Gifts. We offer them to You as a sacrifice of Our love for the entire human race.” The entire Holy Trinity participates in this Offering. This is Her Sacrifice of Love, this is Her Love, for Herself, and from Her to people. This sacrifice is needed by God and needed by people because by partaking of it, a person unites with the Son of God, and through Him becomes a relative of the entire Holy Trinity. But for salvation, for uniting man with God, in addition to God’s sacrifice, human sacrifice is also needed. In addition to God’s descent, human ascension is also necessary. As a sign of understanding this truth, the priest raises the Holy Gifts with crossed hands (crosswise). Thus, the ascension and the Cross are obtained, and their meaning is as follows: “Father, accept these Gifts from us, we offer them to You, for They are our love for Your Son and our sacrifice to You.” That is, we offer these Gifts out of love for the Son of God. They are a victim, but our love is also a victim. What can a person sacrifice to God? The worthy Gift that God can accept is His Son. And out of love for God the Father, we offer Him His Only Begotten Son. God cannot refuse this, it is Himself, it is His Son. That’s the meaning of the words “Thine own of Thine own we Offer unto Thee, in behalf of all and for all!”

And then the choir responds, “We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee, O Lord; and we pray unto Thee, O our God.” During this singing, sacred rites for the Transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts are performed, a secret prayer is read by the priest, and bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. These are the same Body and Blood of Christ but deified and ascended to Heaven.

What conclusion can we make from that? The main moment is entering the parallel world, into that Heavenly Liturgy that goes on

constantly, forever. Christ constantly offers Himself as a sacrifice to God the Father. Love lives by sacrifice and cannot exist without sacrifice, it is constant. Our goal is to enter into this Heavenly Liturgy. And we must understand where we are. Otherwise, we're empty, and our stay in the temple is meaningless. How did the saints perform miracles – healing the sick and raising the dead? They performed them only when they entered another world. And it's interesting that for the Other World, these are not miracles, but ordinary phenomena. Therefore, in prayer, you must learn to move from one dimension to another – putting aside everything earthly and going into the Heavenly. How did the saint John of Kronstadt heal the possessed? He entered that world, stood before God, and everything he asked, God gave him. Therefore, he served the Divine Liturgy and took communion every day to always be there. And when he entered the Divine region, he saw human souls. This is how we need to know this and practice this experience of the Holy Fathers in our lives. Entry into the Heavenly Liturgy is a reality, and it occurs through the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. Christ descends to us again, this is really so, His Body and Blood are before us. In the sacrament of Transubstantiation, there is a transition from the Heavenly to the earthly, of Christ to the Holy Gifts. But we also need to ascend, and this only happens through faith.

Next, come prayers for those who can begin the Holy Communion, and it's said what the Holy Communion gives. It cleanses the soul, preserves love, and gives grace and the Kingdom of Heaven. After this, prayers are read for those for whom this sacrifice is made. It's offered for everyone who has entered the Kingdom of Heaven, and for those who have not yet entered the Kingdom of Heaven, who got into hell, but have hope – a thread connecting him with God. This thread, this germ of salvation, is in love for God and people. It's very important to have it. The Church on earth has the power to pray for such people because the Son of God is present here on earth with His Eucharist. In other words, the fate that is prepared for a person after the fortieth day can be changed. If a soul that passes from this life to another one is without love and is not ready to unite with God,

naturally it goes to the place that is closer to it in its condition. Many souls go to hell, that is, to a place distant from God, and then through connection with the earthly Church they receive the missing love, and when they are warmed up by this love, they can already live in heaven with God, in His love.

You can enter the Kingdom of Heaven not only during the liturgy in church but also anywhere during prayer. Therefore, the saints performed miracles not only during the liturgy but also in other places when they turned to God. St. Seraphim of Sarov was a hieromonk, and then he left the ministry and went into the desert. At the liturgy, he received the skill of going into God's world, and in his small cell, he united with Christ. But there is one condition for entering the parallel world – a person must renounce the world and overcome his egoism. The Holy Scriptures say, "Unless you die to the world, you will not be born into God." And vice versa, "He who dies to God is born into death."

The Holy Fathers say that a monk should be destitute because this way it's easier for him to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Leaving all vanity behind, he unites with God. When a person begins to be burdened with certain things and his head is full, there will be no prayer. The patristic path is the path of asceticism and always lay through poverty. It's impossible to enter the Kingdom of Heaven if a person's soul clings to earthly things. From earthly gravity the soul becomes restless, and when it goes to the place where these things don't exist, the passion doesn't die there either, but remains. Therefore, after death, the soul begins to suffer if it's attracted by passion and is clung to it. That's dangerous.

Somewhere in the lives of the saints, I read a story about a monk. He saved up some money, but when he passed away, brethren began to prepare his body for burial. When they found his money, they told that to the hegumen. And the hegumen said, "Let this money be his condemnation." They threw money into his coffin, did not hold a funeral service for him, and forbade him to be remembered as a suicide. It's impossible to combine the monastic dispensation of a person who has completely given himself to the service of God with

attachment to earthly things. On Mount Athos there's a law: if a monk watches TV, then comes the police and drives him to the outer world. Monastic life is incompatible with television and the daydreaming that comes from it. It doesn't matter whether he just watched the news or a cartoon. The point is that his imagination starts working, and the devil enters the soul of a person through the mind. Orthodoxy has always been fighting with dreaminess because it leads you away from God.

Please, have those feelings that a Christian should have when praying during Liturgy. "Stomen kalos!" – let us stand well, let us become warriors, that is, you need to have a warlike state of mind. If you don't have a militant state of soul, you won't be able to fight the enemy and connect with God. This state is vital for us. Always keep track of exclamations during the service. "Let us stand well, let us stand with fear, let us attend, that we may offer the holy oblation in peace." – wherever you are, whatever you're thinking about, whatever you're doing, leave everything and get yourself together. These words are a call, a trumpet calling to battle. They have to sober you up. You have to understand what state you're in and with whom you are – with God or with the devil. This feeling of the presence of God, the fear of God, should be always and everywhere.

The charter of Optina Hermitage established that after communion of the Holy Sacraments of the Body and Blood of Christ, prayers of thanksgiving should be read eight times during the day. I wonder why eight. Number 8 is an infinity sign. This is the figure for the future Kingdom, and the Resurrection of Christ was on the eighth day. Our earthly life consists of 7 days, then it ends and eternity begins. I think that the Holy Fathers of Optina Hermitage perfectly understood what was happening at the moment of the Divine Liturgy, and the eightfold reading of prayers of thanksgiving reflects the inner state of a person and the anticipation of his future life.

It's very important to preserve grace from the Holy Communion. The closer a person is to God, the closer the devil is to him. The divine nature is very subtle – one movement of your heart, your thought, and He leaves. So it is with Communion: you are united with Christ, but the slightest irritation or fussiness immediately leads to devastation.

Therefore, it will be beneficial when we learn to save the grace. Yes, you rarely receive communion. But what's the point if you can't save the grace? Learn to save it. Yes, it's hard because you have to protect yourself even from yourself. The Holy Fathers pay great attention to protecting yourself. When the Lord gave them some kind of grace, they took great care of themselves from laziness, overeating, and excessive communication, they were very careful, thrifty, and attentive to themselves. In the patristic books, a little is said about the preparation for the Holy Communion, but much is said about saving the grace, which comes into the human soul after the Communion. To preserve yourself, use both the patristic and your spiritual experience.

– *May I ask something? Will there also be a Liturgy after the Second Coming?*

– It always will.

– *Also one question. When you tell us "Bless me", what does that mean? When God or a priest blesses us, it's clear, but how can we bless you?*

– It is the soul that blesses. That's because grace enters into the nature of man, into his soul, and with this grace, he loves and creates because grace in its essence is the energy of the Divine. You come to me and say, "Father, bless me." What am I doing? I'm giving you the blessing, the energy of God with my hand and my soul. Why did the forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and others bless their descendants? So that through their soul and hand, the energy of God would preserve, save and give them goodness in their lives. But for this, the descendants must be worthy successors of Divine grace.

– *Last question. You talked about the portraits and said that if a person reaches some spiritual heights and then falls low, then he'll never reach his first level. I remember I once read about the life of Reverend James the Solitary. He was a miracle worker, but one day he fell into terrible mortal sins. But then, with his crying and repentance, he begged God so much that the grace of miracles was completely returned to him. That is, he realized that God had forgiven him and returned everything to him in full.*

– This is a little different. I meant the general path of salvation. A soul distorted by sin will usually have a weak point in itself. But the

general path of salvation, of rising from sin, is the same for everyone. Saint James the Faster of Phoenicia said, “The first tactic of liberation from sin and the devil, is escape from temptations.” Thus, a person humbles himself, “God, I’m weak, I can’t endure it!” And then, when a person is strengthened by the grace of God, he begins to resist sin, like St. Mary of Egypt. The Mother of God told her, “Go beyond the Jordan, and you’ll be saved there” and showed her the path of salvation to flee from temptations. When she had done this and was strengthened in her determination to escape, she began to be tormented by memories of past sins. Then God gave her the strength to endure and love. But in special cases, by God’s providence, the soul, on the contrary, humbled itself from the pain of sin, was aroused by zeal for God, and flew to Him even higher than before.

The grace of God must be preserved and protected, since the slightest sense of superiority can lead to a fall and loss of grace. It’s not for nothing that St. Anthony the Great said that the last Christians will be fleeing the world and hiding in caves, mountains and deserts because they’ll feel the smallness of their humility, and it’ll be difficult to preserve the grace. In ancient times there was a heresy of the Euchites. They said that at some point in their spiritual life, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and got into a non-falling state. They stopped praying and fasting, and as a result, went into false contemplation and fell into delusion. These people became very proud. I want to say that the saints, no matter how much they achieved holiness, were still afraid of losing the grace of the Holy Spirit. There is one spiritual law – don’t calm down until you die because the devil will attack you all the time and will be nearby. You can die at any moment. St. Ignatius Brianchaninov describes one case. One bishop was dying. The hegumen brought a novice to the bishop to help him and went away. When the novice just touched his toe, his passions flared up and a sin occurred. The Lord raised him from his deathbed, and he was repenting of this for the rest of his days. As soon as you fall just a little into pride and forget that you are made of flesh, the devil is right there. Everyone needs to remember that. The Holy Fathers wrote that when you leave your cell, you won’t return the same.

What can we do? We live under God, and God sees our needs. If you go out into the world and communicate with people out of need, then God covers you. But when a person goes into the world on a whim and seeks entertainment, God won’t cover and save him. Let’s pray.

July 13, 2007. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Four

Just as there is a lot of good and bad in a person, there is a lot of good and bad in the world around us and the events taking place in it. But something very bad can come out of good. That’s the most dangerous thing, both in ourselves and in this world. Many seemingly good discoveries of humanity begin to bring evil, death and even a threat to our entire planet. Take, for example, atomic energy. Everything – from every little thing to the biggest deed – will sooner or later bring great harm if it’s done without God. Therefore, if you begin to do something and feel that you are losing God (you lose God when this cry of unity with Him is lost), then such work will not fill your soul, but, on the contrary, will empty it and lead it away from the internal to the external. Don’t say that you are doing this for Christ’s sake, don’t deceive yourself or others. If you have lost Christ, how can you do something for Him? Only with words, but not with soul. In everything, there is a purpose, God. He is the Essence. Take away this essence, and only the form remains.

What is a sin? It’s a fulfilment of passion. Any passion is an inclination of the soul, a root, from which a sin grows, and a sin is its fulfilment. First, you are looking at a sin, examining it, and only then you commit it. This path lies through daydreaming. Interestingly, daydreaming is much stronger and sweeter than sin itself – in the mind, in feelings, this sin looks much more beautiful, sweeter, and juicier. As a result, the soul cannot stand this fantasy, bursts and walks to it as if spellbound. But the holy apostles write that when the soul tastes this dreaminess, it immediately experiences bitterness. Therefore, the devil comes not through sin, but through daydreaming,

through thoughts. St. Theophan the Recluse says that sin is considered a combination of thoughts and feelings, that is, an appearance of daydreaming, and of this, you already have to repent in confession. Daydreaming is the life of passions in the human soul. It needs to be eradicated and cut off. If this doesn't happen, then the person becomes like a demon. Fallen angels don't sin, and they can't sin, as they don't have flesh, like humans. But this bubble of passions unites a person with demons. Demons live in daydreaming and cannot free themselves from it. A person, while still alive, unlike demons, can satiate his passion and free himself from it for a while by sinning. Like a drunkard who will drink as much as he needs, and after that he calms down and feels good. But if he doesn't let his soul sin, it begins to crave, and this process never ends. But when a person dies, he really experiences torment, precisely from his passions, but it's impossible to satisfy them. Hell is the internal fire of passions. Everything that's written in the Holy Scriptures is true, and if a person goes to hell, he becomes like a demon, and when he's depicted, this similarity is precisely reflected. It manifests itself more in the soul, that is, daydreaming is not in sin itself. There is an icon of the Last Judgment, which depicts harlots in a human face. The face has not changed, but that's not true because, in hell, a person's soul changes. Therefore, it is possible to depict on an icon a person who is in hell in human form if one concentrates attention on the very sin that he was committing. But if you focus on the soul, on the passion that enslaved him and brought him to hell, then the image will be different.

I remember that in the Koutloumousiou monastery, there was an icon painter from Thessaloniki. He was decorating the new refectory and did it so skilfully that the entire history of Athos could be seen on the walls. He also depicted the history of the Xeropotamou monastery, the time of Catholic expansion on the peninsula, when the brethren of the monastery accepted the papal union. He depicted those fathers in hell. They are similar to monkeys – bright beards and brown skin. Athonite monks say that when those fathers died, the earth did not accept them, so their remains were black when they were dug out. Later, they were thrown away to the sea. The iconographer depicted

their inner state, their souls. That is, he depicted them the way how he saw them in hell with his inner eyes.

There's one more moment in the history of the Xeropotamou monastery. In the main temple in honour of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, there was growing a grapevine from under the throne, and on their feast day, it bore fruit. The brethren picked those berries and gave them to praying people, and they received healing from them. But after the adoption of the papal union, it stopped blooming and completely dried up. In such a way, the wrath of God was clearly manifested in the taking away of this miracle from the monastery for its deviation from Orthodoxy.

Another wonderful vine on Mount Athos grows in the Hilandar monastery. Its roots come from under the temple, where the coffin of St. Simeon the Myrrh-flowing stood. There's a prophecy associated with it: that the brethren must live and save their souls on Athos as long as the vine grows and bears fruit, and when it dries up, they must leave the Holy Mountain. I think that there is some parallel between these two vines – the Xeropotamou and Hilandar. Orthodoxy is the true and saving faith, and if faith dies, then there is no life. The protection of the Mother of God over Athos will remain as long as there is faith and love there, which means it will be possible to live and get salvation. There's a similar prophecy about the Pühtitsa Convent. Dear Father John of Kronstadt said, "If you don't anger the Mother of God, Pühtitsa Monastery will stay up until the Second Coming." But the Mother of God can only be angered when love becomes scarce. Without love, our faith is empty. Without love, a monk is a museum piece. Therefore, let's cherish love and the presence of the Mother of God because we are like children and can't live without our Mother.

– *May I ask? You once said that a monk has to experience loneliness, but without people, I get bored. I can't even live in my cell without someone.*

– *Sure, live with people. That's your new obedience.*

– *I feel good when close to somebody, but when alone, I go insane. Ugh, I won't be a nun.*

– How so?

– *Because without people, I feel bored and bad.*

– Then live with people. That's your disposition. Look how many saints there were in the history of the Church, who dedicated their lives to their neighbours. They organized hospices, took care of the sick, and ministered to the brethren...

– *One more question... You were talking about God's will. But I didn't quite understand what it means to subordinate your will to someone else's?*

– Another type of will is the creative one, which is directed through people, animals, and events that happen to us. Through all this acts God's will. When we accept everything that happens to us, both positive and negative, like from God's hand, we acquire humility. And when we are ready to fulfil someone else's will as our own will, we become humble from that. Even when a fly hits the window and wants to fly out, we will open the window for it and from this we'll humble ourselves and gain love. That's the creative will – it's in everything and everywhere because God arranged this world and our salvation in such a way that we have to forget about ourselves and destroy our egoism by fulfilling His will. The devil's will is completely another – it devalues our lives and makes us dependent on some things and passions, which deprives us of the image and likeness of God. Daydreaming in the mind and embitterment are already the work of the devil. The state of depression is the same, but God always has peace. There is also a third will – the human one, which processes someone else's will either into God's or into the devil's so that in the end it merges and becomes akin to one of them, so it's impossible to tell if it's Divine or devilish. The human will is an everyday one – to eat, drink, go out somewhere. It can't exist by itself and is united with another will because the nature of the soul is woven from love, and love can't live on its own – it needs an object or person to love

– *You were talking about fear of God and hesychia. But what we, nuns, should do if we live simple everyday lives, but the enemy still tempts us?*

– That's fine in your state. You don't have to be embarrassed by enemy attacks here. The main thing is that your soul doesn't become

embittered during these temptations, doesn't live by it, and doesn't fuss. In general, do whatever you want: pray, eat, sleep, just so as not to become embittered. When you reach this point of peace, then you'll quickly move on and hesychia will come, and the memory of death and everything else.

– *Father, do I have to cut off dreaminess right away?*

– Do you still want to stay in it and enjoy it?

– *Well, I understand that it must be cut off immediately, but it doesn't always work out.*

– Try to cut it off right away because that'll lighten your spirits and make you feel better. If it doesn't work out right away, don't despair. And most importantly, don't wish for this in your heart, fight this delusion.

– *Father, sometimes you just don't have time, there are so many things to do. (Laughing)*

– Well, you have to practice. You have to know the process itself and how it starts. It starts from the heart, and not from the mind. If you come into contact with some thought and accept it, then daydreaming appears. It cannot appear out of nowhere, that is, these feelings are in the heart, and when some thought comes, it begins to worry, connect with it, pictures appear, and feelings swell.

The Holy Fathers always spoke about the fight against daydreaming and sobriety. Sobriety is the ability to see and observe your heart. They always guarded their feelings, did not allow their hearts to react to sinful thoughts, respond to them and live by them. And this moment of stopping your feelings, not thoughts, but feelings – you stop the movements of your heart when it goes right through – it's always a sorrow because you break it and don't let it fulfil its desire. So, if there's no sorrow, then you are not praying, you are not staying sober, you are not living. The most important thing is that you feel that there, inside you, this withdrawal is happening, a struggle with yourself. From this comes the purity of heart, humility, a cry for help to God, a feeling of His presence and intercession, and ultimately, love for God and people.

– *There's one more thing I wanted to ask... It happens so that you live and get tired of this spiritual life, from sobriety, from the tension of this, from the fact that you always need to watch your thoughts.*

– But without this, there is no way, our life is in struggle.

– *Sometimes you just want to rest from this struggle.*

– Our rest is more about feeling some kind of joy, some kind of emptiness. If the soul, from the very beginning of the monastic path, got used to sorrow and felt the taste of the sweetness of struggle, then it would be looking for it on its own.

– *And what if it's not used to sorrow?*

– Then you have to accustom yourself. You see, without sobriety, you'll always wallow in the dirt that the devil will serve you, and in the end, you'll get tired from it. While you are young, you can acquire this grief for yourself, you can break yourself because you have the strength to do it. When a person is old, he doesn't have such a spirit or the desire to fight with himself. Whatever this life brings, that's what he lives with: if it brings something good, he lives good, if it brings something bad, he lives bad. There is no struggle, no feelings, no zeal for God. It's like horses used to be trained for war. Trumpets sounded, they were shown blood, and that turned them on. And when those horses were already accustomed to that, they went into battle like tanks. They were no longer afraid of anything, and the very blood that they saw inflamed them even more. It's the same here. When a person enters into some kind of battle with his passions, when he begins to break them, then this battle itself, the breaking itself should warm up the person even more.

But our problem is that we don't feel this struggle, or, what's worse, we don't know it. As Mother Athanasia says, "I'm tired." That's not true. By and large, she doesn't have this concept of struggle or path. She's just tired of herself, of not understanding what to do. She endures, just lives, and swims out, but there's no struggle. What is a struggle? It's a feeling of jealousy inside when a person purposefully keeps his love, and if this is not the case, then he's like a blind kitten – he'll bump here and there. It's not a fighter because he doesn't feel the fight.

From the heated spirit of jealousy, a person himself wants to go into this withdrawal of passions, the soul itself reaches out, and because of this, it becomes ascetic. Remember, we said that in Greek icons the Holy Fathers are depicted as ascetics; this spirit of jealousy, severity, and harshness towards sin is conveyed. Orthodox Christians

in Russia depict saints in contemplation, that is, the result of this path of sobriety and asceticism is a departure from this world to God. The Greeks themselves are very temperamental, the blood just burns in them, and when they enter this battle, they get heated. This battle with the devil heats them. But when a person doesn't have this experience of struggle, he doesn't feel the devil. That's why St. John Climacus said, "If a person does not hate the devil, they will never hate sin and will not be freed from his passion."

I was once asked, "Father, how can we have empathy for somebody when we hear about their fall?" Firstly, you must always see the devil behind this sin. If you don't see the devil, but only the event itself, then only your mind will work, your heart will be silent, and you'll never be able to pray for this person. You cannot be inflamed with love for God yourself, nor can you help this person. Secondly, you have to feel anger. This anger at the devil must reject that evil, that sin that that person committed, and the rejection of this evil makes the person clean. Then in your eyes, he becomes "one of the thieves," and you become a Samaritan. This is how a person who sees the fall of another begins to pray for his sins: one drinks and another one sees him as if beaten by robbers, a man, naked, unhappy, wounded, dying. He puts him on his donkey, takes him to the hotel and does everything that needs to be done. And if he started to think about what kind of person he was, what he had done, and why he was beaten, he wouldn't become his neighbour. Therefore, know how to separate sin from a person, and then you'll be able to accept them and pray for them. In general, fulfil the commandment – love the sinner and hate the sin.

Let's return to what has already been said... Tension, fatigue, and nervousness come not from the fact that you are fighting your passions, not from sobriety, but from self-will and pride. The tension from sobriety brings joy and inner saturation, but your tension is despondency and embitterment. Therefore, let's change our feelings through repentance and obedience.

– *You were talking about attachment. But if one is attached to the monastery where he or she lives, is it a sinful attachment? If a person feels only this place as his own?*

– Attachment to the monastery and the sisters are all normal feelings. Every person has his own home. Likewise, a person who comes to a monastery has this feeling of homeland.

– *So it's not a sin?*

– No, it's not, but there's a step above that a person has to climb. When a person rises one step higher, he begins to seek the will of God, and not his own feelings. Until you climb that step, your feelings are good. Live by them and they'll save you. But when you ascend to another level, the Lord Himself will reveal this to you, either through the hegumen, or through your spiritual father, or in another way, if this is necessary for your perfection and salvation.

– *You were talking about reading and singing in church. One sister used to live here, but a few years later she left the monastery. I once heard a recording of her reading the akathist in the cell. Her reading was so spiritual, so soulful. But during the service, she would read mundanely. I once asked the sisters, why there was such a difference, and they explained that that sister was embarrassed to express her feelings.*

– Well, I didn't hear that recording, but you mustn't pay attention to sensibility in reading and singing.

– *It feels like a person is talking to God.*

– I won't argue, but there are certain rules for reading and singing, you must also keep them in mind and follow them.

– *I'm sorry.*

– Today in the temple someone was reading the akathist to our Sweetest Lord Jesus Christ sensibly and without haste, but you mustn't read like that. Pour out your feelings in confession or your cell, but not in the temple.

– *But when I get an obedience to read and perform it with a sense of duty, I feel some emptiness inside. And you're saying that one has to understand what he is reading and singing so that this emptiness wouldn't remain in the soul?*

– Obedience is performed not for the sake of obedience, but in the sake of obtaining humility. If you read or sing with humility, then your emptiness will fill with God's spirit, even if you were inattentive. Your work won't remain in vain, just do it for the Lord Himself.

– *When I listen to some sister reading, then little by little, I get involved in prayer. But when I read, I think more about correct pronunciation and not making any mistakes. And as a result, I don't experience anything, as if I'm not praying at all.*

– Don't be afraid to read. It happens only when you start, but then you get used to it and won't even notice people. There will be only God and you.

– *Sometimes I experience what I read, but sometimes I feel emptiness. Everything goes topsy-turvy, like rat-a-tat-a-tat, and I don't even remember what I read a moment ago.*

– From the very beginning, you have to disconnect from all your affairs, and then you'll be reading calmly. And in calmness, there is attention, and feelings gather inside.

– *Father, please tell us about sacrificial love. What kind of love should we have for God and people?*

– There are two loves: human and Divine. Every person has at least a grain of God's love. It's always necessary for the Divine love to develop, and for the human love to die. If you give way to your love and drown out the Divine love, a problem will arise.

– *But how do we distinguish them?*

– Physical love is sensual love because when you have some feelings for God, if there is this passionate love in it, then it's not from God. And if you think that is Divine love, then you are deceived. There mustn't be such a thing, it's a deception. All sects, it would seem, are moving away from carnal sins, but they transfer this carnal life to the inner one. They want the same feelings, euphoria in the soul, so to speak, sinful ecstasy, but without the sins themselves. But from this, only pride grows in a person: "I don't sin, and I have so much love..." Yes, in the name of Christ, they can arouse such carnality in themselves. Such things happen, but it's not correct because it's a deception.

– *But I really don't understand what this carnality is like in life.*

– You feel this physical love with sensuality when your heart begins to play, – that's not good. Spiritual love is always suffering, it's a cross; you'll always distinguish it. In liturgy, a person also connects with the Sacrifice that is being made. Christ suffers, love is always associated

with suffering. If there is no suffering, then your soul doesn't enter the soul of another person. If you don't have empathy and don't understand someone, you won't love them. When a person has compassion, he understands what's in another's soul, what pain it's suffering, what alienation from God he's experiencing, and from this he begins to cover with love his infirmities and bitterness, do you understand? Therefore, the first thing you need to find love and be a normal person is understanding of another person and the ability to enter his soul.

If you begin to do something good for someone, to love them without feeling and understanding them, nothing will happen. You will always impose your will on that person, which will damage you as well. When you perform an obedience, you face each other, and obviously, some conflicts occur. You feel that someone's doing or saying something wrong. Put yourself in that person's shoes and try to understand why he wants to do something that way and where the devil hooked him. And when you understand this person and have empathy for them, you'll cover their weaknesses. You can speak harshly or unfriendly to him, but your love won't disappear from this, and you won't become embittered towards him. But if you impose your 'correct' thoughts on him, this is a sign that you haven't understood that person. Your "I" has been left without love, and you've alienated this person from yourself. Your "I" must dissolve, it must not exist. Salvation is the dissolution of our "I", getting rid of our passions. The worst thing is when a person begins to think only about himself, so that he feels good, and the rest doesn't interest him. That's a problem.

– *Now things are getting clearer.*

– Just learn to see the devil that catches a person and immerses him in his will. And be able to separate in a person the devilish and the Divine. Always love a person's soul because God loves it, and you are children of God, which means you are one spirit with God. And you must have the same love as God. A child of God cannot hate another person; it is not in his nature. But if you have some kind of anger towards another, then you are damaged, and this is a big problem.

And when you leave this earth, will God solve this issue? No. When people ask whether a person has been saved or not, the first

question asked is, "Did they have embitterment?" Therefore, the first sign of our salvation is love. If we take anyone by the hand and ask, "Do you have embitterment?" and they reply, "Yes, I do," then they're not ready. What matters is not whether they pray, go to church, take communion, or confess, but whether they are angry.

I remember how one father was studying with me. He had a photographic memory, but he also had a weakness – he liked to drink. But, despite his illness, he was very complacent. If you shout at him or pull him, he'll never get irritated or angry. So he once went to the Pskov Caves Monastery. He was walking around the monastery, looking around, and suddenly saw Father John Krestiankin coming out of the temple. The archimandrite went straight to him and joyfully said, "Oh, look who came to us!" and started hugging and kissing him. The visitor did not understand anything. He blossomed, and then all his life he remembered how Father John greeted him as his most beloved person. Look what kind of soul Father John had: when he loved someone, he accepted the last sinner with such love and care that the flow of this love for a sinner was even greater than for a righteous person because his soul sympathized with him and wanted him to be saved. Therefore, try to have such a spirit in yourself, such mildness, love, and simplicity. Then, we will all receive salvation and dwell with God in His love and kindness forever.

– *But what if you see someone say or do something bad, and disagreement appears in your soul?*

– Most of all, be afraid of right thoughts. Right thoughts are sisters' mistakes – they make them feel their superiority, and it seems that there are no worse people on earth than these people – they are the devil. It's clear that a thought will arise in your head that this is the right way to do something, but don't get hung up on this thought because otherwise you'll give food to pride and your heart will harden and become embittered. Take care of yourself. Love doesn't fit in with the false, statutory truth. When I came to the monastery, at first I was also living by this truth. You see that someone's doing something wrong, and you start to wind yourself up and drive yourself into anger. That's wrong because love is instilled first, and only then comes truth and everything else.

– *But what if you make a remark to your neighbour calmly and with love?*

– Then you'll calmly scold everyone. (Laughing.) Yes, some sisters only know how to scold. With kindness, in a good way, but they scold, and that's fine. Don't be offended by them, that's their nature.

– *Father, I'm the same.*

– So stay like that. Alright, we'll be heading to the temple soon.

– *Time spent in church is time best spent.*

– Alright, let's pray.

September 27, 2007. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Five

Here we are all gathered together again, and I'd like to share my impressions with you. I was once at the Gethsemane skete, which used to be a skete of the Pühtitsa Convent, behind the Jaama village. The place is very beautiful, somewhat similar to Valaam – like a small island among swamps and pine trees. The sisters once planted pine trees in this clearing, now they have grown – so big and beautiful. The building where the sisters lived remains, but the temple and other buildings are no longer there.

– *It was said that during the Burial of the Shroud (the Matins of Holy Saturday), they would always serve there.*

– Yes, the place is very beautiful and very sacred, but now it's not suitable for monastic life because it's inhabited by worldly people. Here, in Pühtitsa, there are all the time a lot of people and vanity. But those people who come here don't violate this prayer, they don't dominate this place. But as soon as the nuns left the place, there came gardeners, who laid their own track and imposed their spirit, but we don't need to adapt to them. No alien will that separates us from God can dominate us. Monks should never lose their inner strength. They have to be like warriors: grouped and always in uniform.

I want to tell you about one book: a three-volume Great Patericon has been published in Greece. The Ancient Patericon was published in Russian, yet it was short, but in Greece, it came out in the complete version. The brethren from the Athonite skete of New Thebaide translated some part of the Great Patericon, which wasn't included in the Ancient Patericon, and printed a small book. I'd like to read the most interesting moments from this book and reflect on them with you together. Archbishop Theophilus, approaching the end of his life, said, "You are blessed, Abba Arseny, that you've always remembered this hour" (that is, about his death). This is also the essence of a monk, an integral feature of his world view – the constant memory of the world into which you are going to go. If a person who comes to a monastery, young or old, doesn't think about leaving this earth and uniting with God, they'll never become a monk and unite with Christ to the depths of their soul because they'll remain in a slack state and will be living in the emptiness of this world.

The Holy Fathers always said that this world is not ideal but deceptive. When you contact people whose relatives died, you notice that they begin to feel the unreality of this world – a young, healthy person who had a whole life to live has suddenly left this world, and all that's left of him is a mound... Some personal belongings and his smile in the photograph remain, but he is gone. When such misfortune befalls a person, he already looks at this world sadly because it becomes empty for him. Without a loved one, his love, and his soul, the beauty and joy of this world become transitory and unnecessary, and a person can no longer live and rejoice, as he rejoiced during the life of his loved one, who is no longer there. After this, a person begins to feel and realize that this world is transitory, disappearing. If a person is wise and thinks about something, then in these losses he begins to find God and another life. Yes, he'll feel sad, but this sadness is no longer hopeless, not dull, as the person already feels it as a temporary phenomenon, and understands that There it will disappear because he will unite with his loved ones.

So, this remembrance about death, about your departure from this life should always be present. But if it's not present in a monk or

a Christian, then sooner or later, a person begins to turn to earth, whether he wants that or not. If a monk's heart doesn't have the memory of death, it remains empty even if he lives in a monastery. And when you come into contact with such a person, you feel the cold emanating from him. He may be a skilled cook and some kind of craftsman, but he will be an earthly person. The soul is satisfied only with Heaven. All passions only devastate a person's soul, and it becomes naked and empty. Only the memory that you have to leave this world warms the soul, makes it more compressed, purposeful, and alive, gives it sobriety, and some kind of sadness, and saves it from attachment to a person or something. Only in this state can a person become a monk and unite with God. It's about this state, this memory of one's death, that I wanted to talk about in connection with these patristic words.

Here's another story. Some fathers told me that one day, when the brethren were eating at the table of love (apparently it was a liturgy), one of them burst into laughter. Abba John saw him and said with tears, "What does this brother have in his heart that he laughed when he should have rather cried when he tasted love itself?" Here we are talking about what feelings and state of soul a person should approach Holy Communion with, that no thought or feeling should dissipate the mind. For what reason can a person laugh? Either he recalled something from his life or got distracted by something, and laughed. Here we are talking about the fact that during the union with God, a person has to pull himself together and not pay attention to empty things, even if they are good. Without gathering yourself, you're like an empty shell. Again we're talking about emptiness and how to overcome it, and again we return to the memory of death since it gathers a person inside himself. The main thing is not to be absent-minded, to have in your mind, heart, and feelings only the memory of God, of the Kingdom of Heaven, and then you'll take communion worthily. A person should never forget that during communion he tastes love.

And Father John said that the brother who was laughing should've been crying when he tasted love itself. The love that always has a taste

of suffering and sacrifice. Passionate love always brings euphoria and lightness, but God's love contains melancholy and crying. It's impossible to have both loves. There must be inner tears in your soul. Only they who have gathered themselves, have no empty thoughts and a repentant state of soul and realize what they are partaking of, take communion worthily. When a person approaches the Eucharist, the priest says, "The servant of God (Name) partakes of the Precious and All-Holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ", and Saint John says that a person tastes the Love itself. That is, there is an equal sign between Jesus Christ and Love. We've already said that the Eucharistic canon, the sacrifice when blood is shed, cannot be logically and spiritually compared with the major chant. Chants should shape our souls, attune us to the mutual sacrifice of love, and arouse in us repentant feelings so that we can take Holy Communion worthily.

There is love in the soul of a person, no matter how fallen he may be. A person necessarily has a grain of love, so this grain, this thread can always be touched either by a chant or by some word. The soul will blossom, tune in to the mood that you set for it. We have already said that the Divine Liturgy is performed constantly There, in Heaven. We simply enter this liturgy, and the union of Heaven and Earth, the Heavenly and earthly churches takes place. Those praying enter There, and we see those angels who see God. All churches in which the Divine Liturgy is celebrated are part of one timeless Heavenly liturgy. And misunderstanding of this moment of the Divine liturgy leaves its mark. A person comes to church, and prays during the service, but doesn't seem to participate in it and empathise with it. Outer life, unfortunately, becomes a reflection of our inner life.

All the chants appeared for a reason. They were born from the inner state of people who were deeply churchly and secular as well. The hymns of church authors always incite repentance and attention. Secular authors – Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky – wrote their works, in general, for secular people, so their works contain a lot of ornateness, external beauty, and major. Even then began a misunderstanding of what was happening. But the worst thing is that it became common

practice, the life of the entire Church. A lot of things pass through the Church, through Its prism. Even the Church itself sanctifies many things that were unacceptable until some point. Still, my thought says that the Church cannot accept and sanctify what is not in Its spirit and doesn't correspond to reality. Such chants speak of a misunderstanding of the spiritual world in which we live, a misunderstanding of Whom we unite with (and we unite with Love), a misunderstanding of this Love. St. Seraphim of Sarov greeted everyone with the exclamation, "My joy! Christ is risen!" He was happy in his soul, but this doesn't mean that he always had a positive attitude inside him. On the contrary, from this sadness, awareness of one's unworthiness, and constant abiding in the memory of God, comes the joy of union with Christ. In this state of the soul, joy and sadness are always intertwined, but the mood to unite with Love must still be through a grieving heart.

I already told you that on Mount Athos on Holy Saturday during the burial of Jesus Christ, they read three sections (stases). The Greeks focus on the troparions, and the singing helps to get to the bottom of what's happening. Russians have a tradition of reading troparions. And the burial itself is the lament for the Body of the Saviour by the Myrrh-bearing women. The tradition of mourning the dead has existed since ancient times in the Middle East. The first two stases sound in minor, arousing in the soul sorrow for the deceased Saviour, but the third one is completely different and sounds major. If you look closely, the troparions in it are very short. That is, they proclaim the glory, sing a hymn, and glorify the victory that Christ accomplished over the devil by descending into hell. The songs of love relate to what is happening. I may not see it with my eyes, but it exists, and my soul tunes in to what is happening There, in Heaven. We know Christ thanks to the Gospel, but we also unite with Him in Holy Communion, and the Holy Father says that we unite with Love. That is, we have to find this Divine love in ourselves, even a little, even a drop, but we have to feel and understand it. If a person has never felt this droplet and has not driven it through his feelings, heart, and mind, then he will never reach God. For that person, God will be somewhere

far away. And he will perceive God with his emptiness like, "Well, I've come to church, lit a candle, and what's next?" Or, he will perceive God with his passionate heart, which will be a delusion, a real problem.

Why are there many people in a state of delusion that go to church? Because they came to church with their already established world and their personal impressions. They approach God, and the Church offers them God, Christ, but they have a different internal state. And if a person lives in his delusions and develops in himself feelings that are not at all from God, then he will perish. Therefore, we must reject all our old passionate feelings and accept the real Christ, and not the Christ, Whom we want to see with our fallen feelings. Christ is known through love. The Apostle Thomas knew God through touch, and we know Him through love. There are words inscribed in our churches and the Holy Scriptures: "To a Known God", that is to the experientially knowable God, the One who is inwardly felt by our hearts. We have to look for Him there, in the depths of our hearts. But until a person rejects his dirty, unclean love, he will not unite with the love of God. Sometimes people ask, "Father, how can we know Christ?" That is how. As long as you love yourself and live with your 'I', you'll never connect with God. God is in you, but He needs to grow like a fetus in the womb. He must develop within a person, but for this, a person must thirst for Him and want Him to come into the light so that He will be born in him. When a person is baptised, the seed of Christ is placed in his soul.

According to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, even if a person dies and goes to hell, this spiritual seed of Christ remains with him until the General Judgment. Why so? Because if he still has at least a drop of love, even for his family and friends, then love can live and grow, and through this love, God can lead a person out of hell. That is, a change in a person's state can occur: from empty, rejected from God to a new one, filled with love. That's the interpretation of elder John's words.

Here's the third story. Abba Isaac and Abba Abraham lived in the same cell. One day, Abba Abraham came in and saw that Abba Isaac was crying and asked him, "What are you crying about?" The

elder replied, “How can we not cry? Where should we go? Our fathers are dead. We don’t have enough handicrafts to pay for the passage on the ship and to sail to see the elders. Now we are orphans, that’s why I cry.” The entire patristic path lay through the elders, through those who brought a person to Christ, gave him these seeds of love, and developed Divine love in his heart. There are words in the Holy Scripture: “With the holy, thou wilt be holy; and with the innocent man, thou wilt be innocent.” (Psalm 17:26-27). The simplest way is when a person draws love and experiences it through another person. It’s also possible through the Holy Scriptures, work, and some kind of obedience, but that’s a very labour-intensive and long way. This is what the elder was crying about – “They died, but our labours are not enough for us so that we can go to our fathers and again draw this love through their spirit.”

Likewise, our labours for salvation, even the most difficult and exhausting, will be small in comparison with obedience to the elder, because here God’s love and humility are drawn directly – heart-to-heart. And if a person, even in the most unfavourable place for salvation, clings to the elder, then he will succeed much more than if he lived in the most favourable place for salvation, but without the elder. When you simply cross paths with an elder, you thank God for being present in people with His grace. You know God’s love through spiritual people, and after that, you already know what it should be like. On Mount Athos, they say, “You need to choose the monastery where the monastic tradition has been preserved.” You have to go precisely to those who have acquired this love for God, who have it, and from whom you can learn it.

Why do many problems arise in newly opened monasteries? Because there are not so many treasures of love. Good people come to the monastery, but they don’t find real obedience and a fatherly spirit, and therefore cannot develop, which is also an issue. In the Pühtitsa Convent, there is someone to adopt the spirit of humility and love. Unfortunately, this spirit cannot be found in every monastery. Of course, if you pay attention to the bad, you can find it everywhere, but you don’t have to live with it. But grains of grace, of Divine love are

here, collect them. Yes, a person can contain both bad and good, but as a wise person, he will retain only the good and leave the bad. A stupid person will scoop up everything, like a vacuum cleaner, but we don’t need that. You need to draw only the good and the good. Abba Jacob once said, “Just as a lamp placed in a dark room illuminates it, so the fear of God, when it settles in a person’s heart, enlightens him and teaches him all the virtues and commandments of God.” Elders talked a lot about the fear of God: it’s the feeling of God’s presence – there’s no prayer and love without it. It’s the feeling of the all-seeing eye, the presence of God inside and outside oneself. And the Holy Father pointed out this fear.

The Holy Fathers have this expression: faith begins with the fear of God. There is no faith without fear of God, and whoever among you begins to lose the fear of God, begins to lose the sense of God’s presence and faith. Laymen and monks come to me for confession and say, “Father, there is such emptiness inside me, like disbelief.” They can’t do anything about it. This is the first sign of losing the fear of God and the feeling of His presence. It’s easy to lose, but very difficult to gain. The worldly conditions in which a person finds himself begin to crush and destroy the fear of God in a person. When you visit your parents, they meet you with love – hugs, kisses, ice cream, cakes, and so on... But such conditions begin to destroy the sense of God’s presence. When a person is immersed in all this and begins to live by it, he loses this feeling. We very often hear from the sisters: you come home, a day, or two and that’s it – back to the monastery. The mother starts crying because you’ve just arrived, and you’re already leaving, yet she doesn’t understand that her child’s soul feels bad and empty.

I remember the departed Father Gabriel, who was asceticising in Abkhazia. We arrived in Krasnaya Polyana and went to the father’s house to stay overnight, but he put his backpack on his back and went into the forest. He took out his oilcloth, set up a booth for himself, lit a fire inside, and spent the night there. There was no one, it was calm and quiet, complete hesychia. Anyone who went into a hermitage can no longer live in such a dormitory; he only arrives there when needed.

And when he came to Father Naum for blessing and advice, no matter what monastery the priest sent him to, he could not go there because his soul was already accustomed to loneliness. In Abkhazia, he had a cell right in the mountain, it was called 'Dovetail'. Under his cell lived snakes, and their nests were there. In the evening he became despondent, left his cell, sat on a ledge and began to scream. Only the moon and mountains could hear him. When he calmed down, he returned to the cell and went to bed. And this went on for three years, and then he got used to it and couldn't live another life. When the war in Abkhazia began, he left his place of residence, wandered around monasteries in Russia, and then returned, lived for a year or two, and in late autumn somehow went to his neighbours, the hermit fathers, across the ridge. He came to them, stayed with them for a while and began to get ready to go home, but the weather turned bad. The fathers tell him: "Don't go alone, in a couple of days we'll go together." And he: "No, no." I wore rubber boots all the time. When the fathers came to him a couple of days later, he was gone; They realized that they had wandered somewhere. They went and searched in the mountains, along the paths, but did not find it anywhere. This means he died somewhere, and then winter came. In the spring, when the snow melted, he was found there, not far from his cell. None of the animals were touched. There they dug a grave at the top of the hill. From what? How? Maybe it was a bear, or maybe they were shot – you can't tell. Who knows? Hunters go there too. It happened near his cell; he couldn't get lost. This is how the life of Father Gabriel was.

We can also read this. Abba Longinus said, "Fasting humbles the body, vigil purifies the mind, hesychia brings with it crying, and crying washes a person and makes him sinless." All the deeds and virtues are fasting, vigil and prayer, which we do in church and the cell – all that is very good, is the humility of the body, but in the first place he put the virtue of hesychia. Hesychia is silence; it gives crying, and crying cleanses the soul. Last time we talked about the fact that a person must taste his one-halfness, the sorrow of silence with God so that from this taste, sorrow for God will be born. A person can know and taste this half-heartedness only in a state of hesychia, silence.

When a person is in some kind of bustle, among people, he will never feel that he is lonely, that his soul needs a soul mate. For a monk, no one should fill his soul mate; this place in the soul is intended for God, as the Holy Fathers point out. But the path to loneliness lies not only through hesychia; the basis of this path is in obedience, in renouncing one's will. In obedience, one has to receive this feeling of loneliness and abandonment by everyone. We have to understand what we really are. That is, we have to know the state of 'only me and God' – one half is mine, and the other belongs to God.

This feeling is inherent in monks. Married people don't know this state; they experience it when they lose something, but that's already another state, another pain. Therefore, there has to be this state of hesychia, or loneliness, and withdrawal into it. If the soul longs for some kind of silence, then it's a natural, correct state that is inherent in every monk and Christian. If a person begins to look for what or who to fill his "I" with, then he moves away from God, from the most important thing – his salvation. Therefore, each of you must have the practice of silence. If a monk doesn't practice hesychia in his life, he won't be able to become a monk, as he should be by calling. A person should be on his own for at least a short time. If one doesn't do that and all the time is in vanity, he doesn't understand who and what he is. Therefore, please acquire those spiritual qualities that a Christian and a monk should have and practice them in your life.

And as one saint said, the main thing is not asceticism but silence, to which a person must come through obedience and sorrow. And only in this state does a person understand the words of the Holy Fathers, prayers, Divine services, and everything that takes place in the Church, because all this was compiled precisely in a state of silence. But when we are constantly nervous, then all God's words don't reach our hearts, and our spiritual structure doesn't correspond to the prayers that we read. Therefore, we need to be at least a little like the Holy Fathers in self-denial. But if there is no such assimilation, then we'll speak to God in different languages. For a beginner, disorganisation, vanity, and emptiness are still acceptable, but from the very beginning, one has to understand that this is wrong so that

such a life doesn't result in an empty form. One has to understand that his soul has to be satisfied, and when a person takes the path of self-denial, then sadness is born in his soul, which saturates his soul with the fullness of God's love. But under no circumstances stay in vanity, don't wish yourself some kind of spiritual entertainment to drown out loneliness. Otherwise, it will turn out as the Holy Fathers wrote, "We come like angels, but we leave like demons." This is largely because we fill our souls not with God, but with everyday tinsel. This is wrong, so we should always have the goal of doing everything for the sake of Christ. If there is no place for God in our souls, then all our work will be empty – it will bring no benefit to us or others. Even in the world, everything seems to be intended for the good of people and the state, but when people forget about God, everything collapses, and good turns into evil. God is the foundation, the basis of all living things; without Him, there will be nothing. Knowing all this, let's strive for His love, for life with Him and in Him. May the Lord help us in this because He Himself wants to be with us always and everywhere, and He will never leave us in His love. Let's pray now.

September 2, 2008. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Six

Now I'd like to talk about the events taking place in the world and about the Holy Scripture, which reveals to us the book of life: what has to happen and why this is happening. It gives us answers to questions about things happening in ourselves and around us. Let's try to look through the prism of the Gospel at current events in Georgia, Ossetia and Russia. Not a single side remained indifferent; everyone reacted to these events in some way. What conclusion can be drawn from a Christian point of view? There is no peace in the world, it is in a state of dislike – they have practically forgotten about Christ, about God, and they don't talk about Him. People sort things out, having forgotten about the commandments of Christ, and achieve their goals without looking at Heaven. This means that the world is

afflicted with godlessness and is therefore approaching its end. In the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia, it came down to scorched earth tactics. Those are proud Caucasian people, and if blood is shed, they won't forget or forgive it. Therefore, Georgia's policy is very simple – cut out everyone, including the elderly and children. The militants didn't leave anyone behind, they killed everyone.

– *How can a Christian do such things?*

– That's not a Christian. That's not Orthodox Georgia that violated the borders of Ossetia and began to do this. Such atrocities can be committed only by people whose souls are corroded by nationalism – that is, by pride. Nationalism enslaves the mind. A nationalist's evil inside will not calm down until he destroys the one who brings him concern, even if he has never seen those people. Every nation has its own negative traits. Among the Russians, for example, those traits are carnal – drunkenness and so on. All nations probably have nationalism, but it becomes pride when people feel the superiority of their nation over others. Nationalism also manifests itself in Ukraine; there's that infection as well. If nationalism has taken root in a person's heart, then no matter what high ideals he has, no matter how much he fulfils the commandments (went to church, prayed, did good deeds), with this evil he will remain without God. That's why the charter says that if you have hostility or hatred towards at least one person, you cannot receive communion because it will be damnation to you. There are words in the Holy Scriptures that in the last times "nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matthew 24:7). But that can happen only when this spirit of nationalism rises, so be afraid of any manifestation of nationalism in yourself.

But we have to be prepared for any events that may happen in the world because many countries, even seemingly Christian ones, have departed from the commandments, and Christ dwells in them only secretly. Therefore, the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians says, "For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Perhaps, the one who holds it back is Russia. This is perhaps the last power that can resist all the evil that is

accumulating, not only in spirit but also in physical strength. The power of the state and the holiness of the people are needed here.

– *So, the end of the world is coming soon?*

– No, we don't have to talk about that. We have to be fighters and resist evil with our communion with God. If we don't lose love for God and this communion with God, then we won't have any problems. But panic, despondency, sadness – those are not from God. We don't have to be afraid of these events. Tyutchev has a line: "Blessed is he who visited this world in its fatal moments." We're living in blessed times. It's blessed because God is very close to us now. We definitely have to live with Him and worry about what's happening around us, about the fate of other people, about our souls. The soul cannot remain indifferent to what is happening. When Christ came into the world, someone left the vanity of this life and followed Him, but someone rejected Him and became embittered and indifferent. So now, the events taking place don't leave people indifferent. We have to live in anticipation of Christ's coming. I remember that while studying at the Academy, one of the teachers said that spiritual uplift among the people was always felt when the ideas of the second coming of Christ were relevant, and the decline was when the feeling of the imminent coming faded away and a person stopped waiting for a personal meeting with Christ. The first Christians received communion every day because they waited for Christ every day. This feeling began to fade away more and more. But the Holy Fathers were really waiting for Christ. For them, times were always the last, so they prepared for that meeting every day.

The greatest experience for us is the Divine Liturgy. It is always a meeting with God, a meeting with Christ, who comes in the Holy Gifts under the guise of bread and wine. Christ is present in the Church, this is His coming into the world. One's soul is alive to the extent that he experiences the liturgy, to the extent that he participates in it. Therefore, if you come to the liturgy, but do not have peace in your soul, your conscience is dirty. The Liturgy will pass by, he will not understand it, will not enter into it, will not participate in it, and will not be involved in it. The Liturgy will be celebrated, the priest will

be serving, and church hymns will be sounding, but the person will remain empty. Therefore, the first condition is that there must be inner peace in the soul and righteousness. Only a humble person can accept God and enter into communion with Him. What is repentance for? So that the soul changes and can be reconciled with God. Repentance is always a kind of sadness, but it's also filled with joy that God forgives your sins and accepts your repentance. And another thing is that a person in a state of repentance should feel the mercy of God, His love.

Besides the fact that a person has to condemn himself, he should also see the great mercy of God towards himself and the whole world. The Holy Fathers always said that the greatest miracle happens on the thrones when bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ – that is, God appears before us. When you understand this, you feel that we are not worthy of His coming into the world and His sacrifice for us: no matter how we prepare, no matter how we repent, our soul will always be unworthy of God, of Communion, of this entry into the Divine Liturgy, to the Kingdom of Heaven. We definitely have to feel our unworthiness, and by realizing it, we gain God's mercy: God gives us Himself, and we can embrace Him, take Him into ourselves and be with Him. Having these two feelings – one's own unworthiness and the love of God – a person can contain the grace of God. Remember St. Ephraim of Katounakia – when he was performing the liturgy, he lost consciousness and fell on the throne. I think he lost consciousness not so much from the feeling of his worthlessness and insignificance, but more from the love of God that he felt. The whole soul trembles from this love. When they began to bother him: "Father, wake up, what are you doing?," he came to his senses, stood up, finished the liturgy and then said to the fathers: "If next time I fall, let me be like this. I felt very good." Something similar also happened to Elder Tikhon, the spiritual father of St. Paisios, during the Cherubic Song.

You can approach the love of God only in one state – the feeling of your unworthiness. And you will never feel the love of God, the liturgy, until you descend into the depths of your unworthiness, your

hell of the soul, from where the Lord takes you out. The lower you go there, the more deeply you feel love, the power of God and your weakness. Therefore, the main goal of our life and our obedience is to realize and feel our weakness and badness, and God's power and love. These feelings give an increase in love in the soul, and from this, the heart begins to live. When you experience God's sacrifice, you'll be the image and likeness of God and sacrifice yourself for others. You'll be seeking to fulfil the will of others, and not your own will and desires – that no one touches you and doesn't upset you, to eat something tastier, to sleep more, and simply to feel good on this earth. Therefore, the first stage of churching passes through fulfilling the will of others. And only by taking this path can a person taste the love of God and 'burn' with this love. But without this 'burning', going into hesychia, into some kind of alienation from people and worries will be a delusion. Going into loneliness without love is dangerous, as the soul isn't ready yet. You can keep practising, but you can't go into it.

Everything in this life has gradations. And spiritual life is also built in the form of a ladder - what comes from God happens by itself. The Lord gives to a person according to the state of their soul. Everything Divine in you has been acquired through humility. And the absence of some kind of goodness, some kind of love, proper dispensation, some kind of bitterness is a sign of a not quite correct internal state, not quite an adult one. One may not be a great ascetic and not go into deep and long prayers, but if they have a humble spirit and a kind soul, they can receive great insights from God. It often happens that simple people, some village elderly, have prayer and contemplation of God. Why? For a simple reason – their internal state is kind, so God can dwell in this soul. Such people won't lose God because they've already acquired humility through their simplicity.

One priest visited me somewhere a month ago. He teaches anthropology at the theological institute. We started to talk about the human heart, about the concepts of 'spiritual heart' and 'physical heart'. The Holy Scriptures usually speak about the spiritual heart. What is it? The spiritual heart is the container of all human feelings. The physical heart is an organ, a part of the human body. The

spiritual heart can move, its place depends on the feelings that fill it. If the spiritual heart is filled with Heavenly feelings, then it's located above the top of the bodily one, but if it's filled with carnal feelings, then it descends into the kidneys. When you, with your mind and feelings, find yourself above the physical heart and remain there, you communicate with God and spiritually see Christ. All human insights occur in the spiritual heart. Below, under the heart, a person already comes into contact with the devil and gets to know him. The spiritual heart of people who were dying from their passions turned out to be exactly below. That's because the soul falls into delusion from the heart, staying below. So, when passionate feelings come, your task is to lift up your mind. But when the mind stands in the spiritual heart, conscience speaks.

Our body is connected to the soul, therefore, when a person sins, it's written in the canons of the Church what penance is due for this or that sin. Almost all penances include prostrations and fasting. That is, the goal of penance is to kill passionate feelings with physical labour and fasting and raise the spiritual heart from the bottom up, so that the mind can be freed from daydreaming, from its attachment to sin, and feelings from the thirst for carnal pleasure. Physical labour and repentant prayer help the heart begin to work in a different rhythm, in a different mode, and this new rhythm lifts the lowered spiritual heart upward. Therefore, whenever you are immersed in some kind of daydreaming, don't be embarrassed – leave the temple, walk up and down the street, do something, unwind and come back. You can even have a nap in the temple, the main thing is that you interrupt your daydreaming. But if you start thinking that you mustn't leave the church during the service and decide to stand until the end, then until the end of the service you'll remain with the devil. Prayer should be a connection with God and not a background. You have to feel the exhaustion of the body, a lack of bodily rest. Saint Seraphim of Sarov was once asked, "Father, why are you carrying this sack with earth and stones?" He replied, "To oppress the one who's oppressing me." The Holy Fathers wrote very interestingly that the worst thing is not the absence of fasting and prayer, but sleep, that is, laziness, and rest.

When a person oversleeps, very often there's a feeling of emptiness, as if he has lost God. St. Mark the Ascetic also says, "Every prayer in which the body doesn't become tired, and the heart doesn't become contrite is recognized as unripe fruit because such prayer is performed without a soul."

Usually, the spiritual and physical hearts are intertwined with each other and depend on each other. However, a spiritual heart can exist without a physical heart. When a heart is transplanted or when a person's heart stops, and he is connected to machines, the spiritual heart remains the same in the person. Perhaps, due to a misunderstanding of this point, an error crept into the canons of the Church: "If a miracle is born with two heads and a common heart, then it must be baptized as one person." That is, it's assumed: one physical heart – one spiritual heart, but practice shows otherwise. Remember the conjoined twins Krista and Tatiana Hogan? They had a common heart, but they were clearly two different people. I think that the spiritual heart, or personality of a person, depends on the will. The formula is: one will – one spiritual heart.

The spiritual heart must live in love. Love is given to the heart from birth, but with baptism, a person gets a spark of God's love – that's the birth of Christ within a person. After this, God's love begins to grow from our desire to love and begins to consume the whole person. On icons, saints are depicted with a halo, which is the burning of love, I suppose. And the love of God permeates not only the person himself, but also those around him. The Transfiguration of Christ is a manifestation of this spiritual love. Love was within Christ, came out of Him, and surrounded Him all around. This is how the Saviour is depicted on icons – surrounded by light.

– *Father, how does obedience affect the soul?*

– As long as a person lives in his passions, his thoughts are still damaged – that is, he listens to himself, to his heart. Therefore, a novice would always be brought to an elder to purify one's thoughts and desires through obedience to the elder. The heart of the novice felt the will of the elder and at first, so to say, went to the zero level. Everything rotten and dilapidated in a novice was being destroyed.

And only after this 'old man' and his old wishes were cut off with obedience, righteous thoughts began to be born. Why was there continuity in the Optina Hermitage? The Holy Fathers Ambrose, Joseph, Anatoly and others, being in obedience, took over the inner world of the elder, from one to another. The novices learned to think and feel like their elder, and after the death of the elder, the Lord passed on his gifts to them.

Consider, for example, us – why do we read the Gospels? To be like Christ, to have the same desires and thoughts as Him. The Gospels will remain closed to us if we remain with our own desires and thoughts, and Christ remains with his own. Why do people open the Gospel but remain empty? Because the Gospels require the life, the heart, the whole person. What's the main mistake of Protestants? It's that they deviate into shape. They study texts and times when certain events happened – they go into knowledge, but they don't explore the spirit of Christ. I don't know the Gospels as well as they do. I don't have such a good memory, but they'll tell you everything – the number of the chapter, of the verse. However, what follows it, what feelings one should experience while reading it, and the inner world doesn't interest them. That's exactly what makes Orthodoxy different from Protestantism because it pays attention to the inner world and makes the heart and feelings work.

– *Father, tell us please about over-intellectualisation. How should we feel about it? Is this a virtue or a vice?*

– In general, the idea is simple: for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The spiritual heart is the container of all feelings. The mind forms these feelings into words, into some symbols, and expresses them verbally. If you have passions inside, your mind produces passionate speeches. If you have love in your soul, your mind will work accordingly and produce words of love. The mind and heart work together. Excessive rationality is the work of the mind alone – it's when you begin to think logically without connecting your feelings to the mind. When excessive rationality takes over for a short time, it's fine, but if it goes into a longer or permanent state, it becomes dangerous. Let's say that the thinking of people who do mathematics

is directly related to logic, but those thoughts are not connected to the heart – that is, it doesn't live by them. Those thoughts don't come from the heart, but are only in the mind – that is, only the brain works. Another type of predominance of reason over feelings is vanity, into which you mustn't plunge, as the Holy Fathers say. The mind begins to heartlessly put everything into a proper order and live with the outside world. You can defeat excessive rationality only by withdrawing into yourself. Thoughts must arise within us.

In everyday life we surely need rationality to go to the store, to calculate something, to schedule some meetings. However, it mustn't take over our way of thinking. But the saints don't even have everyday rationality. That's described in the Ancient Patericon when one of the brethren came to Elder Pimen and asked him for branches. The elder replied, "Yeah, just wait a second." He then went into his cell and forgot about the branches. The brother knocked on his door again, "Father, give me the branches." The elder left again. The brother knocked for the third time, and the elder told him, "Go to the cell yourself and take what you need." The mind of the elder didn't give up the feelings, it didn't lose what was happening inside him. He couldn't step away from God's love even for a second. That's why he told the brother to take what he required himself. However, we need everyday rationality. It even humbles us to some extent. But when a person is engaged in mental work, divorced from his heart and feelings, he might get damaged, and his heart might become cold. In spiritual life, having some logical state of mind is very dangerous. All the learned Holy Fathers say that they always strived for simplicity. Everything that came to their mind, they would say from their heart and feelings. They would never turn to logical reasoning.

Where there's simplicity and no thoughts, there's great holiness. That's because in the Place where we are going to depart, lives exactly heart. Let's say when I hear confessions – already for ten years, since 1997 – people come to confess and speak out their sins and problems. Time passes, and somebody comes after seven or ten years. Obviously, I don't remember the person and his name, but when they remind me of their life, I feel that I've once experienced that feeling and know

that person. Only when you start to worry about something, your heart begins to accommodate different worries. And you remember not even the events, but the feelings that arose from meeting a particular person. It's not for nothing that the canons say that at the Last Judgment, the priest will bear witness to the confession of your sins. I think that comes from worrying; the heart of a priest has to accommodate these worries for a person. The heart, like a kind of computer, records all the information about the penitents – not in thoughts, but precisely in worries. And the heart can accommodate a huge amount of worries. Simultaneously with these worries, it pushes out the bad and contains all the good. Sometimes people have some problems and you need to tell them something. You begin to talk, relying on the baggage of your heart, and then somewhere among the Holy Fathers you find that they experienced the same state, that exactly the same thought visited them, but you simply say that thought in other words. If the disposition of the spirit is correct, then feelings and thoughts will be the same. If my words don't coincide with the patristic ones, then something inside me is wrong.

Over-intellectualisation is one of the main problems of intelligentsia. Very often people come to confession and say they don't sin at all, which disheartens me a lot. Why do they say that? I think that's first because of their hardness of heart. They don't heed people and don't have any feelings because they do the work of the mind. Since they have a lot of knowledge, they perceive life with mind and not with heart, which is why they have no worries. There are, for example, doctors who approach people with soul and worry – they are close to God. But if a person has no soul and no worries, this is a problem.

St. Isaac the Syrian wrote that when a person begins to pray and acquire a state of love, he enters a state as if he had not yet been born into this world – no one knows him, no one sees him, as if he has dissolved. It feels like he doesn't exist – he doesn't want or need anything. That's the state you should be in. So, logic is a good thing, but not in spiritual life. As far as I remember, St. Lev of Optina wrote, "When I speak from my mind, I make a mistake." And St. Ambrose said, "The first thought that comes to me is from God." The first

thought is formed without the mind. That is, you speak from the inner feelings – your mind, and your tongue form words that come from the heart. But that applies to a person who has attained dispassion. Excessive rationality makes us proud and concentrates our minds on rightness. And from rightness always come pride and condemnation. But when you go through temptations and humble yourself, excessive rationality goes away, and love takes its place. Then you'll accept everyone as they are, condescend to them and justify them.

When you hear a confession or simply talk to somebody, you can understand by his thoughts how much of a man of God, how correct in his disposition of the spirit or how damaged he is. I mean, when he begins to touch on life issues and especially his experiences. The worst thing is when a person has no emotions, when his heart is lifeless – that's even worse than passions. In this state, a person has no Christ inside, no love, no condescension. Such a person is already damaged. The main thing is that your heart is alive and that it worries. If it's so, then God will be inside you and save you, so there is nothing to fear. It's bad if you're going there with your passions, but God will save you. A student of St. Macarius the Great of Egypt asked his teacher, "Abba, if a person was sinning and repenting, where will he be after death?" The saint replied, "He will be where his heart was." A living heart will be living, but a dead heart will perish – even those sins that a person committed, God will burn and nothing will remain. Therefore, it often happens that sinners end up in heaven, like the penitent thief, and right people, like the bishops who sentenced Christ to death, end up in hell. Everything depends on the person's heart.

– *Father, we cannot constantly love. Sometimes comes irritation.*

– The main thing is that you don't have bitterness.

– *Father, how do we receive salvation?*

– One question leads to another: how not to sin? Salvation is a union with God, and sin destroys this connection. So let's talk about how to deal with sins.

It's bad if a person has already fallen into some sin because a sin tends to turn into a skill. And the devil holds a person for these sins and doesn't let him go. A person cannot be completely freed from

sins, only God can free him. But God frees us only when we want it with our will, and not with feelings. Because feelings have already gone into that passion, have grown into false love and have become one's life. The main thing is that the will of the soul is established in love, that it has a desire for God. Then it will be saved because the Lord will give it determination. And if the will deviates from God, it will be hovering and wishing for sin all the time, and there will be problems. One of the Holy Fathers said, one saint prayed for a girl who died at 15 years old and saw her in hell. He was perplexed, as she didn't sin. And he got an answer from God: with her desires, with her will, she was living with a lustful passion, so after death she ended up in hell, although there were no obvious sins.

The question arises: why doesn't the Lord take away these passions from a person? Can't He? He can, but He doesn't do that because a person has free will, and once deprived of his will, one will cease to be a person and become a robot. When Adam was in Paradise, his will was tempted and thus fell away from God, and in its falling away it experienced the spirit of pride. His feelings induced his will to sin. And now we ask God for a feeling of love, so that it induces our will towards holiness, towards God. Here on earth, a person is faced with passions and faces a choice: to reject or accept, to live with it or not. Here, a person is free to express his will – that's the most important thing.

Jesus Christ said, "Not everyone who tells Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). That is, the Lord is talking about the will of His Father. He doesn't say that we have to be saints or without passions. Therefore, we'll be acquiring holiness in temptations. If our will is rooted in goodness and will not reject it, then from these sorrows the soul will be succeeding and testing itself, and thus established in the love of God. We only have to endure our passions and fight with them, and thus acquire the Holy Spirit in ourselves. However, the first step of salvation is to learn to run from sins, to always remember that I am a sinful person and my will is always inclined to sin. The Holy Fathers always said, "It's better to die than to make a sin." They were afraid of making a sin a deviation of their will

from God's will – that is, rejection from God. St. Isaac the Syrian wrote that hell is a place without God, alienation from Him. The greatest suffering is to be in lovelessness, loneliness, and emptiness.

– *Father, how do we receive salvation in the barnyard?*

– Yes, you have to work really hard there. That's why fatigue can come, and from it comes a nervous breakdown. Try to support each other as much as possible and treat each other with understanding. The Lord will help you with that, and you'll learn to tolerate yourself.

There's also an example of the patience of the saints: when St. Paisios had cancer and was in the hospital, he was in a lot of pain, and the doctor told him, "Elder, take some painkillers, you'll feel better." But the elder replied, "I want to feel through my pain the pain of Christ on the Cross, the suffering that He experienced for us." In the same way, you touch the pain of Christ and unite through this with God despite any difficulties. We are designed in such a way that only through suffering do we unite with God. There's no other way, Who in the monastery has no problems? There's no such a person. Everyone endures their own: some suffer from people, others – from their illnesses and passions, or themselves. In a word, we are always in some kind of suffering. But when we wriggle in looking for a warm corner, it's not correct. There may be seemingly good, plausible thoughts to get away from this suffering, but that only damages the person. Such a person is no longer a fighter, and no matter how long he lives in the monastery, he'll always be looking for comfort. For him, God is no longer in love and suffering, but in comfort, and escape from all sorrows.

– *Father, maybe it's my point of view, but in the monastery, some people hold on to their place so that they can somehow live more calmly and pray. They value this place and don't want to change it to something else. On the one hand, that's wrong, but on the other hand, I don't even know what to say... In my opinion, that's very widespread in monasteries: they want to perform only certain obediences.*

– On Mount Athos, obediences change every year so that the monk doesn't become attached to a certain one. Yes, a brother could spend two or three years on one obedience, but still, everyone knew that the

obediences would change. The statutes of the monasteries say that a person must go through all the obediences that exist in the monastery so that he is not afraid of anything. If a person becomes attached to some place, then this soul-saving obedience may turn out to be an addiction for him, and there will no longer be internal freedom and readiness to fulfil any will of God. Such a thing shouldn't happen.

– *Father, in obedience there are extremes: at first, they give one obedience – you master it, get involved, and after some time you need to go to another and master everything again, which makes you very upset.*

– Yes, perhaps, that's bad. But looking at obedience as achieving some result and making yourself happy is wrong. You perform an obedience to cut off your will. The external is done for the sake of the internal.

– *Father, I'm thinking not so much about making myself feel good, but about the fact that from this race I start to get nervous.*

– The Holy Fathers say that if you start to do something fast and at the same time you get nervous, you still have to perform that obedience because the disposition of the soul remains peaceful, and the person acquires humility from that.

The problem is not in this rush, but in ourselves, in how we perceive obedience. Do you remember how the sister was given the obedience to clean the room in two hours? She started scrubbing everything there. "What were you doing?" – "Well, washing the windowsills." – "Why were you washing them?" – "Why, they were dirty." If you were given two hours, you had to do only the main things that caught your eye and leave the rest. If you want it to be cleaner, give me two more hours, and it'll be cleaner. Continue fulfilling the obedience only after being blessed for it, but if not – don't worry, leave it and move on to another obedience. When a novice starts to turn on his mind: "It's dirty here, it's dirty there, I can't leave this mess," he's not obedient any more. Once you've received obedience, fulfil it as you can. If you are sent to another place, go there, if you're left here, stay here. Don't get attached to anything and don't think about how to make something better – just do as you're told.

– *But if I have to think about the others?*

– If you get the obedience to be the elder sister, then think about others; if you get the obedience of a housekeeper, think about how to harvest the crop so that it doesn't go to waste. Each sister in obedience has her own field of activity and her own concerns; if her obedience is changed – she'll be doing something else. Let everyone do their obedience. God gives everything according to people's needs, and when there is no need, He takes back what He gave. The same happened during the revolution: the people no longer needed churches and priests, so the Lord took them away. This happens both in the material and spiritual spheres.

– *Father, if I haven't finished something during the obedience, I have to finish it in my free time. This makes me very tired, what should I do?*

– It all depends on the obedience: if you can leave it for later, then finish it tomorrow. If not, then you need to finish it. Yes, obedience can be very difficult, but you can't live without it. On Athos they'll accept you into the monastery if you have some obedience; but if you don't have any, they won't. Without labour obedience, there will be no internal obedience, and without the latter, there is no point in living in a monastery. The spiritual father looks at the spiritual and physical strength of a person and gives obediences according to them. Just don't tar everyone with the same brush – everything should be arranged prudently and spiritually. Obedience has to be fulfilled with a blessing, in good conscience and within your powers.

On Mount Athos, a hegumen is always an elder; his obedience includes the duties of both administrator and confessor. If the hegumen is the spiritual father of the brethren, it's the ideal of monastic life. I remember one story told in the Koutloumousiou monastery. The Holy Elder Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia was dying of cancer in 1991 in the hospital. Father Nikolai went to see him from the monastery. He went into his room, asked for a blessing and sat next to him by the bed. And the elder told him, "A long time ago in the Koutloumousiou monastery, there was a hegumen of holy life, and all his spiritual children, the entire monastery, were saints. Their bones are now in the cell above the monastery." Elder Joseph of Vatopedi said, "Back in the day, all the monks would be saved under the

leadership of the abbot, but now only two or three monks find somebody close in spirit and get saved little by little." And that's right. You've come here all different. If you unite, nothing will work, though you have one confessor. You disperse in twos, threes, and in such groups you receive salvation. Such a time has come, such is God's providence for man now.

– *We were once picking berries with worldly people. I don't know who they saw in us, but they were telling us about all their sorrows and worries, which I took to heart and began to worry about them more than for myself. But the thing is, I don't know how to help them when they ask.*

– They open their souls to you, and whatever the Lord puts on your heart, say it or just pray for them. Both your soul and theirs benefit from this.

– *How should I pray for them and for how long?*

– You can pray with the Jesus Prayer or with your own words. You also can put bows to the earth depending on the problem – from one day to seven, as much as you can.

– *Father, did you read the book "The Third Bird's Cry"? What do you think about it?*

– I don't know anything about it. Why is it interesting?

– *This is a new one. I haven't read it all the way through, I've only skimmed through it. It was written with love for monasticism, but there are also situations with a lot of anger. If a person who is not a monk reads this book, they will get a negative impression of monasticism.*

– But why are you reading this book? I keep telling you that you have to read books written by the Holy Fathers. They said a long time ago that there would be many books of a non-Christian spirit. Even in those days when theological schools existed, literature was published that you mustn't read. For example, a book about St. Seraphim of Sarov has now been published, even under the patriarchal blessing – The Notes of Nikolai Motovilov –, they were recently found. You can't read this book because it was written in a state of delusion. The hegumen of our monastery said that. Likewise, you can't read the book In the Caucasus Mountains, written by the monk Mercury

(Popov). Even the editor of the book mentioned in the preface that the author wrote the book not quite in the right state, and that they tried to correct it, but how well it turned out, they don't know. They didn't manage to correct the spirit of the book.

– *Is it rather descriptive?*

– Not at all. It is of spiritual content, but the spirit is wrong. Once you read such books, you get damaged, so don't even try. Better educate yourself and live with the Holy Fathers. Or take, for example, the prophecies of the little boy Vyacheslav Krashenninikov – they are not from God, you mustn't read them. Then see if you can get all that out of your head. That's how people get damaged.

– *Father, there's a book with biographies and memories of different people, which tells about a priest Grigory Dolbunov from Nizhny Novgorod, who had a gift of foresight. One woman wrote down her memories of asking God for forgiveness for having an abortion. She was praying to St. Barbara, the Great Martyr: «Give communion to my children», and to St. John the Baptist: Baptize my children!» But I don't understand how you can baptize people who are already dead. And then she had a revelation – the names kind of sounded to her, based on the number of abortions. She went to the priest, and he told her: «God's mercy is upon you. The Lord has forgiven you.» But can a person be baptized after death, like this child?*

– No.

– *I think so, too, but that's written in an Orthodox book.*

– I doubt it's Orthodox.

– *Well, they are referring to that priest.*

– Don't read such dubious literature, otherwise there'll be a mess in your head.

– *Well, those are life stories.*

– Life stories are obviously interesting, but you still have to take care of your soul. Let's pray.

May 5, 2008. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Seven

Usually, when we get together, we talk about problems, external and internal, related to the soul. Events happening around us affect our inner world. Our soul not only accepts the feelings that events, people, and passions bring us, but is also filled with thoughts, both good and bad, enriched by these internal experiences. What to do with this baggage of feelings and thoughts, how to dispose of it? Something needs to be left, and something needs to be cut off from yourself. The correct mental dispensation helps us leave everything we need, everything Divine, and analyse and throw away the sinful things that happened to us. As a result, we become wiser through bitter experiences and acquire immunity against evil and nostalgia for love, repentance, and goodness. God wants only one thing from us – humility. That's why God's providence doesn't always consist only of goodness. When we discover the lives of saints, we often see that people passed through the paths of sin. And when the soul plunged into sin, it became imbued with hatred of evil and armed itself to fight it. In this struggle, in this correct perception of what was happening, she felt sin more acutely and painfully, love and the desire to live with God, to live There, in the Kingdom of Heaven, took root in her heart, and the cutting off of evil took place. The Gospel and all the patristic teachings reveal to us the state of human souls. The main theme of the Gospel stories is the correct internal state of a person. The Lord shows us which state is saving, correct and leads to God, and which is wrong, deceiving, that is, deceptive, and leads to the devil. When reading the Holy Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers, not only do we have to know them and be able to use their quotes, but also understand the states about which they speak. Knowing the patristic thoughts and having experienced some experiences in our life, our soul concludes and explores its inner world, which is reflected in our mind with some thoughts. The soul reflects itself (its feelings and states) in thoughts. Therefore, by a person's thoughts, one can know their internal state: what they are like, where they come from and with whom they are.

I want to tell you one case. Today, when I was talking with people, I came across a spiritual problem. It seems like a completely incomprehensible phenomenon. It happens that people who go to church for years, pray, confess, and take communion, turn out to be sicker and more mentally unstable than people who don't go to church and live by the "go with the flow" principle. And so those people who don't go to church turn out to be better than those who do. That seems to be wrong and unbelievable, but the fact remains! And now I'll try to explain the reason for this phenomenon. When people go to church, they accept the church's, God's world view. If it's incorrect in some way, then their soul will develop incorrectly. It will perceive this world in a distorted and false way, and the person's mental structure will be abnormal. As a result, not only their physical state will be shaken, but also their spiritual state and their psyche. There may be many errors in the human world view, but now I want to talk about only one.

We all live with God. Our prayer should have two components: feeling the fear of God, or His presence and attention. Prayer is based on these, without them, there is no prayer. According to St. Mark the Ascetic, prayer is the connection of a person with God. So, you need to have all of that and cultivate and acquire that, deepening your sense of the presence of God. If a person goes to church and reads prayers, but doesn't have these two properties, he won't be able to truly pray. It's not for nothing that the Holy Fathers say that the fear of God gives birth to faith and without it, it's impossible to unite with God. This feeling of the presence of God should always be, outside of us and inside of us.

What mistakes do people make? In what way do they deviate from God? We know that, in addition to God, there is also the devil, who becomes the root cause that leads us into sin and pushes us away from God. Thoughts come to us not only from us, not only from God, but also from the devil, who really exists in this world. People understand these two concepts – God and the devil – very well and accept this correct Christian world view. Then what's the mistake? People begin to feel and see that the devil hears them, sees them, knows every word and deed, watches them and sets up various temptations for them. So, they begin to pay more and more attention to that. This feeling begins

to grow and bust the person. Instead of feeling the omnipresence of God, the opposite happens, and the person begins to feel the omnipresence of the devil and becomes afraid. As a result of that, appears some kind of suspiciousness. In order not to 'jinx themselves', when asked how things are, they answer, "Okay" instead of "Great," as they believe that the devil will definitely intervene in their fate, and things will suddenly go bad. If such people have some sin, they won't confess it at confession because they're convinced that the devil will hear that and will get even angrier. As a result of such an incorrect world view, such a substitution, appears an illness, a mania. The main thing to remember here is that God is above everything.

A Christian is a person who serves God and subordinates his will to God's will. A person who has truly taken up the service of God is ready to accept various sorrows; he doesn't protect his "I". He tramples on his egoism: "Let it be bad for me, the main thing is it's according to God's will. He does not run from illnesses and sorrows that come to him, and is not afraid of them. Yes, it hurts, yes, it's sad, but he doesn't run from it. When the soul is damaged, a person is afraid of these sorrows. When the soul is hurt, it shrinks, it's afraid, it wants to get away from them, and therefore begins to take care of itself. And the opposite happens – a person begins to fear the devil. The feeling of God's presence goes away. Love leaves, and irritation, suspiciousness, and anger appear. It seems to be a little thing, but because of this little thing, the person gets damaged and cannot be saved. They participate in the sacraments of the church – confession and Holy Communion –, but at the same time, they are not cleansed of their sins, not corrected, not sanctified, and not united with God. The sacraments cease to be effective because a person finds himself in deception. They cannot help a person because his soul is in the wrong state. And it is not God who is to blame, but the person himself. God had revealed to him how to be saved and which way to go, but he chose a different path. That's why the Holy Fathers always said that those who remain outside spiritual nourishment cannot travel this path without a state of delusion. Over thousands of years, the devil has tempted many people. He sees the weaknesses of every person and uses them so that

the person is deceived. And a person, thinking that he is doing good, will fall into evil and, being sure that he is being saved, will perish.

Now let's talk about prayer again. Last time we talked about how it can be different. Prayer is the connection of a person with God. It's not just about reading prayers. Looking at icons, not dreaming, not thinking, but having sobriety and going into God, into contemplation is also a prayer. Prayer is detachment from everything earthly. Prayer is also reading the Holy Fathers and immersing yourself in those words, in the states they spoke about. The Holy Fathers were always read before some kind of prayer rule to warm up the soul. Prayer is deeds of love, repentance, forgiveness, and condolences. All this is included in prayer and helps to connect with God. In prayer, a person has to be in the spirit of love! The spirit of love is in reconciliation with your neighbours. The Divine Liturgy is entirely permeated with the understanding and feeling that only in a peaceful, calm state can a person approach God: "In peace let us pray to the Lord."; "Again and again, in peace let us pray to the Lord."; "Let us stand well, let us stand with fear, let us attend, that we may offer the holy oblation in peace."; "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess". If the person doesn't have peace and love in his soul but stands in arrogance and exaltation, then his prayer will only bring him harm, and what seems intended for salvation will destroy his soul. Seems unbelievable, but the fact is. Why? Because a person is in a state of delusion. In this state, the virtues intended for salvation become destruction for the soul. Thus, the Divine, the Holy, leading to salvation, can turn into destruction.

Many monks, laity, and bishops turned from being kind and good to evil and proud, and as a result, perished. The devil has drawn many people into his snares of pride by deceiving. It happens so: somewhere, sometimes a person, out of his pride, listening only to his own opinion, accepts a small sinful thought and gets damaged by it. The damage begins, and the feat that he's been carrying out for many years brings him not love and humility but only evil and pride. Therefore, the state of delusion is not a simple, harmless state – it's a

state of destruction. It's very bitter when people, having lived their lives in the monastery in the service of God, and then crossed the border of life and death, end up cursing the day they were born into this world, and go to hell. Every time during our meetings we talk about these problems. This concerns not only the understanding that God is next to us, around us, and that we shouldn't fear the devil but he who should fear us. We shouldn't be afraid of life and this world, in which a person must be a warrior and fighter.

The most fighting state of a monk and any Christian is sobriety. It helps you observe your soul and understand what it's like, where it is, and who it is with. When you come to confession, you not only name your sins but also show your sobriety, show how you see your soul, your inner world. The first difficulty with confession is that a person dryly names his sins. Few people pay attention to how all this happens in the human soul. Sobriety is like medicine. A focus of the disease has appeared, and the medicine, kind of envelops it, detects it, cuts it off from everything good, doesn't allow it to spread and helps to tear it away from itself. When a person comes to confession in spiritual sobriety, he not only does he list his sins, but also talks about the thoughts and feelings that led him to committing those sins. He has the power to reject them. He hates them and doesn't let them spread further. Later he might commit them again, but still, they will always be under his supervision, as if in a vice, in a cage. That makes the soul tougher and more militant, and it rejects this evil. Therefore, at confession, the sacrament of repentance is twofold. There is double cleansing: both from God and from the person himself. Not only does God condescend and cleanse the repentant's soul, but the person also rejects sin from himself. If one doesn't have enough power, spiritual sobriety, observation of his sins and rejection of oneself, then God cannot incinerate their sins. Grace passes by, slightly sings them, but doesn't completely burn them out of him. The sins remain rooted inside, and the person doesn't experience the desired grace, freedom, and lightness after confession that they crave. Therefore, he doesn't experience that sanctifying purity and grace after Holy Communion, since one follows the other. That's the dual action of God and man.

We often come to confession, thinking that during this sacrament only God acts, but no. God sings, purifies, and dissects one's soul, separating good from evil, but at the same time the repentant must willingly participate in the rejection of his sins. Sometimes worldly people come, and I have to confess for them myself and ask what sins they've committed, and they only nod their heads: this I did, this I didn't do. A person has confessed, and the Lord accepted his repentance. But the person didn't experience the effect of the grace of the Holy Spirit that the Lord gives to people after the sacrament of confession because his soul wasn't ready to reject and feel pain for his sins; they were not placed into his sobriety. But when sins are enclosed in a person's sobriety, his soul always aches. I always scold people who commit big sins and live with them. It's not normal to feel that your conscience is tormenting you, that your soul has died for God, is alienated from Him by sin, and to drown out this pain. A person can accept some pseudo-good thoughts, like "I'm not ready for confession" or some other thoughts, and keep living with these sins. That's wrong because by thinking so, the person destroys his soul and gets accustomed to those sins. The person has endured and got over them, and when he finally comes to confession, it seems like he has sins, and he repents of them, but that pain, that rejection of sin that was in the beginning, when his conscience was crying out, is no longer there. That's bad.

There's another moment. At confession, I always tell you that after sinning, your conscience hurts. Therefore, immediately name the heaviest sin you committed and don't obscure it. Sometimes people start confession from afar: first, they name tiny little sins, and then big ones casually pass by. There is deceit in this, and you won't receive the fullness of the grace of the Holy Spirit because you are not completely rejecting your sins. Your spiritual father won't get angry or think badly of you. He only worries that you begin to lie, firstly to yourself. That's false modesty, false correctness when you incidentally try to quickly insert a sin, for which you are to be excluded from the Eucharist, no matter if your spiritual father heard it or not, and then just go away. That damages the repentant, his confession becomes

empty, and he doesn't reach the simplicity and holiness that God grants through His sacraments.

In our time, in our circumstances, a person is mainly sanctified and approaches God through the sacraments, primarily through the sacrament of repentance. First, at home, in the everyday environment in which one finds themselves, immediately, on the spot, later repentance in the cell and then at confession. These are your main ways of salvation – repentance and Divine Liturgy. All the obediences that you fulfil have to make you humble, they are not just for the sake of obedience. What does obedience have to give you? First of all, love. It has to cut off your right or rational thoughts and give you mad ones because love doesn't have right thoughts but only insane ones. Love covers this rational truth and reveals other people's weaknesses. If you live only according to the laws of truth, you'll be lining people up against the wall, but love covers all weaknesses and sins. For example, a thought of truth will never cover the one who likes to secretly smoke behind the corner – it will definitely expose him. Sometimes you can hear, "How can he go to heaven if he serves the devil?" Sure – in the world, girls and women smoke, not to mention men. If you start to think like this, you can say goodbye to your salvation: no heaven for you, you'll go to hell. Maybe a little exaggerated, but that's the correct thought. Yes, no one argues – smoking is bad, but love has mad thoughts that cover everything, like "Well, he is who he is, God will forgive him."

God always said, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). But how do you love your enemies, who humiliate and kill you? God said, "Love them." A smart, right person will say, "How is it possible to love such people? You feel bad, you are hurt, and you will love them?" Therefore, obedience cuts off not only the will of man but also this rational correctness. It should give the madness of love and simplicity, like that of a child who sees no evil. I once visited one family and joked with their child (told him a little lie), and his mother told me, "Father, he doesn't understand that you're telling a lie. He takes everything at face value." After that, I felt ashamed. Parents know such things. Same in obedience. You have to become like a small child but with your mind. If a person truly lives in obedience, he sees no

evil. If a person begins to talk about the past, remembering evil, then they have a problem with obedience. Obedience is primarily aimed at ensuring that our thoughts are pure and obedient. When we call the Icon of the Mother of God “She Who is Quick to Hear,” we mean that She is obedient, instantly ready to do the will of God – fulfilling it right away, without hesitating. If a person has even the slightest remnant of hostility, then he has an internal problem with obedience.

Obedience can be internal and external. External obedience is when you try to do something perfectly, but internal obedience is performed in trust and without anger. That’s why I always say: if something sad happens to you, if you fall under some kind of disgrace while living in the monastery, endure it, and then don’t think any more, don’t remember your past life. It was what it was. Just keep moving on and don’t remember it at all so that your soul isn’t stressed. When a person undergoes internal obedience, then, first, he is enriched by the thought of madness, and thus, he begins to destroy his correct thoughts. He stops bossing people and being strict about the weaknesses of others. Acquiring the spirit of love is the first sign of obedience and indicates that a person is being saved. If correct thoughts take root in a person, and they begin to live by them, that’s a sign of damage. That’s what I wanted to say about obedience in the monastery. Your life has to be enriched with thoughts. If we take each of you (everyone has their own baggage of correct and mad thoughts), then, unfortunately, we have to admit that correct thoughts exceed mad ones. That is, your truth exceeds your love. Of course, there is love, but it’s too little to love the whole person with his good and bad qualities. Why do we often fall into despondency and sadness? Because there isn’t enough baggage of mad thoughts that always give cheerfulness to one’s soul, resolve many sorrows and problems and lead to God. “You haven’t performed your prayer rule, ate a lot, or something else – that’s it, you have to suffer. If your prayer isn’t going well – that’s it, you’ve fallen away from God, and life is over.” That’s how the devil catches us; he always plants something to bother us.

When I was on Mount Athos, I met serious, good monks. For those who live in obedience, the monastic dispensation is

always intertwined with the cheerfulness of spirit. Archimandrite Kirill (Pavlov) said, “Brethren, the flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing.” He would always speak of himself like that and always had that state of soul. When you are attacked by passions and bad thoughts, when you are offended and scolded, you give up and have no cheerfulness. Sisters, acquire more good crazy thoughts! Make fun of yourself, behave like foolish. If you’ve got into some sin, cheer up a little, like “Well yeah, I’m really bad, what can I do…” and get out of there, live, crawl on. But if you are caught up in despondency or evil in yourself, then the bottom is guaranteed for you, and it’s unknown if you’ll rise from there. Then you start crying out to the priest and sisters, “Pray for me, pray for me!” Cheer yourself up and get into a normal position, then the Lord will help, and the prayers of others will reach your heart. But when you are in such despondency and anxiety, who will help? You have to know this state of delusion and wrongness.

Enrich your soul with kindness so that at any moment you could find in your soul, in your head, an invigorating thought that connects you with God, and thus you’ll be connecting with the Lord. Remember Father John of Kronstadt – always before the liturgy, if his conscience was convicting him of something, he knelt before the Throne of God and repented to God, asking for forgiveness. In his repentant prayer, in his repentant heart, there was not only a feeling of rejection of evil, of those bad, evil thoughts and feelings that came to him, but also a thought of love: “He is so low, so small, so rotten, such a sinner, to whom you shouldn’t even look, to whom you shouldn’t even give your little finger, but the Lord forgives him everything and even gives Himself, His Body and Blood.” From these thoughts and feelings that came to him after repentance, he was completely transformed, covered with this love, and only then he began the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Whenever we feel God’s forgiveness, when He covers us, when His grace comes to us, we feel God’s love on ourselves. Until Father John of Kronstadt received that tenderness and all-forgiveness from God, he did not begin the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

Thus, when you pray and repent at home, in confession, and take communion, you have to be enriched and understand all this in the

same way. You can fill your soul with these thoughts yourself and excite it with this understanding. Behind this understanding are feelings. If they don't come, it doesn't mean that nothing is happening inside: God is kind of teasing your soul so that it's ready to accept His grace. You may not feel it, but the Lord is doing it to you. He gives Himself as a sacrifice for you! You have to understand it and live with these thoughts. But if you don't have such thoughts, you'll have problems: you'll never taste on this earth the states that the Holy Fathers and the Lord Himself spoke about. You will not understand and know the Living God. For all this to come – tenderness, indiscriminate forgiveness, love, and repentance – you need baggage of kind, humble and meek thoughts that would be possessed by love, and not by your truth. Now I'm exaggerating a little and sharing truth and love. When love begins to take its place in the soul above your sense of rightness, it absorbs this truth, unites with it, and merges into one feeling. When a person is still sinful and lives his 'old man', then they have to separate "truth", correctness and love. While they are still so 'old', they will be changing all the time: either they will be in a rational state or in love. It has to be this way. This is the path of love, perfection, and human sanctification. In the end, love has to be established, absorb the truth, and unite with it for 'the old man' to leave. The Holy Fathers say that the saints also sinned, but their love immediately burned away the sin. The saints lived in love – due to their thoughtlessness and childishness, they could commit sins, but their humility didn't let their love leave, therefore, God was always with them. Foolish thoughts, don't let this "truth" in us make us arrogant and significant. You may be a rocket scientist, but if you have such a kind and loving foolishness for Christ, it won't let you magnify yourself.

I always wondered, how was it so that the Holy Fathers would perform miracles, raise the dead, heal the sick, cast out demons and... didn't they see what they were doing? Of course, they perfectly understood what power they had from God – by God's grace, they were as if sons of God. Why could they maintain that in themselves? Why didn't they become proud? Probably, because they had that mad,

foolish love, which would always lower them to the very bottom. I remember one moment from the Holy Fathers, "When the thought that I mean something and perform some miracles comes to me, I tell myself, "Man, remember your fornication and calm down." So, that's kind of foolishness before oneself. Remembering the past and humiliating oneself are foolishness too. It prevents a person from becoming arrogant. But a proud person doesn't have such thoughts. So it is with you, if you notice smart thoughts, be all ears. But if a man has foolish, kind, loving thoughts, that's our man in the spirit of love. But where will smart thought lead us? They may lead us in one direction and in the other. It's not bad, but it's not good either. Be prudent, patient, and hard-working. Don't overthink.

October 14, 2008. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Eight

In order to receive salvation, we have to unite with God. That's the main thing that a monk and, in general, every Christian needs. That's the goal and work of our whole life. A synonym for the word 'salvation' can be the word 'prayer'. The Holy Fathers say that prayer connects a person with God. In today's conversation, I want to touch on these very topics – salvation and prayer.

When I read the Holy Fathers, I was always interested in the effect of God's grace on people and how we perceive it. What are the signs of grace? When you read about it, and it was written in the spirit, you light up with this grace and come into contact with this evidence of God's entry into man and their life with God. The Gospel also reflects this union of man with God. Our spiritual father Fr. Kirill always said, "Read the Gospel" because this is how we really become intertwined with the Living God. Remember, how we were talking about the book of Archimandrite Spiridon (Kislyakov) "Things I Have Seen and Experienced"? It tells about the Siberian missionary: how he was preaching in prisons, turning people to repentance, and how he had walked his path of unity with God. It describes many interesting

moments when the grace of God was affecting him, and he even lost consciousness from prayer.

Saints Ephraim of Katounakia, Tikhon the Anchorite and Paisios of Mount Athos wrote a lot about that. It's captivating that when reading the Gospel or books that talk about phenomena of grace and contact between a person and God, people perceive what they read differently. An external, worldly person selects only information about events – what, when, where and how it happened. He just needs food for thought. But a believer chooses food for the soul from what he reads – that is, what warms up his soul and gives him love because the soul lives only in love. If you don't feed your soul, it will wither away. But if it has never experienced contact with God, then it passes by, it does not know Him and doesn't feel Him, although God comes into contact with it. And you grieve that people don't feel and don't know God. As Saint Silouan the Athonite said, "O merciful Lord, bestow Your grace on all the peoples of the earth, that they may know You; For without Your Holy Spirit, man cannot know You and conceive of Your love." That is, he was asking God that people would feel the touch of His grace to them and to other people. Therefore, I want to draw your attention to the fact that you always have to warm up your heart in prayer. Your soul has to be alive, and prayer has to give contact with God and His Spirit. If this contact doesn't occur, prayer becomes mechanical, dead. The nature of prayer is complex.

Now let's stop at some moments of what we've read – the book about St. Ephraim of Katounakia. There's a case in his hagiography when his soul began to leave his body, but he was returning it back inside himself. Later, he finally let his soul go, and it came out. The elder saw three figures with his inner eyes, his soul embraced the middle one, and he felt that it was Christ. When the soul returned to his body, he started to grab onto any objects – a closet, a table, everything that was in the room not to die. Having come to his senses, he ran to Elder Joseph and told him his spiritual experiences. The elder told him that he had achieved that state of prayer, love, and grace in a short time, while other fathers would spend decades on that.

Another story. During the Divine Liturgy, Father Ephraim experienced a vision of the other world. He began to empathize deeply with what was happening during the sacred service, and from those feelings, he even lost consciousness and fell onto the altar. The Elder entered the sanctuary, pulled Father Ephraim by the leg, and he came to his senses, regained consciousness, and continued the Liturgy. After completing the Liturgy, he said, "Elder, if this happens again, don't touch me, even if I lose consciousness, leave me as I am."

Elder Tikhon also describes something similar. St. Paisios was singing during the Cherubic Hymn, and the elder was serving liturgy, praying and crying for a long time. When the liturgy was over, Father Paisios asked him, "Elder, where have you been?" And he replied, "I was in Heaven with the angels." This man's soul was also connected to the upper world.

Archimandrite Spiridon Kislyakov described one case. When he was a boy, he was praying with Blessed Maximus in the forest. The saint began to read the Lord's Prayer, then "Holy God". And they entered into such a prayerful spirit that the archimandrite even lost consciousness from this feeling of tenderness. He later woke up, but Blessed Maximus was praying in tears and was still in a prayerful spirit.

Why have I brought up these examples? When the soul achieves a living prayer, becomes alive, and God's love begins to act in it – that is, appears a feeling of love and empathy, it comes into such a prayerful state. Figuratively speaking, the soul is like a bird: when you hold it in hand, this bird folds its little feet, holds its wings close to its body and seems to be all calm, but if you unclench your fingers, the bird will immediately flutter out and fly away. This is the state that should be during a living prayer. When a person begins to pray, their soul kind of goes out of them. It feels as if only the body is holding it, but the soul itself is moving outward. That's a novice state of living prayer. Elder Ephraim experienced this state when his soul was trembling and saying that it was leaving. That's why he grabbed the closet and the table, as his soul really came out of him. Understand one thing – love always contains everything and everyone. It doesn't divide people into good and bad. The nature of love, its essence, is all-encompassing:

it gives itself and at the same time absorbs everything. Therefore, if we love everyone, but not someone, then this is not real, not God's love. This is human love. But the genuine, the correct prayer gives God's love and, conversely, God's love gives prayer.

What do I want to focus your attention on? If someone begins to seriously engage in prayer, then, as the Church Fathers always say, he has to be under the control of his spiritual father or an elder, who himself has walked this path and knows what to do so that the person doesn't get damaged. Because if the person performs the prayer mechanically, he can get damaged. I'll bring you some examples of how we can get damaged when practising the Jesus Prayer. This prayer is short and very quickly collects the mind – that is, a person quickly begins to concentrate their attention on themselves and withdraw into themselves. But, remembering the name of God and turning to Him, they don't revive their inner feelings, their heart does not kindle. There is no love, yet the person is praying.

The first sign of this incorrect state is that if during prayer you pull the person and disrupt their prayer, say, with some question, then an explosion will occur. They'll suddenly become nervous and hostile because their peace has been disturbed, so they need to interrupt their prayer, leave that state of absorption and turn to the newcomer. That false peace is rooted in the pleasure of carnal feelings and selfishness. Withdrawing within yourself without love is a state of delusion. For a person who practices prayer and who has love, it always directs them to sacrifice – all for the sake of Christ, for the sake of people. The soul, like a bird, is ready to fly upward; the power of love embraces that person, it consumes them. And if someone visits them, then, obviously, it is not hostility and nervousness that are born in the person's heart, but, on the contrary, they feel even stronger love.

I once told you that on Athos, everyone who obeys their spiritual fathers always has a sign of obedience – constant goodwill. They are always ready to fulfil the will of another person and are friendly towards them. They don't talk too much, they are always kind to their neighbours, they always have love. Quietness, meekness, and humility always live in their souls. When a person lives on his own and does

not have this inner love, they will not take a step towards you, but, on the contrary, will be ready to run away just not to be bothered. I wanted to say this so that you can set spiritual guidelines for yourself. Without knowing them, you can go in the wrong direction.

The easiest way to warm up your heart is to turn to God in your own words. This method was used by the Holy Fathers and ascetics who were labouring in the recent past. You can warm your soul faster with your words. When a person turns to the Saviour, the Mother of God, and the saints they love, the soul begins to warm up. This means that feelings are connected to the words of the prayer. When a feeling of love appears, words are not spoken in vain. I think the simplest thing is to turn to the Mother of God. Addressing Her is more understandable to us because each of us had or has a mother. These feelings for our mother are very close to our hearts, they are in our memory. Moreover, the Mother of God is the mother of all Christians. Blessed Pasha (Prascovia) of Sarov would always address Her as Mommy as if She were her own, the closest one. When we turn to Her, feelings of love warm up very quickly. Maybe I'm saying this also because the presence of Theotokos on Athos is very close and here, in Pühtitsa, you can feel Her presence very strongly. When you warm up your soul with your own words, you need to add the Jesus Prayer to the warmed heart, and then again switch to the prayer in your own words and return to the Jesus Prayer again. You can alternate in this way until your heart warms up and settles in the Jesus Prayer and begins to do it on its own. That will be a living Jesus Prayer and not a mechanical one.

When your prayer has got going, it doesn't mean it will remain in the soul forever – it will stay for some time and go away. When Father Ephraim of Katounakia was asked, "Father, how long have you been in grace?", he replied, "About three hours." As soon as the heart warms up and grace enters it, the Jesus Prayer becomes alive. Some people may be in this heated state more, others less. When the Jesus Prayer begins to cool down, then thoughts already appear, and behind them, vanity again brings the heart into a cold state. When this happens, you need to return to prayer in your own words. And so alternate. When a person has the skill of prayer and living prayer, like Rev.

Silouan of Athos and other fathers, he will remain in this state of grace and his heart will be constantly warmed. Then you no longer need to alternate and move from praying in your own words to the Jesus Prayer – that’s it, the Jesus Prayer got going. Even if the heart cools down for some reason, the Jesus Prayer will warm it again. This is how you can learn to pray. Everyone can choose for themselves the path of unity with God – whichever is easier for them. If you tried one option, but it didn’t work, do it differently – that’s your right.

Just know that without living prayer, without a warm heart, without love, we cannot be with God. Man is a living being and wants to love and be loved. This is a property of our nature, a need of our soul. If it doesn’t experience this, it begins to wither. When we are born, we hold on to our mother’s and father’s hands – that is, we grow up in the love of the family home. Then we move from this hearth to another hearth and home – a marital hearth, and there is love too. All the time the Lord gives people these spheres in which their love would develop, in which it could live because in this love there is God. A monk doesn’t have these earthly hearths that are intended for worldly people. He has a hearth of a small family – the soul and God. If a person does not create this hearth of his family, he will be dead. Perhaps physically he will be healthy and prudent, but from a lack of love, the soul will begin to wither because it needs nutrition and energy, just like the body. It feeds not on bread and water, but on love, and without receiving this spiritual food it begins to languish.

When you come across a person in the world or in a monastery who doesn’t live this living life, this love and contact with God, you notice that their spirit is different from the living spirit of love, the spirit of God. A person who lives in obedience, in the bosom of the Church, has a sound spirit. Usually, the spirit manifests itself through thoughts. When you come into contact with other people and books, your spirit is always tested: whether it’s healthy or not because you find in books something close to you or alien. The soul, absorbing some information, comes into contact with the life of the spirit and gains experience; it analyses and feels what is native to it and what is not. The health of the soul is also tested by this. We need to know this,

and if we don’t understand this, this is a problem because without this sensitivity it will be difficult and a person can be damaged without this. Unfortunately, a lot of literature is being published now in which there is no spirit of love at all. We need spiritual experience.

During conversations, we always touch upon the topic of spiritual delusion. If we have living prayer and strive for it, the Lord always brings out of delusion. How? Through humility. God’s love is always associated with the humility of the soul – God cannot enter the soul if it’s not humble. And when in the living prayer, we call on the name of God, we always internally ask to renounce ourselves, our attachments and our passions to unite with God. The monk renounces earthly happiness, he requires only God. Only when this inner renunciation of a person occurs, this self-sacrifice, their heart can come to life. Without this self-denial, humility of the soul, the heart cannot warm up and prayer cannot begin to act. Humility is always sacrificing oneself to God Himself, renouncing all one’s passions and attachments. You may not be free from them, but desire itself gives a person the opportunity to unite with God. And if there is no such a desire, the heart will not ignite and the love of God will not enter the soul of a person.

The soul has to be able to accept this love. Prayer also lives according to its internal laws. If self-denial does not occur and a person does not renounce his passions and affections, then there can be no talk of any love. God will not enter this soul. I understand that a human is a human: some hostile feelings, vanity, dirty thoughts – all this exists, but prayer aimed at self-denial and humility covers those feelings with love. And God enters the soul, despite all that, because by his will a man doesn’t want evil. As far as I remember, the Prologue describes one case; I’ve already given it as an example. The mother’s child died, and she, mad with grief, was walking along the road and carrying her baby in her arms. A harlot met her, and, having caught up with her, the mother threw the baby into the hands of the harlot. And she, also in a state of shock, looked at the dead baby who was in her arms, and out of compassion cried out to God: “Lord, raise him!” And God raised this baby not through the prayers of the mother, but

through the prayer of the harlot who turned to Christ because she renounced herself and asked God about that. That is, the cry of renunciation of oneself is necessary in prayer. If that's not the case, then the prayer will be dull and earthly and will not be heard. Whatever a man may be in his fall, in his sins, if he has this cry of the soul, he will be saved because God will be with him.

Father Spyridon (Kislyakov) in his missionary stories tells about prisoners who were up to their ears in sins, murders, and everything one can imagine. His book describes the condescension of God's grace and love on those people, their repentance and how they felt God's love. It's interesting that when intelligent people who have no great sins read that, they don't understand: "How can God accept those murderers, who have so much blood on them, who have done so much evil on this earth? How can He forgive them? Why doesn't He punish and destroy them but gives them forgiveness and love?" Their pride doesn't allow those people to humble themselves because only in humility can one understand God and love. In the stichera of Good Friday, there are the following words of the Apostle Peter: "Lord, even if everyone denies You, I will never deny You." The Church, as if on behalf of the Lord, answers, "Peter, Peter, you have not yet known the mercy of God." God's providence is for man to know the all-forgiving love of God. That's precisely why the Apostle Peter needed that fall. Without knowing it, he would not have been able to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven and become the disciple who loved people the way God loved them. When we fall into some kind of delusion and accept some wrong thought, our soul begins to fall away from God and turn to stone in this state, and the Lord, through some kind of fall, through some sins, admonishes us and with forgiveness instills love in our hearts. The soul warms up again and flies up to God. You no longer know God's love when you receive something good and kind from Him, but when the Lord saves you from some kind of fall, from the hell of sins with His forgiveness and you feel His hand. From this love the whole soul breaks and trembles. There is a feeling that the soul cannot withstand its pressure and is about to die. That's how the Lord visits and saves us.

What else did I want to tell you? The main thing in this life is to do God's will. The will of God is living and good and always leads a person to salvation. His will is done over each of us individually and over all of us together. We must not only partake in God's love in prayer, not only be enriched by it, but also understand what God's will is for us, for those around us and the entire world. In God's will, His love is always present: when the soul realizes what exactly the Lord wants from it, it immediately comes into a state of burning in love. Without understanding and seeing the will of God, it's impossible to remain in prayer and love. The Holy Fathers say, "The more a man lives, the deeper he plunges into the will of God, into the vision of this will." Try to see the purpose in everything, and then you'll receive an internal answer through your spiritual father or in some other way, and your soul will be enriched with love all the time. Even the evil that happens around us must be accepted as given by God and perceived as admonition and a cure for sin and delusion, as a result of which the soul begins to love God even more. You yourself came to the monastery, began to live here, came into contact with its inhabitants, not only with the good, but also with the bad, and when the soul accepts some external evil as a cure for sins, begins to see the hand of God in it, then from this, it humbles itself and becomes kinder and more loving. If the soul accepts temptations as if from the hand of God, it will not become angry, cowardly and downtrodden, but on the contrary, will recover if it was sick, mature and become stronger.

If one begins to fear the evil with which he comes into contact, damage occurs, and the person becomes downtrodden and fearful. The person prays and gains a state of love, but loses it because he doesn't see God's will and therefore doesn't accept it. Even if they succeeded in prayer, but did not see and did not accept God's providence, their work will remain in vain. Worse than that, from this ignorance and egoism the soul gets damaged. When in confession and in personal conversation you come into contact with those who accepted only good from the hand of God and rejected the bad, you find that flaw of love in those people. It means that the person, living in the world and experiencing something, never asked himself the

question, “Lord, but what do **You** want?” God participates in our lives, and always, no matter what happens in it – good or bad – we have to ask this question: “Lord, what do **You** want?” This question doesn’t mean that you have to accept everything that is falling on you, no. This humility will be false. It can even break a person because many of the troubles that come to us may be beyond our strength. And if we, like a donkey, keep bowing our heads and accepting them, we might overstrain ourselves. When a person begins to look for an answer to his question, the Lord won’t leave him and will answer him, and the person will take those sorrows that he can handle, but to the ones he can’t take he will remain indifferent. Humility varies in its nature.

Humility is instilled in our soul only when we begin to seek and fulfil God’s will. It’s always interconnected with it: God always gives His will to us according to our inner humility, and if our souls are not humble enough, He will never give us severe sorrows that could crush our souls. And if a person does not understand God’s will and takes on too much, then the truly coming sorrows can tear them apart. Each person has his own limit. One can bear a lot, another can bear little. Every person has his own Providence, his own sorrows and suffering, both physical and mental. Therefore, we all have to pray, know and fulfil God’s will. If one of these aspects is missing, the soul gets damaged. Without fulfilling God’s will and without prayer, it cannot be saved, live in fullness, develop and cleave to God. Without fulfilling God’s will, the soul will be insufficient. In youth, these problems of the soul are not so visible, but with age, they will manifest themselves more and more strongly, and it will become clear how a person was living in their youth.

Salvation is a path that is both difficult and easy at the same time. You just have to accept everything easily and at the same time prudently. There are some things you have to focus your attention on, and some things you don’t have to pay attention to. God’s will is usually known through a spiritual father. That is why the main task of a priest is not to fulfil all kinds of prayers services and rites, but to be able to unite a person with God so that they can fulfil the will of God themselves and reveal it to others. There’s one more point. The world

gives us more and more unnatural temptations, from which people get greatly damaged. The soul knows how to fight natural temptations because they are natural. But when people constantly come into contact with the computer and television screen, their soul gets very damaged. The imagination begins to work completely wrong. If they see those pictures all the time and don’t take care of themselves, that’s very harmful. For prayer, it’s death. If a person watches TV or some programs, he will always have fantasies in his head. St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite said that daydreaming is the devil’s bridge, along which he enters into the human soul. He will not get inside any other way, only through fantasy. After watching some film or program, a person will no longer be able to pray until time passes and his mind calms down, so take care of yourself.

Thoughts from God always bring peace and tranquillity, and the soul gains love. At the same time, from these thoughts, there occurs, in the good sense of the word, a breakdown of the sinful will, a withdrawal of the soul. It can continue for a couple of minutes, and then the sinful will rolls in again and the “correct” thoughts take possession of the person, and from them, he again falls into irritability and anxiety. The worst thing is when a person begins to live by such “correct” thoughts. Such a person will always be nagging everyone. He will speak correctly, but he will not have peace in his soul until he begins to live according to the law of love – to justify others. Love always can cover flaws, and the devil always can uncover flaws: this one is a smoker, that one is a drunkard, and so on... There are no ideal people, everyone has some kind of flaw, which the devil reveals. If you fall for this, then you’ll lose your love until you fix your thoughts.

St. Paisios has always said that in our time the biggest problem is not passion and abundance of sins, but a damaged thought. When a person has a healthy thought, then love acts in them, which will always justify and cover the sins of people. But a damaged person starts to boss everyone according to their ‘correct’ thoughts. They’ll always find someone to blame – the catch is that they are telling the truth. If they were telling a lie, it would explain everything, but they are telling the truth. However, that truth only brings evil, and that

person themselves begins to suffer and grieve all the time. St. Paisios said that such people begin to have a mental disorder. If it continues for a long time and continues to increase, then sooner or later a mental breakdown will occur, and the person will get damaged. They cannot be reasoned with and live only by their thoughts, while a mentally healthy person listens to everything good. For example, if you tell me that I'm doing something wrong, I'll admit that and correct myself. You say good, correct things, and I accept them, but a person with damaged thoughts cannot renounce their "I". Whatever they do and say seems to them absolutely correct. For them, there is no one higher than their ego – this is why they don't accept the comments of others, which is the worst and the most frightening. If a person is passionate and sinful, but their mind is healthy, they understand that this is bad, and they refuse it. They always have the opportunity to turn to God and embrace God's love within themselves. Even a passionate person can accept a remark, humble themselves and correct themselves, but a person with a damaged thought cannot. And over time, they begin to suffer from themselves. They grieve and, by God's Providence, get saved by their sorrows – this is their path. And, unfortunately, there are more and more of such people, especially in old age... Now, ask your questions if you have them.

– I wanted to ask about the spiritual recording that we listen to. What do you say?

– You understand, all this listening comes from the fact that a person doesn't yet have the fervour of prayer, he needs to heat it up. And when a person enters the state of prayer, when prayer gets going, then everything goes away by itself. The Holy Fathers always had books. Books give spiritual stimulation, even when you don't touch them, and they just sit on the shelf. That is natural because books store the word. When I was studying in seminary, Fr. Vasily (Stroganov) was teaching us the New Testament. He said that the apostles were writing the Gospel on tablets, and before them, the Jews were writing it on scrolls, so the Gospel appeared in the form of a book, and the Old Testament was in scrolls. I think that even the shape of the books standing on the shelves is already a kind of

evangelism, and their very appearance encourages the soul to pray. Cassettes have their advantage – they can capture the intonation and voice of the fathers, convey to some extent their spirit, and reproduce information from prayer books or spiritual books. In general, everything is good in its time and place.

– If you see that someone is doing some kind of evil, how can you adjust your thoughts so as not to condemn, but to justify the person who is doing evil or behaving inappropriately?

– Here are two points. First, we have to learn to see God's providence in everything. When this feeling takes root, you will understand what the Lord wants in a certain situation. For example, if a person is rude to someone, maybe this is God's punishment for the one on whom evil is poured out. That is, the Lord here on earth cleanses them, and if this is so, then you need to move away because if you start to interfere, you can harm yourself and that person to go against God's will. But there may be another situation – the Lord will reveal to you that a person cannot bear the temptation that has fallen upon him, then you have to help him. The soul lives and functions normally when there is humility. It's normal when a person gets humbled, that's how it should be. But if he has little humility, then he can suffer some hardships only a little. And if you feel that someone starts to break him and that he is getting damaged, you have to help him. We all need to learn to feel and see God's providence. Each case has its own approach. It would be wrong to say that we have to protect everyone all the time. There has to be an inner feeling. The Lord Himself reveals when to intercede and when to step away.

– But if you don't stand up, and the person begins to become embittered by what's happening to him?

– If a person is being broken down, and you stand aside, that's wrong. Don't be afraid to ruin your relationships with people, don't be a downtrodden person. You need to be a fighter, a strong person. Don't be afraid to mess up your relationship with someone by defending the one being attacked. You don't have to adapt to anyone. You have to be kind, but in some cases, you also need to be firm. If you feel like you are being broken, you need to somehow stand up for

yourself. When the devil works through a person, and you begin to show false humility in response, this person feels that he is right, hurts you, and is already carried away – seeing the correctness of his actions, he begins to humiliate and break his neighbour even more. But if you put such a person in his place, he may feel that he is wrong. When a person starts to scold or insult someone, stop him. If he begins to put pressure on someone, it is not God who is acting through him, but the devil. But if you (falsely) humble yourself before the devil, you will get damaged. Remember Father John of Kronstadt and other fathers who were healing the demon-possessed, and how the Saviour was casting out demons. There was always strength. We often associate silence with humility. “Sorry, sorry...”, but it’s not always humility; humility is much higher. In many cases it’s a blowback, so regularly you really have to be a fighter, to stand up for yourself and for others. Then your mental state will be normal. Moreover, standing up for yourself doesn’t mean swearing when you are scolded, but being like a madman, as if those scolding words don’t concern you, and if you shout, then without evil. You also have to learn that.

– *I read in one book that people who didn’t participate in the Church Sacraments, were great sinners and didn’t communicate with God in this life, will go to hell forever and ever, and we can’t beg God’s mercy for them.*

– Everything is in God’s hands. There must be one dogma – God is good. And no matter what the Lord does, no matter how He deals with a person, He will still deal with him according to His goodness, according to His mercy. A person will contain God to his strengths. You slightly misunderstand what the Kingdom of Heaven is. It’s not that we are begging an unmerciful and formidable ruler to have mercy and bring a sinful person into heaven. No, it all depends on the state of our soul. God always wants to accept us, but if our soul doesn’t have love in itself, it cannot perceive God’s love, it rejects it. It’s always said that a mother’s prayer takes her children out of hell. What does that mean? If a person retains at least love for their mother, they will always have a clue to God because in this natural love, there is God. Father Paisios said, “If a person has a merciful heart, don’t worry about his salvation – God will save him.” Don’t try to get into this area of salvation

with your mind. You can’t put everything on shelves. The human soul is a whole world with so many things in it. If the Lord says that He created the entire world for the sake of man’s soul, then how dear it is to Him! God has much more love than all of us combined.

– *I’ve lived my life and only in old age did I find a book about God’s will. I read it every day and learn from it.*

– Yes, you can read so many wonderful books, but accomplishing all this takes a lot of effort and work. The Holy Fathers wrote all their books from spiritual experience. How much of their experience can you pass through yourself, how much of it can you perceive? That’s not easy, either. It often happens that you read something, and then decades pass until those words reach your heart. If your soul is healthy, and you have humility, the Lord will heal these passions in due time. We were born passionate, and our passionate heart remains until the end of our days. But Christ came to earth and gave us new feelings, a new birth. The seed of Christ is infused into us, and we have a new life, a new heart. This feeling of love for God should override the passionate heart and drown it out. However, if we lack love for God, we will be living by our passions. We will only realize that God exists, it will only be in our mind. Therefore, as soon as God’s grace goes away, all our passion immediately comes out. The Holy Fathers always said, “Lord, just don’t let us die in our sins. May Your love always cover us.” They were always afraid of losing God’s grace.

We must know our human nature. We constantly have to warm up our heart for the feelings of God to be there. If they are not there, we’ll be living by our passions. Ecclesiastes says that we are given time not to think, but to live. Father Cyril taught, “Be little fools for Christ. Take many things easier, don’t get hung up on them. Don’t even pay attention to the evil that is in you.” And I tell you: take a simpler approach to many things that are inside you and around you. Everything that is done according to God’s will, happens by itself. And grace itself quietly and peacefully comes into the human soul. This requires madness – let many things pass only through the mind, don’t let them pass into the heart, otherwise you may get damaged. If you constantly endure even the evil that is in you, then you will be

damaged by it. That's not humility but false humility. Humility is "Yes, this is what I am, but I don't want to be like this," and you move away from this. That is, you ignite your heart with hostility to the evil that is in you, and at the same time with the hope that God sees your desire and, when necessary, He will fulfil it. At any age, no matter how long you live, you must have a healthy soul and mustn't be nervous and anxious. That's a wrong dispensation, we must move away from it, otherwise the devil will catch us in everything.

– *And how do we get rid of this tense state?*

– Just don't cycle through unnecessary problems in your heart. Cross yourself and move on. Don't engage in dialogue with those thoughts and feelings. Feelings can be bubbling up in your heart, but if your mind doesn't connect to them – that is, you don't want that, let them bubble. One thing is required of you - not to live by it and not to think about it. That's exactly why fools for Christ were blessed. You have to feel like you're travelling on a train: you are sitting down and looking out the window – villages, forests, fields, people are flashing by, but the train is going, and you're just sitting in the wagon. This state of mind should be both in relation to the world around you and to what is happening inside you. Passions are bubbling, and you are sitting in your wagon. Well, what can you do? Just hang tight. There's no escape from yourself. It's clear that this is suffering, but you have to treat it calmly. If you obsess over this, you won't help yourself, but will only get sick. There will always be difficulties: sorrows, illnesses, and slander. And problems in a person's soul are due to disobedience to God's will, and they begin in a person's mind, when the mind begins to be enslaved by something. If some passions arise in the heart, then usually you can deal with it when your mind is with God. But if your mind is clogged with some person, event or experience, then that's already disobedience, which results in a fall and loss of God's love.

December 4, 2008. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Nine

Now I want to talk to you about memory. I understand it as an imprinting of some image within us. Thus, years after meeting a person, when remembering them, an image of them is formed in the mind: their face, figure, voice, intonation, gait are remembered. The mind mainly imprints external appearance. Why can't a person see the soul of another person? Because if the soul is in love, if it's sensitive, then it must leave within itself the image of the human soul. Holy Scripture says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). This can be said about the Holy Fathers who achieved purity of heart, but first we begin to see the souls of his kind and angels. In the heart of a person who lives in a Christian way, according to love, to the law of God, another person will certainly be imprinted with his soul. At the liturgy, we come into contact with the angelic world. Holy Fathers say that when approaching God, the first thing that is revealed to us is that we begin to see with our inner eyes the souls of people and the angelic world. Not God, but souls and angels. That's the most important thing – that God reveals to man his soul. Only when our sins are revealed to us can we repent, correct ourselves and be saved. That's what happens when God comes into our soul. Then the devil cannot enter inside, so he comes only from the outside – through thoughts. If we accept them, dreaminess will appear in us. For example, in a dream we see figures, faces, feels fear or, conversely, unnatural joy, and, by plunging into them, we come into contact with the devil. God and the devil can be revealed through visions of the same bodies or objects, but the devil always reveals himself through fantasy, but God reveals Himself through spirit. Fantasy concentrates attention on what is seen and on feelings, and the spirit concentrates on the depth of content and purpose. The devil imprints himself in the imagination, while God, angels, and the souls of other people are imprinted in the very soul of man.

Human memory can be divided into memory of the mind and memory of the heart. Dreams originate in the memory of the mind.

Seeing the spiritual world refers to the memory of the heart because love is in the heart, and only thoughts belong to the mind. A thought arouses love, sets the heart in motion, which is why the heart begins to see. Therefore, in prayer, it's firstly the heart that has to participate. If our heart connects with the Heavenly world, which during the Divine Liturgy descends here on earth, the service is not in vain for us. If the heart remains without feelings, then time has passed in vain. The soul must penetrate into another world through love.

At the funeral service, we sing about eternal memory. Eternal memory belongs to God. We ask God to capture, remember and have this person in Himself, in His memory. The name contains the essence of man, and we ask that the person be in the memory of God, in God Himself. It's interesting that when you pray, perform a memorial service and look at the icon of the Saviour, then in His eyes you see not only His gaze from Heaven, but also the gaze of those who have gone to another world, who are imprinted in His memory, because they are there, with Him, in His love. In this gaze is the whole of God's world. Through God, His memory and in the Jesus Prayer, we communicate not only with Christ, but also with everyone who has left this world and with those who still live in it and are in the love of God. That is why the Lord in the liturgy calls us to be in unity with all who live in the spirit of love, in the spirit of Christ. Only the spirit of pride contradicts the spirit of God; it's rejected from the love and memory of God. And the book of life is the memory of God. If we have humility and love, we are with God and in God – both those on earth and those who have left this world.

I also want to talk to you about the events taking place in our world. Everything in this world happens according to God's providence. The Lord has never left and will not leave our world, He knows about everything. He cannot help but know because He created this world, which will come to an end in due time. The world will end due to spiritual reasons. Man will step away from God and cease to be a man because there will be no love in him, then the end will come. Ask more often, "Lord, what do You want?" Never stop exploring God's will. Crisis brings great sorrow to families and people in general.

Family people have to raise their children and feed their family, but there is no work and low wages. Those are big worries.

Let's look at a few moments of this crisis. Firstly, the world that we live in is already united – one country depends on another. Previously, everyone could exist on their own, but now we see that the crisis that began in America has swept the whole world, and everyone feels that we are connected by economic threads. Secondly, the coming sorrows should have pushed Christians to self-deepening. The Lord came to earth and showed the way to Heaven, which lies through Golgotha, through sorrow. Without sorrows, no one will ascend to Heaven. We have to accept sorrows correctly and use them for good. If we begin to worry and get nervous, we won't change the situation, but will only harm ourselves. In such situations, we need to rely not on ourselves, but only on God. For people who are not believers and are subject to passions, the coming tribulations lead them to an even worse state. A crisis wave of robberies and thefts has passed through the world – they are beginning to take away food and things from those who still have something. If such sorrows increase, then aggression in the world will begin to increase. Those are my thoughts, maybe I'm wrong in some ways.

We perceive other people not only with our external senses, but also with our heart. It's very dangerous for the soul to put a stamp on someone, like "this one is bad, and that one is good." because everyone has their own weaknesses. If your soul makes a judgment about someone, and you have hostility in your heart, then you won't love that person. And if you don't have love, you are already falling away from God because He has love even for the worst person – that is His nature. The stamp of hostility destroys love, so try not to judge anyone. Archbishop Vasily (Krivoshin) didn't call people 'bad', he just used the word 'eccentric', and always without evil. Thus, he did not offend the person who might have been bad; he did not break the love within himself, and the spirit of God remained in him. As I've noticed from my experience, when you see something embarrassing or bad in someone and pass a sentence on them, you imprint this image of the person in your memory, put a stamp on them and from

this you get damaged. Later you come across them again, you want to love them, but instead of love you already have hostility in your heart. Try not to put such sentences, such seals on anyone. It's better not to analyse or discuss anyone, and if you see some kind of weakness or evil, accept it, like "That's what he is, maybe I'm even worse..." Don't characterize or condemn anyone for some kind of passion – otherwise, you'll be left without God. I wanted to tell you about this state of delusion because it concerns primarily monks. Why? Because they live in a hostel and see each other.

You are spinning around in a hostel in your little world, and if you feel hostility towards anyone, then you'll have problems not with this person but with God. You will go to services and receive Holy Communion, but you will not receive love from the sacraments. Divine love and energy enter into the human soul only when it is godlike. Open the Gospel, look at Christ: when He was nailed to the Cross, whom did He curse? No one. Whom did He condemn? No one. He only said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do." (Luke 23:34), He had no bitterness.

I like one moment in the Gospels – Peter's Denial. When Christ said, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night", Peter replied to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be." And then Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." But he spoke more vehemently, "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all said likewise (Mark 14:27-31). And when Christ was led away to the Sanhedrin trial, a certain servant girl, seeing Peter as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him." But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I don't know Him." 58 And after a little while another saw him and said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said

to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:56-62). Before that, he did not remember His words, but when they looked eyes, he remembered. This look of Christ is not a look of condemnation, but a look of memory and love, which said that the Apostle Peter was in God's memory, mind, and heart. He was weeping bitterly and left – that was his repentance. That's a very interesting moment in the Gospel, and the Apostle Luke captured it.

Such nuances say a lot. When you start to get involved in the hustle and bustle, doing something around the house, you feel how little by little in these vain affairs you get attached to earthly things. You start to like them, and you already feel your dependence on them – this is how any passion works. The same thing happened with Judas Iscariot – little by little the passion of love of money grew in him. Was he stupid? Didn't his soul feel God? It felt and knew everything. But like it or not, in mind, you understand that you don't need anything and nothing is holding you here – you'll die anyway and go to Heaven, and here everything is temporary, but no. When some passions catch you, it's in your heart. You already like it and start living it. And you can no longer say, "I don't want this." The heart says the opposite, "No, dear, you'll be here on earth." That's why Saint John Chrysostom said, "Lord, don't let us remain here on earth." Passions pull us to earth and hold us, and we can't tear ourselves away from them with our feelings. The same thing happened with Judas. He slowly became addicted to money – he would walk around with a container and collect money. And when the woman came with an alabaster jar of ointment and washed Christ's feet, Judas said that he could sell all this and get three hundred denarii – that is, he began to convert everything into money (Mark 14:3-5), (John. 12:5). The Divine faded into the background, so he began to see the whole world through the prism of money. When he betrayed Christ and the guards took Him, Judas walked away, fell and cried, that is, he was perfectly aware of what he had done and that Christ is God. Then he took this money and, in such despondency and sadness, brought it and threw it in the temple (Matthew 27:3). It's interesting that in great repentance the soul gives up everything and

in great despondency it no longer needs anything, despite passions. But repentance returns a man to God, gives them hope, but despondency cuts off everything and brings death.

Firstly, the Gospel is important for us for its deep meaning, the transmission of those internal spiritual states that people and the Saviour Himself had. The Gospel is not only evangelism but also a teaching about That life, about how to be saved, how to ascend There and what we need to be. The Gospel reveals the right state of the soul and the wrong one. There are commandments in the Holy Scriptures, a kind of spiritual formulas. If the Lord spoke only in formulas and didn't reveal their essence, then we couldn't accommodate and understand them because the interpretation of formulas can be different. But the Lord specifically says what He means. When heretics begin to arbitrarily interpret the Holy Scriptures, they begin to contradict its context and spirit. The Holy Fathers always revealed all the commandments based on the states that the Saviour Himself spoke about, and fulfilled this with their lives. These are not some made-up interpretations. Sacred Tradition is the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures by the Holy Fathers, which leads a person to God. And this meeting with God takes place inside a person when they unite with Christ in spirit, and acquire the correct inner state revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, prayer includes not only reading evening and morning prayers, attending services and the Jesus Prayer. The most important task of prayer is the entry of God into us – that is, the achievement of a state of humility. This state of humility can be twofold: tenderness or dryness. A visit from God can be in tears and in joy, or maybe without visible feelings. But we know that the state of God's presence is always a state of peace and tranquillity. Therefore, both at the liturgy and at the evening service we always say, "Again and again, in peace let us pray to the Lord." The Church does not speak about a state of humility, but about acquiring a peaceful spirit. And if God wants to visit a person and give them something they need (tears, joy, dryness). If you don't have this peaceful state, you won't unite with God. Why does the Church Charter say that if a person is irritated with someone and doesn't forgive them, he cannot receive communion?

Because the state of their soul is not peaceful, so they can't connect with God. Peace of the soul is the basic state that a person has to acquire. It's not for nothing that the Holy Fathers said, "If you are praying and someone comes to you, then leave the prayer and receive the guest, for love is higher than prayer." You'll break away from prayer, but your conscience will remain peaceful and calm. If you don't accept the one who has come, then your conscience will become worried, you'll become restless, and until you repent, correct yourself, and understand what the problem is, God won't come into your soul.

– *If I'm physically tired and feel indifference to everything, and at the same time my soul feels peaceful, is this humility dry?*

– In this state, the soul is calm, peaceful, but doesn't experience feelings of joy, any kind of tenderness, it's simply peaceful. The main thing for us is to acquire the state in which God can enter the soul. How did the Holy Fathers live? They were on cloud nine with God's love, and they could hold on to this love. They went into the desert for this and lived by this. But we cannot hold back this love of God, so the Lord covers it. This doesn't mean that a person doesn't have love – it exists, humility itself has love in itself, but the manifestation of this love will not be in the soul, there will be a state of some dryness, insensibility.

– *I don't feel the joy of the holidays, although my soul is peaceful.*

– Archimandrite Kirill (Pavlov) was once asked, "Father, should I take communion on the feast day of St. Sergius of Radonezh? There's so much fuss, so many worries, so many people in the hotel, I have to feed everyone. I have to go to the early liturgy, sleep for three or four hours and get up, and after the liturgy I'm back in the hustle and bustle." And the father said, "Take communion, be sure to take communion, where there is a lot of grace, there are many temptations."

– *But what should I do if it's Easter, but I don't have Easter inside, although I hold no enmity against anyone?*

– Look into your soul more often and longer. If you say there's no Easter, it means something's wrong there. You won't even notice how some thought will slip through and cause trouble. I'm telling you from my experience and from the experience of the Holy Fathers: if you are

reprimanded, offended, or something else happens, especially during the liturgy, when you are in such a concentrated, airy state, and they begin to tug and distract you from all sides, then in your soul, whether you like it or not, a defensive response arises. The right thoughts of protection from this person appear, like he's this, and he's that. This may all be correct, the person is really wrong, he offended you or makes a remark that is not to the point, but you have already lost peace and will remain in such an unpeaceful state until you replace these correct thoughts with foolish for Christ ones. You just need to laugh at yourself a little, justify your brother, and cover his weakness with your love. But you carry out an obedience on Easter and, willy-nilly, come into contact with people, who don't let you remain in an airy state, they tug at you all the time, they make your thoughts earthly all the time, and frustration appears in your soul because you want to pray, but you can't. The lack of foolish for Christ thoughts leads to the fact that the soul becomes constrained, offended, and not saturated with love. These are spiritual laws and human nature.

– *Father, but if someone has an offence, but repents of it, can they receive communion?*

– Yes, they can. The main thing is that a person, at least in their mind, has the intention to renounce this evil. Resentment may remain in the heart for a long time, but the mind can immediately be cleared of one desire. If the evil thought doesn't change, then it's your will that doesn't allow you to repent. Those who repent at least mentally receive salvation. When I come to give communion to old people, I ask if they are angry at someone or something before God. Of course, they don't remember a lot, but if they say at least, "I repent" and admit their sins, they unite with Christ. And if they insist that they did nothing wrong, then their mind remains unchanged and there is no repentance. There is repentance of the heart and repentance of the mind, but in any case, first there is a change in the mind.

Let's remember the life of the Venerable Mary of Egypt. A miracle happened in her life - she could not enter the temple. She felt the power of God on herself with her sinfulness and prayed to the Mother of God to be saved. Look, this is an interesting point - a person wants to know

the will of God about herself, which she did. She not only repented, she heard the will of God and understood how she could be saved. But besides changing with our mind, we also have to change with our heart, which requires a lot of labour and tears. That's why she heard God's voice, "Go beyond the Jordan into the desert, and there you will be saved." As the Lord told her, so she did. Unfortunately, when people come to confession, there is mainly repentance of the mind and rarely repentance of the heart. We both understand that today they are repenting, and tomorrow they'll go back to making the same sins, small or large – it doesn't matter. There are few people who come to repent from the heart – that is, who change completely. They remain in such a passionate state mainly because of their cowardice, because of this depraved world. At the end of the 19th century, Saint Theophan the Recluse said that the one who preserves chastity, that is, the one who marries in virginity, will be saved. So it is here: the one who brings repentance will be saved. This is a sign of the end times. The Holy Scriptures say that in the last time, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:21). He who calls on the name of God always repents and realizes his own badness. A proud person, the one who rejects God, considers himself good. There's a big problem with intelligent people coming to confession. They say, "I didn't rob, I didn't kill, everything's fine with me. I have no problems and no sins." And the priest begins to collect their sins: "Did you do this? And this?" That's because of the sin of pride. The main thing is that a person realizes and feels his sins and wants to change, so that he understands the difference between himself and God: God is light, but he is not, he is sinful. And when a person doesn't feel it, that's the worst thing.

– *How do I learn to be attentive to people, that is, as you said, learn to imprint a person with my soul? How can I sympathize with their problems not only with my mind, but also with my soul?*

– When a person has repentance and love, then the soul is already alive. The soul always suffers from repentance, and it cannot pass by another person without compassion; it imprints it on itself. And if the soul is restless, lazy, it can't imprint another in itself, it remains indifferent. Remember when we said that prayer should be alive? I

don't just pray the Jesus Prayer – I pray, pray, but it gives nothing, my soul is cold. It all depends on a person's soul and how alive it is. If there's something wrong in your soul, you will truly be indifferent. St. John Chrysostom's "Sermon on the Priesthood" says that the priest at the Last Judgment will testify that this person repented of his sins. The soul of a priest experiences and imprints the repentance of another person, and this memory of experience or pain remains in their heart. So it is here. If you don't worry, if this excitement doesn't happen inside you, then this person remains unattended, you don't let him into your heart. If there is at least some excitement in your depths, then your prayer has reached God, because your heart is compassionate. But if you just pass by somebody indifferently, like "Well, that person feels bad because they lost their job. What can I do? Everyone has their own problems..." – that's a sign of a dead heart and an empty prayer.

In the book *Spiritual Meadow*, Rev. John Moschus describes the life of one ascetic – he went into the desert and no one could visit him. One woman really wanted to get to him and finally managed to get there. When the ascetic saw her, he exclaimed, "I pray to God that He will erase you from my memory." From this, she became very despondent and, in such sadness, she went to the bishop and told him everything. And the bishop answered her, "Know that he prayed to God that there would be no imaginations about you in his mind. But your pain he imprinted in his heart, your image of the soul remained inside him." That was the case. Therefore, if you perceive another person correctly, if you have compassion for them, then their soul will be imprinted in your heart, and from that your soul will be alive. The Holy Fathers write that a spiritual father or a hegumen always has to value the renunciation of the world by his novices because they gave up everything: their family and all earthly goods. Seeing their sacrifice, he will cover many of their infirmities. Since they broke away from home, the elders must love them so that they feel like they are part of the family. If the novice doesn't feel such warmth, his heart may be damaged.

– *Father, how does it happen so that I live, work to the best of my ability, pray and empathise with people, but still I myself remain in the first place? How to put the Lord in the first place?*

– That's the whole problem – we are selfish. It's expressed in many ways, primarily in the fact that a person begins to please their passions to feel good. Therefore, in the practice of the Church, there is asceticism, that is, renunciation of some material goods to destroy one's egoism and lust. All the Holy Fathers were ascetics and always had renunciation. And if there is no asceticism in your life, no self-denial, then it's clear that your "I" will come first, and only then God.

– *What else do we have to renounce?*

– Comfort. You get used to it, and it becomes a necessary and integral part of your life. In the life of Elder Hadji-Georgis the Athonite, it is told how he recruited novices to himself: one of the obediences was to never sweep the floor or clean the cell. Saint Nilus of Sora has something similar: the brethren brought gates, and placed them. Then they started looking at it and admiring it. When he saw them admiring their work, he told them to slightly damage the gates. The brethren bent them and knocked on them so that they didn't close properly any more. "Now it's good", he said (there's nothing left to admire). Nothing should distract the soul from the main thing – a conversation with God. Salvation follows the royal path, when we do what we can and a little more than that. Then it becomes a plus, and the soul grows. Few can undertake great asceticism, and at the same time, one can't live waddlingly, because laziness is a state of delusion.

– *If I pick on people, is this no longer love?*

– You have to figure out why you quibble: out of hostility or on business. The very word "to quibble" means that you have some kind of hostility, which is a sinful state. If you mean that you are simply reprimanding someone on business, then it's fine, and there is no sin in it. But if two people are doing the same thing with slight mistakes, and you don't say anything to one of them but scold the other, then it means that you treat one of them with hostility. If you decide to make a remark, you have to do it to both. And you also need to take into account whether the person can bear your reprimand. If not, then it's better not to do it. And you should never do it out of hostility.

– *Venerable Ambrose of Optina said that spiritual life is based on repentance. No repentance - no spiritual life. The Gospel begins with the*

words, “Repent!”, that is, in the first place is not love, not humility, but repentance. Please explain why this is so.

– Repentance is change. Man is sinful by nature. When the Lord came, He gave new aspirations, goals, images to which the human soul should strive and to which it should be oriented. When a person lives incorrectly, they have to change to get closer to these new images, to Christ. Humility is the result, the fruit of repentance. The first movement should be a change – that is, a person must make some effort, strain his will to correct himself. Therefore, what God values most is not even our good feelings, but precisely our will and aspiration. Remember what I told you about Monk Augustine? When a woman began to pester him, he pushed her away and threw himself into the sea from the shore. And a miracle happened: he stood on the water and started walking on it. It’s clear that there were passions in his heart, but at the same time he told himself, “I’ll die, but I won’t sin.” That is, for him, love for God was greater than life itself. God can be present in a person without any obvious signs. We live like everyone else, but when we’re faced with a choice – to commit a sin or go against it – that’s when God reveals Himself in a person. If a man goes against sin, then the Lord saves him and gives him His grace. And if a man goes to sin, then God moves away.

January 25, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Ten

Every time we get together, I try not to put my words in the form of moralizing. I don’t want to teach you, I just tell about my worries and my inner world. It’s rather a conversation than moral teaching. But when you ask your questions, I answer to them on the basis of only my experience, however, some question may be answered differently. Today, I also want to talk about different states of the human soul. Not everything in life is always good and smooth. Very often the soul finds itself in emptiness, in a state abandoned by God. Hell is always emptiness and separation from God, and love is unity.

If we talk about carnal love, then this is marital union; about love as friendship (agape) – this is unity between brothers and sisters; about Divine love is the unity of man with God. Everything in this life is built on unity. Where there is love, there is always unity, an internal unification of people. And, conversely, when a man loses the love and grace of God, separation occurs. Then, even if a man does something – prayer, bows, good deeds, lives in a monastery or in the world as a Christian –, he doesn’t feel the fullness of connection and internal unity but emptiness. And when people leave this life for the Other World and find themselves in hell, they experience precisely the state of loneliness. Saint Ephraim the Syrian says that the biggest torment for a man is the lack of opportunity to connect with God. From this, he suffers mental torment that goes into eternity. One of the main signs of hell is precisely the state of emptiness and loneliness. Each of you has experienced this hellish state. The Lord allows such internal suffering because of sins or for admonition, or for another reason. Now I’d like to talk about loneliness – about this state of soul. What is it like, when does it arise, why, how to endure it and to what extent?

There is such a state as lightness of the soul, in the bad sense of the word. Because when the soul is in God, when it’s in motion, in work, when it loves, then it’s heavy and full. The heart of the soul, as it the focus of all passions in a man, contains his entire life, like a sponge, not only good, but also bad moments: grievances, memories, and passions. They all remain there and are covered with grace. When grace comes to a person’s soul, it weighs it down and doesn’t allow all this chaos – passions, heartfelt feelings – to float to the top, and they sink into it. As soon as the grace leaves, a surge of all the bad things that exist inside begins. When the soul acquires sinful lightness, what happens? First of all, thoughts begin to overcome. Usually, when thoughts are joined by feelings, daydreaming immediately appears. The soul works like this: some moment imprinted in the soul, once experienced by a person, can be experienced again after many years.

For what reason and for what purpose is this happening? The reasons are different. One of them is human sins. When a person falls into some kind of sin, the grace from this malice leaves the person’s

soul. Another reason is the state of delusion, which happens from physical laziness. It can also appear when someone imposes their will on others or is imposed. These moments are very difficult because it's almost impossible to fight them, unless you abolish the lovely state of mind. Then the person begins to come to their senses. Their soul is burdened with good, kind thoughts and feelings, which they begin to cultivate in themselves through an effort of will.

Let's say you get the flu. On the first day, the temperature is high – you seem to be falling through somewhere, and then, when the temperature is still high, and you are already rested, well-slept, more or less on your feet, you begin to feel sorry for yourself, saying that you want to sleep a bit more, but your sleep is already light, superficial. You realize everything, and dreaminess appears. All the bad things hidden in the storehouse of the soul come out. This happens when the body is given excessive rest. The book "Lives of Athonite Ascetics of the 19th Century" tells how Elder Daniel was asked, "Tell me, Father, how long can a person remain in a state of contemplation – a day, two, three, six? They say you can't do this because it damages your soul." And he answered, "Yes, you cannot contemplate for more than three days because laziness comes, a person must move, but for the perfect there are no such limits." You see, even Holy Fathers in a state of prayer need movement. And even prayer, contemplation, and connection with God are interrupted so as not to fall into the other extreme – laziness. The soul can very quickly move from one state to another: from a state of Divine heaviness and saturation – to a state of sinful, empty lightness, from which a 'kaleidoscope' begins to spin in a person's head. The Holy Fathers experienced all these conditions. The mistakes that they made during prayer and deeds are all known. I told you last time, and I'll tell you this time: when the soul endures something, suffers for something, it always experiences profit, enrichment by God's grace.

When a person gets to the Holy Mountain, he finds himself in more privileged monastic conditions, and this vain world begins to gradually move away. The soul is cleared of these thoughts and begins to calm down. The thoughts with which a person lived go

away, and something else has to come in return – you have to live with something, be satiated with something. If God's love and grace have not yet come into a person's soul, and he doesn't live by this, then a vacuum arises – a state as if you are going crazy. You understand everything, but there is nothing to live with – emptiness. A person works, performs some obediences, but it turns out that in the desert a person can be damaged more than living in the world. Why so? Because the heart hasn't yet become attached to God, doesn't yet live in unity with Him. It will touch Him for a moment and then fall away.

Last time we talked about prayer – that it should be warm, real, and alive. Prostrations, fasting and mechanical prayer are not enough – the soul has to feel God, the heart has to participate in prayer. And if it doesn't, then damage occurs. It can happen anywhere: in the world, in a monastery, in the desert. It's often more useful for a beginner to have some passions in the soul, even unclean ones, and to endure them, fight them, than to remain in emptiness because when the soul endures something, even itself with its sinful inclinations, it still lives. But when it has nothing to endure, it starts to die. Therefore, the Holy Fathers say that a person who has gone prematurely into the desert becomes like a wild beast. They seem to be struggling, reaching out to God, but their heart is lifeless because it hasn't experienced anything. Their passions remain unhealed, they are just hidden. And as long as there is no subject for irritation, a person sees themselves as a saint because they are calm. However, as soon as they leave those conditions, passions will immediately begin to come out. The Holy Fathers write that God's providence is done only in patience. No patience – no providence of God. That's true. But patience should also have its own measure – God's measure (when a person is given what they can bear). I've already said that many problems are caused by ourselves. The Lord doesn't give us many crosses, we hang them on ourselves: either we begin to worry about everything, or we take on feats beyond our strength. As a result, we break down: either we become embittered, or we develop suspiciousness as mental damage. As a result, the soul starts to function and perceives the world around it incorrectly and feels incorrectly about itself. The cross that the Lord

gives everyone is always within their strength. It's always a saving cross, which always gives strength to a person's soul. Even those passions that the Lord doesn't completely heal, and that remain in our souls, but with which we struggle, benefit us. If we reject them from himself, we always gain them, we gain Christ.

It's worse if a person doesn't tolerate anything, if there is emptiness inside them: they experience neither internal nor external sorrows. This vacuum, this silence of feelings, is very dangerous. If a person doesn't pray and hasn't yet learned living prayer, then, in essence, they have nothing to live with. They begin to get carried away by everything that comes their way: whatever the devil puts in front of them, they begin to grind. The soul is structured in the same way as the body. We drink and eat, and our body digests and turns all this into energy, without which we can't move. So the soul has to live by something, grind something: a flow of events, information, thoughts, and feelings. It has to grind them and cannot live without this work. It grinds all this into energy: good or bad, God's or the opposite. When the soul acquires humility, the grace of God can enter into it, and it begins to live by this. But the soul that has lost God, that cannot live with God, begins to become addicted to some kind of addiction. This is natural because the heart is alive, and when it doesn't receive Divine love and thus cannot unite with Christ, it begins to seek unity in another. The soul cannot exist without unity – this is its nature. So if a monk doesn't connect with God, then appears deviation in the other direction – spiritual delusion.

It happens that a person goes to a monastery and doesn't live in any way like a monk, which is why he becomes ugly, and his soul gets distorted. And people in the world turn out to be much healthier and more loving than that person living in a monastery. Why? The reason is simple – his soul is not satisfied with God and begins to grind the worldly. It becomes sick and earthly, though it doesn't live in the world. That's a damaged soul. It's wrong to say that it's better to be a bad monk than to live in the world. No, the damage in the monastery is much worse than in the world. Nature is the same for everyone. Man has to live in unity, he needs love, and cannot live without it. I've spoken about this many times, and I will repeat it again.

Let's talk more about the human will. One day, not far from our skete, linden trees were being sawed. A car then brought these branches to the landfill and unloaded them there. I selected the best ones for firewood, pulled them out, folded them neatly, called a priest I knew and told him, "I have firewood for you, come and collect it, it's all for you. But please do come, as after all, they are lying on the road, not on the territory of the skete." Yet, he couldn't come right away. In the evening, a passenger car pulled up, and all the best things I had selected were loaded and taken away. I looked at all that and lost peace. I was working for a long time, called the father, and then someone I didn't know arrived, took everything and took it away right in front of my eyes. A day has passed, the second, but still no peace. It seems that with my mind I understood everything, that I didn't need it, but my will didn't want to accept what happened because when you decide in your heart, you can't run away from it, it's inside you. If you decide that it should be this way, but it turns out differently, not your way, then internal heartbreak begins. The heart is already addicted to these desires, or, better said, to self-will. I already told you that you must always make sure that your desires remain at the level of thought! If you want to acquire or do something, let there be such a thought, but if it connects with a feeling, with the heart, you begin to live by it, you begin to dissolve in your desire, and here your "I" appears. The Lord will break these desires, no matter how good they may be. And then you grab your head: what is it in me? Is it greed, or something else, why is there sorrow in the heart? But this is your will. This is why you need a spiritual father or some kind of superior to prevent you from fulfilling your will. I wanted to remind you of this.

Last time we talked about crisis, I want to say something more on this topic. The Holy Scripture says that due to the cooling of love and faith, the antichrist must come to the world. Before the coming of the antichrist, the monetary unit will be abolished. To abolish money, chaos has to be brought into the world. Throughout human history, crises have arisen, but they were not so noticeable because states were not so dependent on each other. In every state, there was either a drought or other disasters, and people themselves experienced their

own crises. But now that's not the case. We all depend on each other. If earlier world crises were resolved by stabilizing the dollar or some kind of political relations and everything was normalized, then in the future there must be a crisis from which humanity will not be able to emerge. This crisis will entail general chaos in all spheres: financial, production, and sales. If the Lord extends our days for repentance and by His mercy, then the current crisis won't be the last and everything will return to normal. But if it's the last one, then the chaos will be spreading further and further. Only against this background of general demoralization can the antichrist appear. When everything is smooth and all government structures are working, he will never come. This thought occurred to me, and I decided to share it with you. If not this time, then in the future, a crisis will arise from which humanity will not emerge. It will lead to pestilence, famine, and war. These are earthly events, but they are connected with our spiritual state.

I was just there when it became known that women were allowed to enter Mount Athos. Our elder then immediately said that just as in Russia in 1917, there was a revolution for the sins of the people, so now the Lord can allow this for our sins, and we'll have to accept it with humility. And he gave a prayer rope to everyone so that the Lord would have mercy and forgive our sins. What is happening in the country or the world is not only the problem of this country or the world, it is our problem, our repentance, our soul. I have recalled the words of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov. Even then, in the middle of the 19th century, he wrote about the impoverishment of monasticism, "which is a barometer to the entire Christian society," about the 'widespread abandonment of internal work' and the punishment coming to Russia. Inner work is the union of a person with God, the acquisition of love and the grace of God. When this doesn't happen, when a person's heart doesn't contain God, then begin punishments as admonitions.

– *We constantly come into contact with the situations you talked about (firewood). So how should we get out of them? After all, a person cannot be completely indifferent to everything?*

– You need to have practical experience in everything; I mean the spiritual experience, not just life experience. You have many worries

because you take everything on yourself. When you are blessed to do something, you already have your own desire for everything to be good and beautiful. But in fact, you should do it slowly. As it turns out, so it turns out. You shouldn't have your own desires. There is no need to bring in any of your experiences or feelings.

– *Father, but all the same, this attachment to things will appear. And if you approach it correctly and understand your mistake, will there be any benefit? After all, if there are no temptations, then how can one be saved?*

– Well, yes. What you can't understand through the mind, you will understand through your hands and legs. Therefore, it's better to live according to the Holy Father: to stay away from dangers. But, once you've got into trouble, then all that's left is patience. It's alright when you get into a difficult situation, get irritated, but still endure it. But if you like it, it's also worse. If the soul is healthy, it takes care of itself on the level of mind and own feelings and doesn't follow its passions. Passions may tug at it, disturb it, but it's still strong. If passions are given free rein, the devil will never miss it, and a hole will form in the soul. Saint Isaac the Syrian wrote that soul damage manifests itself first of all in evil thoughts. Evil thoughts are cunning and deceitful. A person does some kind of right trick to justify themselves and satisfy their passion. When such a hole is formed, the devil gains power over the soul, and the soul experiences pleasure not so much from the passion itself, but from these evil thoughts. Saint Isaac also said that the first sign of the holiness of the soul is the purity of the inner person. That is, when evil thoughts cease to act within us. Not passions, but evil thoughts. In the sacrament of baptism, there is a prayer for the expulsion of evil spirits. It contains the following words, "Expel from him/her every evil and unclean spirit that is hiding and nesting in his/her heart."

– *Father, excuse me, but if this hole, this state has already formed in my soul, how do I get out of it?*

– By enduring it. That's why God gives us illnesses. When the enemy starts attacking with such thoughts, then you are all jumpy, your entire nervous system is in motion. Physical illnesses can also

be a salvation, a rest for the soul. And if not completely, then to some extent they weaken those thoughts. Many fathers said when they got ill, “the Lord has visited me for my sins”. And they are right – that’s not false humility or a stock phrase, but it is so. I was once told, “Father, drink this and this, and you won’t be sick.” That’s not right. Physical illnesses mainly come from nervous overload, and the body itself resolves this situation. The Lord gave the human soul some kind of obedience, some certain laws. They are in the human soul by nature, and the devil is trying with all his might to destroy them, but the thing is that they can’t be destroyed directly because it’s nature. This is why he attacks indirectly, like “Look how much you pray and fast, but you get nothing from it – it’s a meagre thing. Try this instead, and you’ll see how much strength and love you’ll immediately have.” The person feels something fishy, but begins to deceive themselves. First of all, comes the thought, “Well, a little bit won’t hurt”, and that’s it – the person begins to live by it, gets damaged directly. But this happens to believers and conscientious people who have some kind of inner laws, while non-believers are like children of nature: “As life goes, so it goes.”

– *Father, you said that sometimes we hang crosses on ourselves that the Lord did not give us. Explain that, please.*

– That’s about obedience: don’t go where you’re not asked to go.

– *But what if I already got there?*

– You’ll get damaged. Each person can only bear their own burden. And if you start gaining too much, then what happens to you? What is the first sign of damage? Delusion (from Church Slavonic: прелестъ [prélest’]). This word is translated into Russian as deception in the highest degree. The Holy Fathers never spoke about lofty matters, about what will happen to us when we leave this life, how we will be enjoying it, and so on. But if they spoke about it, they did it briefly and did not go into detail because it’s not very helpful for the soul. They always talked about sins. They would go into the desert, asceticise in monasteries and, first of all, get to know themselves. If they came across a person who saw himself as so exalted, then they saw he was in spiritual delusion. But if one all the

time shows false humility, beats their chest and says how good they are, this is also delusion, which leads to despondency. You have to accept your badness calmly and bear it as penance, as a cross. This is necessary for your humility, and in due time the Lord Himself will cleanse your soul, give you humility and save you. A man has to realize what he is. Why does the Lord allow some sins? In the lives of the saints, it’s said how many of them fell into sins, great and small, to know themselves. Having realized their own badness, they humbled themselves, and through this, they united with God. Therefore, whenever you take communion, you always have to realize that you are unworthy of the Eucharist, unworthy of this union with God. You don’t have any holiness, thanks to which you could take part in the Eucharist. You receive communion only because of the mercy and love that the Lord shows to man. Remember, we talked about the Schism of the Russian Church? If this schism had not existed, the entire Russian Church would have deviated into delusion and taken the wrong path. This split showed how damaged people’s minds were. By their efforts, deeds and legalism, people believed they were worthy of holiness. In Old Belief, everything is based on rituals. Their pride sticks out very much. All their hope is not in the fact that the Lord is merciful and loving, but in the fact that they make prostrations, read prayers, and fast. But if someone doesn’t perform their rituals, they are sinners and won’t go to heaven.

– *Father, when pilgrims from St. Petersburg come, they say it’s impossible to live there, as if it’s hell.*

– If you don’t live with God, everything will be bad and the whole world around you will be evil. A man not only creates his own world within himself, but also around himself. It was not for nothing that Saint Seraphim of Sarov said, “Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.”

– *Father, our acquaintance, wrote to us. A boy, about four years old, doesn’t speak, doesn’t obey and doesn’t want to take communion. Several people could not bring him to the Eucharist. She asks if there are spiritual reasons for that, maybe the boy requires exorcism? But are such small children allowed to exorcism at all?*

– He doesn't need exorcism, and there is no need to force communion. We once served in white vestments in the Athos metochion in Moscow, and a girl of about six years old was brought to receive communion. When I began to give communion, there was a temptation, and she started to resist. And then the parents came, apologized and explained that she had been in the hospital for a long time, and the doctors there were all in white coats. And she still had this fear and resistance. Then I took her hand and stroked her head – she was a normal girl with no problems.

– *Father, you mentioned different types of love: philia, agape...*

– In the Greek language, there are four words translated into Russian as 'love': eros, philia, agape, and storge (family, kindred love). Yes, 'philia' is friendship. And 'eros' and 'agape' are used differently. When Father Dorimedont was translating the works of Saint Paisios, he often used the word 'eros' for Divine love. Things are not so simple for the Greeks. When he wants to show more sublime feelings, stronger connection, contemplation, and withdrawal into God, he uses the word 'eros'. But the word 'agape' can also mean Divine love.

– *Father, you talked about the state of emptiness and abandonment by God... But I didn't quite understand, do we have to do something to get out of it?*

– Of course, you have to get out of it. It arises because of some of your problems. When everything falls into place, you begin to emerge from this state. And if you have wrong thoughts in your head, then until you put things in order, nothing will help you: neither prostrations nor prayer. An indicator of delusion is one's thoughts. Remember the repentance of John of Kronstadt. When some priest took the bees from the sisters, Father John got angry because of such injustice. And then he saw that he had lost grace, fell to his knees and began to pray, "Lord, forgive me!" First of all, he changed his thought, and already from this his internal state has changed – that is, this graceless heaviness went away. He wrote that he didn't begin the liturgy until he felt united with Christ and reconciled with Him. That's the correct state. When you come to the liturgy, you definitely have to unite with Christ. If this doesn't happen, then everything is in vain. This

connection has its specific laws. There should be no hostility towards neighbours. But if you have even a bit of hostility, you won't unite with God, even if you took communion. If you are offended by someone, then pray and repent, "Lord, forgive me! Let it be as this person wants, but I want to return peace to my soul." If you realize with your mind that resentment and evil are wrong, even though the trashy feeling remains in your soul, the Lord will hear this prayer and unite your soul with Himself. But if you live according to your feelings, then mistrust and suspiciousness appear. I've told you this so many times: don't murmur, don't be angry, even if something is bad with you. You won't feel better from murmuring. On the contrary, you'll get damaged and won't change the situation. If you start to see the bad in everything, you'll get damaged. Always be afraid to analyse and fit everything to your frames. If you start to do that, you'll definitely get damaged. Don't have your own judgement. Don't delve into what people are like because they are who they are, and there is nothing to demand from them. But if you start to reason, like "They are doing the wrong thing, they are saying the wrong thing, they are so stupid", then pride appears, and the Lord moves away. The soul has to be as pure as the driven snow. It should have no negative feelings. Otherwise, it will be such a pain: the years fly by, life, which is not sweet, passes, and as a result you get nothing. When you're young, you can purse your lips and move on, but in old age, you'll no longer remain silent – everything will come out. And if a person lives incorrectly, then in old age, whether you like it or not, the person's incorrect state will come out. In your youth, you can somehow hide your passions and damages, but over the years you can no longer hide them.

– *But what if you kind of forgive a person, but hostility still remains?*

– You see, feelings are one thing, and thoughts are another. If hostility comes, you can't just throw it out of your soul. Moreover, if it was accumulating gradually. You already have an opinion about the person. The main thing is that this hostility doesn't live in the soul for a long time. Don't have a framework of correctness: don't argue about how things should be, what kind of people should be in the monastery and what kind of people shouldn't. The Lord gave them to you so that

you could live with them. You need to humble yourself, and not false humility. First of all, humility consists of maintaining the purity of the soul. If you've messed up, you have to ask for forgiveness. And in other cases – remain silent, just be patient with others. When there is any damage, always look for the cause in the person's thoughts, in their head. A person's health can be determined by their confession and thoughts. Not by passion, but by mind. If one has a healthy mind, he can get out of any hole, from any swamp. In Lyubov Miller's book *Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia: New Martyr of the Communist Yoke*, there's one letter, in which St. Elizabeth says, "As a mother loves her baby more when it's ill, so now, when Russia is in pain, in a state of delusion, God loves it more." A normal, healthy person should have exactly this perception of the world. There should always be compassion in the soul. Not only the desire to protect, but also compassion for the person from whom evil comes. Do you remember the story about St. Silouan the Athonite? They left their cell in a storm, and the ship approached the pier and couldn't dock. A novice stood near Elder Silouan, and the elder asked him, "Are you worried?" – "Yes, father." – "Well, that means they will be saved." That's how Elder Silouan pointed to true and effective prayer, in which the heart participates and which God hears.

– *Do we have to cry about our sins? What if we don't have such feelings?*

– Hegumen Nikon Vorobiov said that the last Christians will be saving themselves by repentance. Repentance has a direct dependence on prayer. If you have living communication with God, you'll always have repentance and cry about your sins, about your inner world because you'll be able to see your soul, which only the Lord can enlighten. Only when God enters inside us, these secrets of the soul are opened, and only then can we cry out to Heaven and pray properly. But when God doesn't come inside us, we don't see our sins. You say you don't feel the weight of your sins, which is a sign that you don't have the living prayer that has to be. Probably your prayer is mechanical, but not the living one that enlightens the soul. Remember, at the end of the liturgy the priest blesses the Gospel and says the words, "For

Thou art our sanctification, and unto Thee do we send up glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages." Then, he comes out with the "Prayer Before the Ambo" – "In peace let us depart." Liturgy is a union with God, with Christ, and always enlightens the human soul. From this comes repentance. The Holy Scripture says that in the last days, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. That is, it's impossible to call on the name of God and repent if the Lord Himself doesn't enter your soul. Therefore, if you have this cry of repentance after the liturgy, regardless of whether you received communion or not, then the liturgy was not in vain for you. If you don't have this state, but just come to sing beautifully and please the worldly people who come to pray, all this passes you by, and it's a pity that you don't get anything from the liturgy itself. That's a mechanical habit. Grace descends, and the Sacrament is performed, but you remain outside of it. The sanctification of a man can only occur when he is in a peaceful, calm state of soul. Words talk about an action that happened. At the beginning of the service, "Blessed is the Kingdom..." – entry of the Holy Spirit, and at the end "For Thou art our sanctification..." – sanctification has occurred. The Church proclaims and confirms that cleansing has occurred, the entry of the Holy Spirit into man. There are no empty words in the liturgy. Another thing is that our souls are not ready to accept this consecration, which is why we remain so empty.

St. John Chrysostom said about the perception of the liturgy: "God forbid that we remain here on earth," that is, in our thoughts, feelings, in everything earthly because Heaven has descended, and you must go there. The monastery should give you freedom and renunciation of all vain things. If the conditions of the monastery in which you live don't give you this freedom, this is wrong. All actions of the supreme authority should be aimed at unloading one to the minimum so that they don't have thoughts about vain things. Another thing is when a person himself begins to get into the mess of the world and begins to take on concerns. You don't have to do that.

– *But how so, father? After all, when we are given an obedience, we are given a concern.*

– You shouldn't be completely freed from all your affairs but unloaded to some minimum. Everything is relative. If you've ever caught such pure prayer as it should be and tasted the state that you should have, you'll never give up on it and will always strive for it. But if you've never experienced this, then you'll be living in your vanity all the time. God can only be known through experience. The unity of man with God is always co-presence. If you haven't experienced this yourself, you won't understand what we're talking about. And when we talk about vanity and everything else, we talk about that shell that sticks to us, about that dust. We shouldn't live by this, but if we do live by this and don't experience any other state, this is wrong.

– *So, it turns out that we all the time fall for vanity. After all, there is no such thing that you've never experienced repentance in your life – all the same it happened once, and you remember it. When you are in the church, everything's fine, but when you go out – you've lost everything and don't know what to do.*

– During my stay on Mount Athos, we were taught obedience. You can become nervous and do your work quickly, but, as I have always told you, you must never lose inner peace. If you've lost inner peace, you've lost everything. Then all this work, this obedience sucks you in, and enthusiasm appears. But if someone grabs you by the hand while working and brings you into your cell, and you immediately disconnect from the work and focus on prayer, then your state is correct.

February 25, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Eleven

Recently I sat and thought about how long we've known each other, and how many things have happened. I'm grateful to you, and I think you are grateful to me. There've been many things in this life: I hurt and misunderstood someone, and you bothered me with your bad actions and thoughts. Why am I saying this? When there's such a relationship, essentially a family one, with love for each other, there will always be leniency and forgiveness. And God grant

you'll always have this spirit of love and mutual understanding because God manifests Himself only in it, and only by this spirit will people know that we belong to Christ. These relations, full of love and forgiveness, should be not only between me and you but also between you in the monastery. A normal monastery should be based precisely on such relationships. Of course, there will be grievances, bad thoughts, and suspiciousness, but there should always be understanding of neighbours and condescension towards them. But if you don't do that, a flaw will appear in their soul, and a distortion of monastic life in yours. Monasteries must live by these principles of all-forgiveness.

Love has its signs. When we talk about love, we understand what kind of feeling it is, but it has many facets. Each facet reveals itself at a certain time under certain circumstances. And then we get to know ourselves – whether we have love or not, and if we do, what kind of love it is. We started talking about love, and I'd like to share with you some of my thoughts and impressions on this topic because love is our goal, our task. We must have it because God is love, and we ourselves are love, as we were created in the image and likeness of God. Our soul is woven from this love.

First, we must know ourselves: how we live, how our life goes and what our "I", our essence, is. When the Holy Fathers went into the desert, they went to know themselves. There, in the desert, they got to know their sins and cried about them. There they learned their essence and the essence of God, His grace, His love. The knowledge of this world, the knowledge of oneself, is divided into three components: the first is the knowledge of one's sinfulness and that which destroys love, tearing a person away from love; the second is what a person lives now; the third is what he should strive for and live by.

Usually, we talked about sins and delusion and touched very little on love itself, our essence, our "I" and the knowledge of God. In our understanding, love is not connected with the flesh. For us, carnal love is something sinful, a force that destroys our spiritual/internal/Divine love.

Spiritual love is connected with prayer because prayer is a chain connecting us with God. Our good deeds and sacrifices also unite us with God. When we unite with God in prayer, we come to know God and feel His love in ourselves and around us. The words in the Liturgy “Lift up your hearts” mean that we need to be there, above, and not here. You feel like your heart is beating and is about to fly out – it’s like holding a bird in your hands, and if you unclench your fingers, it will immediately fly out. Likewise, the soul sometimes feels that it’s about to break out of the body. In a state of love, the soul should feel that earth is not its Motherland or nature. This state is the first sign that you have spiritual love. Your soul wants to embrace everything: the entire creation, the entire cosmos, everything that can be embraced. This mental embrace, the feeling of oneness with everything and everyone, should also have love. This feeling causes tears, both external and internal.

The Gospel says that in the days of the Old Testament love was limited: man loved only his neighbour, his people, and his love did not go beyond these limits. People laid down their souls for their brothers and their people, but no one could lay down their souls for their enemies or the whole world. But Christ gave people a new commandment – the commandment of love. He expanded this love to infinity and gave man an idea of what God’s love is. Saint Maximus the Confessor says that by grace, man is equal to God. That is, when Christ came into the world, He sanctified human nature, and man received the opportunity to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. God’s grace, which entered into man, sanctified him so much that he became equal to God. Deciphering this formula of the saint, you understand that the Lord gave man this love that fills the whole person, after which he no longer has a drop of malice, any kind of partiality or earthliness in himself, is cut off from this and contains absolutely everything. No other state of the human soul can contain the entire world. Only love can do this. This state, this feeling, must be present during prayer, during worship, and at any other moment in a person’s life. Focus on these signs of love. Spiritual and carnal love are opposites. Where there are passions, there is no spirituality. God’s love is like fire

– the Lord says in the Gospel, “I came to send fire on the earth” (Luke 12:49). Not peace, but the fire of His love. This fire doesn’t spare anything, this love doesn’t spare passions, it burns them out.

To move towards God in your life, you need to have these spiritual guidelines. Otherwise, it’s offensive: we give up everything – family life, property, all the pleasures of this world, but it turns out that in the monastery we do everything we want, just not what we need. It often happens that people come to a monastery with aspirations for God, pray, go to services, force themselves to lead a spiritual life, and then see that everything around them is relaxed, and they can’t do this, but live a calm and happy life. Their jealousy begins to cool over the years, and they slowly return to their worldly habits. The habits come to life, the people begin to live them, and in the end, it turns out that they came to the monastery, but live like in the world or even worse. Small evil habits that they acquired in the world begin to develop and gain strength in the monastery. Unfortunately, there is such a negative aspect in modern monasteries, and you don’t have to look for someone to blame – you won’t change anything but will only harm yourself even more. Therefore, I ask you: try not to give freedom to your sinful feelings. It often happens that people put on monastic robes, but remain worldly, and even sinful or very sinful. The clothes you wear and the titles you wear should correspond to your inner world. Firstly, there must be a spiritual struggle, a reluctance to be bad, passionate, and a desire to be a bright, Godly person.

Let’s talk one more time about soul damage. I’ll tell you about one incident that recently happened to me. My cell neighbour and I went to the cemetery. As we went, we saw a young guy and a girl walking near the graves. The neighbour tugs my sleeve and says, “Father, they are Goths.” – “What Goths?” – “They are wearing all black, you see?” We started to serve the memorial service, and they were staying opposite and looking at the inscriptions on the graves. During the memorial service, one thought appeared, “We are Orthodox Christians, we are stronger. Let them look at us and see how strong we are.” After the memorial service, we went away from there. They walked around too and left. Interestingly enough, the

young man didn't look much like a Goth, and the girl had everything black: hair, a cloak, boots, and a backpack that looked like a coffin. The next day I had to serve. I came to the cell, read the rule and lay down to rest. And at night, when I got up for work, I felt somehow unwell: some kind of embitterment, irritability, and emptiness in my soul. I went to church and celebrated the Liturgy, but I didn't feel well. And at the liturgy, there was another moment. During the Eucharistic Canon, when I was saying, "Take, eat: this is My Body, which is broken for you for the remission of sins." and pointed to the bread with my hand, there was such emptiness in my soul, and in my head there was a stream of thoughts, and among them, one was constantly disturbing me, "Take it and crush it already." I understood that there was a different action, but that thought was overwhelming my mind. I felt how it was making me dumb and how I was doing everything mechanically. After I served the Liturgy, I felt even worse – there was some irritability inside. In such a state, I lit some dry grass near the house. On one side, there was a concrete road, so the fire couldn't spread there, and on the other side, there was a simple dirt road. I felt deep down that I should extinguish it immediately, but I thought, "*There's no dry grass there, so it won't catch fire.*" I was in a state of dullness. Then the wind blew, the fire jumped across the road, and soon the field caught fire. Then, some empty beehives, and further beyond, the forest. That's when I 'woke up'. I started raising the brethren, "*The forest will catch fire!*" I grabbed a shovel and began extinguishing it. The brothers came running with shovels and water, and together we worked to put out the fire. Then a pine tree caught fire. I rushed to it, and only then did I cry out in prayer. It was as if I sobered up from both the fear and the awareness of my own powerlessness. A sense of humility came over me. When I realized that this was beyond my strength, something inside seemed to sink to the depths: "*Lord, help!*" It felt like I wasn't there, my "I" was dead, and I left everything in God's hands because I understood I couldn't do anything without Him. Once my heart sank into a state of humility, at that very moment the wind died down, and the fir tree was quickly extinguished. There was no wind for about twenty minutes, and

during that time they managed to put out all the fire. What am I trying to say? The soul can become embittered and embrace a foreign, devilish spirit of pride, and God withdraws because of it.

Such a weakening of the spirit can occur for two reasons: due to your sinfulness, when you've accepted some thought or feeling, or from the influence of other people who have unclean, devilish power. But both they and the devil can strike your soul only when there is favourable soil. Venerable John Climacus said that a sign of God's retreat from man is when you feel dullness. Later I remembered that I once had the same condition on Mount Athos. When I went from the Hilandar Monastery to Vatopedi, I had to go through the zealot Esphigmenou Monastery. I decided to go and eat watermelon with them, although I already had breakfast in Hilandar. After eating, the brethren were taking the abbot's blessing at the exit of the refectory. You just step outside, kiss his hand, and then go about your business. So, like everyone else, I kissed his hand and went away, but in a moment, I felt a clouding of consciousness. I had walked that path many times before, yet this time, for some reason, I didn't take it. Instead, I turned aside, veering off the road and ended up by the sea. I realized I had taken the wrong path. There was a hose with drinking water, and I had an empty bottle with me, yet I couldn't figure out how to fill it with water. I continued walking, then I started to run. When you jump from stone to stone, you get caught up in the excitement: one, then another. When I got through the boulders, I saw rocks. I realized I had gone too far. Then I leapt over a chasm and found myself in a dead end. On one side there was water and a sheer cliff on the other one. There was no road ahead, so I turned back, but there was a chasm. When I had gone forward, I leapt over it, but going back was terrifying. When you climb along the ledges, you can't see anything. At that point, my heart started beating like a rabbit. I was spinning for about twenty minutes, but then I sat down, and one thought came to me: "God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). As I began to pray, I felt my heart sink, and a sudden clarity came to my mind. I approached the chasm, and there, trees were growing like shrubs. I bent one tree over the chasm, stepped onto it and jumped

across. Then, with a prayer, I ran to the spring – I hadn't drunk anything for such a long time, and the heat was intense. I immediately realized that I had to remove the foam from the top. I did so, drank my fill, and filled my bottle with water.

This state of devilish attack is accompanied by stupidity. A feeling of anger, irritation, and some kind of gambling can also be present – you lose sense of reality and don't understand what's happening. But the spirit of God always comes when you humble yourself. The Lord can allow such sinful falls when He wants to teach you humility. This state is real. You have to know it with your heart and experience it. As you go through life, you have to understand and analyse the states of your soul. At any moment, your spiritual father can stop you, take you by the hand and ask, "Where are you? Who are you with?", and you have to reply. If you don't know the answer, it means you don't know yourself, you're not doing the monastic work that the Holy Fathers were doing, and you're just wasting your time. I'm not saying that you should have some deep, intelligent thoughts, but you should be able to know yourself. If you've got into a state of emptiness and don't wish to leave it, you are a foolish person. This foolishness will lead you into the abyss. If you feel empty, you always have to strive to escape this state. You have to draw closer to God and acquire Him because we need to live with Him.

Many worldly people don't understand this state of deification, such love. They live in spiritual and inner emptiness, and as a result, their souls don't thrive. Just as a body without bread and water begins to wither, so too does a soul that doesn't feed on the Holy Spirit become dead. Such individuals may not grasp another state – living with God, this inner richness, though they feel their emptiness and start to numb it because human nature always seeks pleasure and fulfilment. The point is that some start to nourish their souls with love and renounce their sins, while others fill it with sins and evade the truth. Though it may seem that everyone seeks good, there isn't a single person who doesn't desire to taste happiness.

It's wrong to remain in a sinful state without struggling with it because it destroys us. If your mind became attached to something

earthly – you went out, engaged in idle talk, became distracted – you have strayed from the spiritual path. Now you need to go to a night service plus four-five hours of prayer to bring your soul back to itself, to replenish and restore it. The deeper the emptiness, the longer the recovery process will be. Saint Ephraim of Katounakia once ended up in a hospital on the mainland, where he was undergoing treatment for four months. People would come to visit him and talk while he was in the hospital. However, when he returned to Mount Athos, it took him six months to return to his former state. He was in a higher state – a deep, more grace-filled one – so it took him that long to return to it. We have less grace, so we need less time. This saturation with the grace of the Holy Spirit, this sense of fullness you have to know, feel within yourself, and never lose. If you've lost it, try to quickly saturate your soul again. Never surrender to your inner emptiness. How to attain spiritual richness is another question. Primarily, it's acquired through prayer, solitude, and good deeds – each in their own way. However, if you have damaged thoughts, there can be no talk of enriching the soul. It's only possible when your mind is sound and your thoughts are good. If the thought is damaged, the soul cannot be nourished.

God and the Holy Spirit can dwell in a sinful soul, but where there is a corrupted thought and resentment, God cannot be. We know from the lives of the saints that even people who had sinful passions could perform miracles and possess Divine wisdom. However, history does not provide examples of the Holy Spirit residing in those with malicious intent. Protect your mind and thoughts. Countless times I have observed: when you begin to analyse, to give some characterization or evaluation of someone, you immediately feel emptiness inside because grace departs and the heart hardens. Even if I speak correctly, I let resentment and dislike into my soul, and there is no longer love for that person within me. When I hear something negative about a person, negativity immediately arises in my soul. The Holy Fathers teach that monks retreat to monasteries to avoid hearing and knowing about the evil that occurs in the world. I understand that you, women, like to discuss things, but that only leads to emptiness. Therefore, it's better not to gossip behind someone's back. The Lord loves us as we

are. Likewise, we have to love people as they are, with all their weaknesses and problems. If we start to judge who's good and who's bad, it's all over.

Perhaps, I've already told you this story. When I was a librarian at the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, Father Constantine often came to me asking for various pamphlets for his spiritual children. I began to wonder, "Why does he keep taking them?" This thought was tormenting me, so I shared it with another priest... He replied, "Well, why do you give them, then? It's your own fault." When Father Constantine came again, I told him, "Father, I won't give you any more pamphlets because you're constantly taking them." He got offended and left. I felt terrible inside and realized I had acted wrongly. I gathered all the pamphlets, brought them to his cell, and asked for forgiveness. He went, "Sure, it's fine" and forgave me. Nevertheless, no matter how much I spoke with him afterward, those open, kind feelings between us were no more because he had closed off, and I could no longer communicate with him so easily. I couldn't begin to love him the same way I loved him before that incident.

Make sure you don't make such mistakes in your life. Don't sweat the small stuff and be cautious. Love is very easy to break, and often, it's simply impossible to restore afterward. The soul must be pure, full of love, ready to forgive. For instance, if I speak badly about someone to another person, I may find myself unable to look that person in the eye any more because of what I said, and I start avoiding them. Not because I don't love them, but because I have a sin on my conscience. So try not to analyse a person's spiritual state – it's not our concern whether they are good or bad. Losing love is easy, but gaining it back is very difficult.

I remember how a teacher in the seminary once told us that during the Soviet era, when atheists were in power, they were persecuting everyone: believers, sectarians, and those who worshipped the devil. Now, however, a time has come when society will divide into those who will worship God and those who will worship satan. Everyone will be aware of the spiritual realm and will make their choice. Indifferent atheists will become the minority. We are living in the times of struggle,

when you mustn't be cold-blooded and careless. As much as your strength and the monastery's conditions allow, acquire within yourself the grace of the Holy Spirit, purity and love for God and each other. Saint Ignatius Bryanchaninov taught that our minds should be steeped in the words of the Bible. Apply the teachings of the Gospel to all events in your life. A believer ties their entire life to the name of God, to Christ, His life, and His sufferings. That's how our life should be.

Why do you say, when confessing, "I have sinned by word, deed, and thought"? You renounce evil and cleanse your soul so that your words, deeds, and thoughts are in God. Strive for this. You can sometimes talk about trivial matters or things of importance, but don't speak about worldly matters. What is worldly? The Holy Fathers teach that the world is a collection of passions. The main thing is that your words shouldn't contain anything passionate or corrupt. Make at least this change in your life. If these things exist within you, and you express them to others, it can lead to temptation. If you live with these things, at least don't tempt others. This is what I ask of you: let there be no worldly spirit in your family and in your monastery.

– You said that love is easy to lose, but to lose it, you first need to have it. Sometimes there can be an instant dislike towards someone, and then it seems like there's no love left for them. How can you warm up this love so that you have it for everyone?

– Love primarily comes through thoughts, so to acquire it, you need to have good thoughts. When you come to me for confession, your soul opens up through thoughts. There's a law of love – blame yourself and justify the others. If you do it the other way around, then your mind gets damaged – you always blame the others and justify yourself. Married couples would come to me to sort out their problems: husbands were blaming their wives, and wives blaming their husbands. Where is the peace, where is the harmony, where is the love in that? Someone needs to come to their senses and humble themselves, otherwise the law of love is violated. And what's the sign of lack of love? Accusing one another. It's clear that this person no longer has love for their spouse. It's gone because the law has been broken, and it's evident through their thoughts.

If you want to have and cultivate love, you must first educate your thoughts. If someone comes to you, and you feel some kind of dislike towards them, don't pay attention to that. But if you start having negative thoughts about that person (like they're this or that), that's worse because it involves your will, which is the most important thing. If you start willingly dragging that person through the mud, you will never have God. However, if your thoughts are good, but you don't feel love yet, don't despair because God is with you. Your heart hasn't matured enough to contain love, but God is already within you because your will, aimed at acquiring this love, aligns with God's will. That's how we acquire love.

– *How can you determine confession by one's thoughts if they confess only sins?*

– That's because you don't confess your sins by a simple enumeration: sinned in deed, word, thoughts, overeating, idling, and so on. By listing your sins, you simply state the fact that you committed them, but first you must reveal the sin, and then say what sin it is. When we describe a sin, we are in a state of repentance and ask God for forgiveness. In this confession, there's a prayer with which we atone for our sins. But it also happens that people come to confession and says that they have sinned in all the sins that were listed in confession, or they write them on a piece of paper – “Here, father, read,” and the priest reads page by page. But the point is that you yourself need to have the feeling of repentance. The canons of the Church say that all sins that a person has committed must be described, except for prodigal sins.

– *Our acquaintance has cancer and is being treated with chemotherapy. The doctor told her that she shouldn't go to any public places. She says she won't go to church for now. Should she go, or it's better to invite a priest for communion?*

– If her immune system is weakened after chemotherapy, then, of course, she has to receive unction and communion at home. When she gets stronger, she can go to church and participate in the sacraments with everyone else.

– *It happens that you try to save peace in your soul, and then you suddenly lose it, which also depends on the person...*

– It depends on everything. Temptation is everywhere, indeed. Your business is to save the peace, and when you save it, your ego remains within you. The devil is trying with all his might through some external sorrows and temptations to bring your ego out so that you pay attention to it and begin to live by it. That's why the Holy Fathers say that when you engage in prayer, your mind should be in the heart. If it's there, nothing will touch you, and your peace will remain with you. But if your mind is in your head, then all the thoughts coming from outside will affect you, and you'll get wound up.

It doesn't require a great mind or being a saint. If you began to get nervous and fuss, it means that your prayer is in your head and that your mind isn't descending into the heart. You have to place your mind in your heart because there is God. We have to dwell in another, Divine world, which is within us, because thus, we maintain peace. But when the mind leaves the heart, we begin to live in material things, and our thoughts cling to earthly things. Think about what St. Seraphim of Sarov once said, “Throughout my entire monastic life, my mind has never left the walls of the monastery.” His mind was constantly collected within him. This can only be achieved when the mind is in the heart. Even though people came to him and said many things, he was keeping his mind in the heart.

In addition to general phrases that you need to forgive, to be loving and kind, there are formulas that reveal what exactly should be inside you. One of them is that the mind must stand in the heart. This is also given from God, although this has always been taught. Why are novices given a prayer rope? So that they learn to bring the mind into the heart. And this is not so simple because the mind, like a cork, always jumps out of there. If you don't practice prayer and don't strive for it, then sooner or later, no matter how good and kind you are, you'll get damaged because you'll always have temptations from others. The devil will never let you go if you are lazy and don't think. The Lord gives you a lesson, but you don't learn from it, you don't internalize it. The devil will break your good thoughts, and you'll begin to become embittered, then suspicious, rancorous, and so on.. So man is left without God. You can get out of this state of

anger and suspiciousness only by going inside yourself. When the mind descends into the heart, the soul is satisfied and you acquire a peaceful dispensation.

– *It also happens that I'm distracted and asked something during the liturgy. How should I act?*

– Let them distract you – there's also God's providence in that. When asked, reply kindly – thus, you'll maintain peace in your soul. And don't think that they are distracting you with that. After all, what do the Holy Fathers teach us? When your neighbour comes to you, leave your prayer and show love – because by love you preserve peace.

– *I once got angry at the demons and began to curse them. But one sister told me, "Be careful, you can't irritate them like that." Tell us, is it dangerous to hate them?*

– The Holy Fathers wrote that only perfect people can contradict demons and communicate with them directly because they come not only in reality but also through thoughts. If you have any passions, no matter what, then when these thoughts come, you won't tell them, "Get away from me, I don't know you." They'll reply, "No, dear, you are ours." And this irritates them more. While you have passions, you can't say such words because that's pride. Not because your passions have some power, but because you are stepping away from God because of your pride. Such curses can only be pronounced by people who have achieved some kind of dispassion. And you better use church prayers: "Let God arise," Psalm 90 and others. This won't do anything bad to your soul, but if you curse them as you did, you'll harm yourself, and they'll have power over you.

– *Should we pray for everyone or only for those who go to church?*

– Pray for two-three days, that's within your power, and that's it, leave it. Of course, there are some special cases when you can pray longer. If people have some special sorrows and some situation needs to be resolved, like someone's sick or can't get a job, then you can pray longer.

– *Father, does praying mean simply sighing in your heart for a person?*

– Make about ten prostrations, or read a kathisma, if you wish.

– *You said that inner peace is attained through prayer, while St. Seraphim of Sarov said that it's attained through sorrows. But sorrows are not always the same as prayer.*

– The thing is when you are in sorrow, you always pray. Suffering can't exist without prayer – that's why people in this world are divided into two groups. Secular people also go through sorrows, sometimes even more intensely. If they suffer with humility, they become kinder, purer and more divine. However, if they take on sorrows with resentment, the suffering will remain, yet the person will be empty. Suffering is always connected to turning to God. At the beginning of our conversation, I told you how I was putting out a fire: everything was burning, so I called the firefighters. The whole brotherhood ran out and started shouting at me. Half the property and the forest burned down. Suffering came, and I began to pray, "Lord, help me!" Therefore, when I speak only about prayer, it doesn't mean that I separate it from suffering. Prayer can be shallow or deep, but in suffering, it gains depth. The Holy Fathers always sought out suffering because this way you acquire humility. Secular people don't have to seek it because it comes to them on its own, yet monks have to.

– *It happens that you sin and immediately start to worry and ask God for forgiveness, but as time passes, you prepare for confession, and there is no longer such a repentant feeling. What can I do to always have it?*

– Understand one simple thing: repentance and confession are slightly different concepts. A repentant feeling is turning to God and atonement for one's sins. It must be always and everywhere, in any condition, at any time; wherever you are, you can and should bring repentance to God. And confession is already a confirmation of your repentance. "Lord, I made such and such sins," and through the hand of the priest, the Lord forgives you.

Why can Greeks receive communion without confession? They say that confession is necessary before communion if a person has committed major, serious, mortal sins. If the sins are not so serious, then the person should immediately repent. They have such a practice – confession to the spiritual father and constant repentance. But we are used to going to a priest who would solve all our problems... But

the thing is that you confess very rarely. If you had the practice of such a repentant state, many of you would already be, if not saints, then of a high spiritual life because your souls would be alive and would react to everything. But what you do is this: you've sinned, and then you wait until you go to confession. And it's clear that when you arrive, everything has already burned out. That's not correct.

– *Should we confess our sins to the spiritual father or the eldress? But what should we do if we don't have them? Should we repent in front of an icon?*

– For example, you've just sinned while on the train, but you don't have an icon with you. Your soul is already defiled, and until you offer repentance, this defilement remains within you. If you lack the habit of constant repentance, you'll carry this burden of sin with you. Repentance should be a continuous practice, not something reserved only for formal confession. If you've sinned but then experienced true contrition and tears, the Lord has already forgiven and accepted you because God is everywhere. When you come to confession and voice your sin, it's as if, through the priest's hand, God seals your wound. That's why you don't need to expect special feelings during confession—repentance has already taken place, and the connection with God is already restored. Read what St. John of Kronstadt wrote about this. When a sinful thought or act arose in his soul, he would kneel before the throne and pray until he felt God visit him and forgive his sins. The Holy Fathers taught the importance of maintaining a spirit of repentance at all times. St. Theophan the Recluse, in one of his sermons, described repentance as the feeling of death. In this state, a person pleads with God: “Lord, take my life, take all of me, but forgive me.” It's as if the person spiritually dies and offers themselves as a sacrifice. This sense of death and complete surrender must be present in genuine repentance.

– *So is that why in Greece people take communion without confession – because they have this practice?*

– Yes, and that's how it should be in the monastery. If something happens to you, the inner work has to begin right away – you go to the elder and confess immediately. Even if he isn't wearing the

epitrachelion, even without the Gospel, he just listens, but it's still confession. It's not necessary for him to place the epitrachelion on your head; he takes on your struggles, your sins, and he remembers them. This is more like confessing one's thoughts; it doesn't require the spiritual father to have the epitrachelion, the cross, or the Gospel.

– *In our monastery, they say that a state of bitterness and irritability can be caused by a heavy workload. What do you think?*

– Perhaps, but not all irritability is the same. There is irritability as a sin – when you have lack of love and bitterness. And then, there is another kind of irritability, where you don't get angry at others. For example, when I came to the monastery, my life took on a different rhythm: waking up at 5 a.m., attending the communal prayer service, not getting enough sleep, and then, during the service, someone steps on your foot, sings out of tune, sniffs, coughs, or chews loudly at meals. This kind of irritation is different – it stems from suffering, meaning the soul hasn't yet fully humbled itself. Yet, it's not a sin because there's no malice involved.

– *Some Saint Father wrote that it is inappropriate to invoke the name of God everywhere and to make the sign of the cross over everything – chairs, tables, dishes... Is this a sin?*

– Yes. The sign of the cross carries the symbol of the Holy Trinity. You can call upon God either through words or through this symbol. While worldly people often misuse God's name thoughtlessly, treating it as a mere saying, overly scrupulous and prideful people, on the other hand, tend to cross everything indiscriminately. That stems from spiritual delusion.

May 6, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Twelve

We've started gathering more often now. While both you and I have this opportunity, let's use this time for the benefit of our souls. We need to remain attentive and sober-minded. We will never truly hear the words of a spiritual father, the Holy Fathers, or the voice

of the Church if we live scattered and inattentive lives, failing to tend to our own souls. Spiritual life, both within and around us, is found in God, and God is everywhere, for He is omnipresent. Let's strive to delve into our spiritual problems, thoughts, and feelings, discerning what is good and what is bad within us. Let the good grow, and let us distance ourselves from the bad. To truly distance ourselves from it, we must uncover the root of evil. Only when a person is attentive to their life will they not merely drift through their days, but instead live meaningfully, drawing closer to God. It's only through inner spiritual life that many questions will arise, and the words we hear in the Church will settle in our hearts, becoming clear and understandable to us.

When I first came to the Church, I was in my twenties. While studying at seminary and later at the academy, the books of the Holy Fathers warmed my soul but didn't touch my heart. It felt as though the lives of the Fathers were their own – filled with their experiences, struggles, and illnesses – while my own life was absent from them. Years passed, and as I reread these books, the words of the Holy Fathers began to resonate with my heart. I started to recognize the states of being that they described; their lives became familiar to me. Saints, who had lived centuries ago, became close and dear, almost like family.

The prayer of the small litany: "Commemorating our most holy, pure, most blessed, and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God" reminds us that everyone we know or don't know, those who have asked for our prayers, all those in our memory – the entire holy Church, both living and departed – becomes close to us through spiritual kinship. The Holy Fathers always said that spiritual kinship is much stronger than physical one. When we begin to live the life of the Church – engaging with the struggles and aspirations that the Holy Fathers embraced, such as the fight against sin and striving for deification – the entire ecclesiastical world becomes our life, our family.

We will only succeed in living a monastic life when we fully embrace this patristic spiritual path: struggling with our sins and striving for sanctification. Only then will genuine questions arise,

because real questions come from the experiential journey of battling sin. Other questions, unrelated to this struggle, tend to be superficial. Laypeople often come with questions about the Kingdom of Heaven or about how the saints live there. These are hypothetical questions; they aren't grounded in lived experience. Even if they receive an answer, it satisfies only their intellect, leaving their hearts empty.

I once had such an encounter. A woman asked me: "What is There? How is it There? Is it bad or good?" Yes, these are questions about the Kingdom of Heaven and about God, but in answering them, I felt the conversation was hollow. The words might have been correct, but the person wasn't engaged because she wasn't living with these truths in her heart. Whatever knowledge she gained about the Kingdom of Heaven wouldn't help her. She will experience real life and sobriety only when she turns inward, examines her inner spiritual world, and begins to live in God's world. The very meaning of the word 'sobriety' implies an attentive attitude toward one's inner self.

When we talk to each other, I share my inner experiences and talk about the vital things that I'm living at the moment, what my soul is aching about. In this life, we meet God all the time and hear His voice, but we don't fulfil His will. That's why we don't know Him and don't feel Him. We come to know God only when we begin to fulfil, see and feel His will. The Son can only be recognized by doing the will of the Father. If He didn't fulfil Father's will, He is not a son, but a stepson. We know God not because we read the Holy Scriptures, not because we are Orthodox, and not because we became monks and novices and came to this monastery, but because we fulfil His will. This is our sonship, our salvation, and our entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. I want to explain to you our ignorance of God with specific examples.

One day, I received a call, "Father, my dad is in critical condition in the ICU. What should we do?" I replied, "He needs to receive Communion. Ask the doctor. I'm serving tonight, but right after, I'll come to Moscow, and we'll arrange it." Later in the evening, they called back and said that the doctor said yes, but asked to inform the doctor who would take over in the morning. While I was serving the Liturgy, my heart was restless. At the end, I placed a particle in the pyx for

Communion. A thought arose within me, “You should go without waiting to hear from the other doctor. Just go, and let God guide it according to His will.” At the end of the service, I partook of Communion myself. The night was sleepless and was exhausting. Another thought came, “What if they don’t let me in? It’s an ICU. Besides, I don’t even know exactly where to go. What if they don’t answer the phone? I’ll arrive in Moscow and then what?” After those thoughts, I no longer felt the strong urge to go. I decided they should confirm with the doctor first, and then call me back. I prayed the evening rule and went to bed. At ten in the morning, they called, “Father, the doctor didn’t permit it, and Dad isn’t in such bad condition after all. He’s also experiencing some agitation. Don’t come – who knows how he might react to receiving Communion? Many people have the superstition that Communion brings death.” I thought, “Alright, I won’t go.” The dad began to recover, was about to be transferred to a regular ward, and then, unexpectedly, he passed away... No one blamed me, but the burden on my conscience remained. A thought whispered, “The feeling you had during the Liturgy was from God. The Lord placed it on your heart to act, a divine prompting.” But as soon as logical, human thoughts intervened, they plunged me into sin, separated me from God, and ultimately, I failed to fulfil God’s will. There was also a bit of laziness, like “It’s far to travel.”

So, we need to listen to our hearts when they are filled with the grace of God. This feeling must be cultivated, gained through experience, and, when it comes, it must be caught immediately. Later, the mind begins to interpret what the heart has retained. The prompting should not flow from the mind to the heart, but from the heart to the mind. For me, it turned out differently: the prompting came from the mind to the heart. My rational thoughts began to influence the state of my heart, and I made a mistake – I failed to fulfil God’s will. Of course, things could have unfolded differently if I had gone there – maybe the dad would have received Communion, or maybe he wouldn’t; maybe I would have been allowed in, or maybe not – those outcomes are unknown, but that’s not the point. Our task is to act according to God’s will, as He directs us, without worrying

about the results. Whether he would have received Communion is not for us to judge – God’s will is discerned not by the outcome or a favourable conclusion, but by the presence of grace.

Don’t think about what will happen later; do what the Lord commands you now. We are wrong to think that if God has put us something on the heart, then something good or miraculous should come out of it. Sometimes people come to me as their spiritual father, asking for a blessing, but that blessing ends up being kind of unlucky. For example, I blessed one man to go mushroom picking, but it was a hot summer, and all the mushrooms were worm-eaten. The person made a long journey and couldn’t gather any mushrooms. If he becomes upset and thinks, “There was no will of God in this; I just wore myself out and wasted my strength. My spiritual father doesn’t understand anything,” it shows that this person doesn’t sense God’s will. His thinking and the state of his heart are both incorrect because he’s waiting for a result. The essence of obedience and fulfilling the spiritual father’s will lies in the heart being humbled and always directed toward fulfilling God’s will.

There was another case. When I was going to Pskov, I had a thought that I should call and let those meeting me know when the train would arrive. That thought was peaceful and calm, settling right into my heart. But then I reasoned, “Why should I unnecessarily bother those people calling? They already know the time.” Those seemingly logical thoughts drowned out the good one, which resulted in a temptation: the person waiting for me assumed I would arrive by bus. So, that situation was a violation of God’s will. Each time I reflect on my mistakes, I realize that the Lord was speaking, calling, guiding me. His will would settle on my heart – not on my mind but on my heart. God’s will often disrupts our logical thinking and rational conclusions.

Learn to always attune your heart first to fulfilling the will of another person, and to that of God. Only when you master this, can you begin to live with God. When you recognize your mistakes, you start to correct themselves. It is often said that at the age of sixty, a person reaches a spiritual milestone. If they have lived well, at this age they stop being immersed in worldly matters and begin living in the

world of God. However, if a person continues to cling to this earthly life, unable to let go of their attachments, they are spiritually unwell. After all, they will inevitably have to leave this life; they cannot live on this earth forever. They are but a sojourner here; everything will decay and pass away. The entire life of the Holy Fathers was aimed at detachment from these earthly attachments.

Last time we were talking about the Jesus prayer and prayer as such. Any prayer is aimed at breaking the connection with this world, at leading a person inward. We talked about the different kinds of love: love for a person, for loved ones, for things, for nature, for one's homeland, and there is also love for God. My mind tells me that all the love that ties us to the earth, that binds us to our carnal heart, passes through thought, through the mind. Love for God doesn't exist in a person's head. Memory or recollection may be there, but not love – here the mind must descend into the heart. When the mind descends inward, into the spiritual heart, a person stands within and becomes 'dead' to everyone and everything. Only someone who can feel themselves as such a 'dead' person can love God. This Christian state of love for God can be compared to the states spoken of in other religions. In buddhism, it is nirvana, a departure from everything, a state of peace and detachment. But in Christian love, there is always a sense of joy, always a blessing. When a person forgets themselves, they feel this blessing even more. When a person prays, when the spiritual heart is already accustomed, the mind descends into the heart and delights in the name of Jesus.

I was thinking back to the history of 'imyaslavie' (literally 'praising the name', onomatodoxy) followers. They had some serious kinks, but it was not that simple. People who really practised Jesus prayer on Mount Athos perfectly understood that when the mind stands in the heart, the words of prayer bring into their heart God, who touches and delights it. They were living by that, and for them there was God inside. They found it difficult to separate words from essence. I'll put it this way, though it might not be entirely accurate or entirely dogmatically correct: to go inward, one must fall head over heels in love with God. Then a person immerses themselves completely in

Him and needs nothing else; nothing holds them to this earth, nothing worries or attracts them – only God. Without this infatuation, a person's heart will remain cold. Many speak about God, about dogmas, about the Kingdom of Heaven, but if a person does not desire and does not have an attachment to God, a love for Him, they cannot be with Him. For them, it's just philosophy, merely attending church, and they don't understand why or for what purpose.

They don't understand why there are sorrows and death – for them, that will be grief; they won't realize that the Lord does everything for good. For God, the main goal is to bind man to Himself. Strive to love God with all your heart and with all your mind.

Returning to the Jesus prayer, I'll say that it becomes effective and alive in you only when your thoughts are righteous, and when you live by the law of love – accuse yourself and justify others. The essence of God, His appearance to us, is mercy. If there is no mercy in your relations among yourselves, if there is only one law of truth, there is no God in them. God is love, and God is mercy. The word mercy, I think, puts more emphasis on covering the weakness of others, it has more sacrifice in it: a merciful person gives of themselves and doesn't live for themselves. If you have this connection in your relationship, this sign of love, then you are God's people. Then you will have prayer, and God will always be with you.

In the desert, saints came to understand not only their sinfulness, the corruption of their nature, and their separation from God but also His holiness and mercy. When sinful thoughts arise, and we immediately turn from them in repentance, retreat inward, and remain in that state, the Lord may, if not immediately then soon, cleanse our souls of the memory and stain of these sins. The saints lived by this, drawing closer to God, as like seeks like. Without perceiving God's holiness or knowing our direction and goal, our souls drift aimlessly in emptiness and loneliness, bound to external activities without inner life. The holy fathers taught that true obedience stems from internal renunciation rather than external acts. A person must renounce earthly blessings in their heart to gain God. Seek to know Him. We come to know God through our

experiences – falling into sins, great or small, being forgiven by Him, realizing our damage and emptiness, and then feeling His presence enter and dwell within us again.

If a person is firmly settled in a wrong way of life, has turned away from God, and does not live by his inner world, he lives his life in vain. This is an unfortunate person, in a state of strong delusion: the person knows God but consciously refuses to approach Him, and there will be no mercy for him because the person has made his own choice, it is his will, his decision. On the other hand, when a person makes a mistake, it is different. Worldly people often sin because they don't know God; they only sense, on a conscious level, that something is wrong. But when we know God and commit a sin, it is bad, and if we persist in it, it is even worse.

What else can I say about the Jesus Prayer? When the prayer is mechanically ingrained in a person, this is the first step. The prayer should constantly be in the mind, always being said, but eventually it should sink deeper within. There should be no thoughts other than those of God. The mind should rest in the heart of the person. At this time, passions, worldly thoughts, or problems may arise, and the mind begins to choose where to go: to stay in the heart with God, to delight in this love, or to turn to another love, foreign to God. This is a delicate and significant moment. Here, a person's will and love are tested. When, after the first step, the prayer moves to the next level, the mind experiences the delight inside the spiritual heart, and it increasingly descends into it. And regardless of whether the mind descends into the heart or not, it carries the memory of this love. The person feels that Christ is there; they begin to seek God within and delight in Him. For this love, they are ready to leave everything, endure any suffering, accept anything from God's hand, and fulfil His will, no matter what it is. When a person realizes they are acting and living according to God's will, their heart begins to rejoice and dance, overflowing with streams of grace and God's love. And as soon as they bring the mind there, they experience even greater joy.

Sometimes, someone comes to me and says, "Father, meetings with people or sisters leave me feeling empty, they destroy me." "Yes,

you are right, but if a person has fully surrendered themselves into God's hands, into the hands of their spiritual father, then no meeting or anything else can harm them. If a person feels, believes, and knows that this is God's will, their heart will be immersed in God's love and His grace. It is not for nothing that the Holy Fathers say, "When a stranger comes to you, leave your prayer and warm that person with love because this pleases God." Why are many laypeople above us, even though they don't pray as we do, don't attend services like we do, live not monastically but with families? It's because they do the will of God. And from this feeling, from this understanding, their hearts are enriched.

In the book of Abbess Thaisia, there is a story. A fifteen-year-old girl was tending cows, and Mother Thaisia was passing by. The girl turned to her and said, "Mother, teach me how to pray." The abbess began to speak to her about the Jesus Prayer, about other prayers, and then asked, "And how do you pray yourself?" The girl answered, "I don't know anything, just the first words of the Lord's Prayer" and as soon as she said, "Our Father," she was flooded with tears. The abbess looked at her and said, "You don't have to learn anything, the Lord has already opened your heart." Such heights, when the heart responds to the words of prayer, are achieved after many, many years and only by the great mercy and grace of God. When God becomes the closest and most familiar to a person, and is within them, the person begins to live with Him. This girl lived with God, her mind was there, inside, and from the words "Our Father," she immediately began to cry.

An interesting feeling arises when the mind descends into the heart, begins to be delighted by prayer, and feels, sees God within. It's as if a click is about to happen, and the heart will open. At the words "Our Father" or "Lord Jesus Christ," the heart fills with tears from great love and mercy. The Holy Fathers say that at first, there should be internal tears, and later, tears will appear in the eyes. Father Sophrony (Sakharov) said that one goes into the desert when they can no longer contain their weeping inside. To avoid tempting and disturbing the brethren and to prevent their own pride, they go into the wilderness. Prayer only happens when the heart opens, and at that

point, complete solitude is necessary. You should know about this opening of the heart. All your thoughts and desires should aim for this – to live with God in prayer. Not for the sake of enjoyment, but to be with God. Let me not experience anything, let me be as cold as a stone, but I want to stand in God, in Christ. And there, it is all God's will – whether to grant me the warmth of grace or leave me in the cold of my own feelings. Our goal, our task, is to ascend to the second step after the first small one, after the mechanical prayer – to go within ourselves. I will repeat that this will lead to harm for those who don't have the right thoughts. For those who violate the law of love, this descent into themselves will be fatal. Without the correct, full thought of love and mercy, don't expect progress in the Jesus Prayer. The most fallen person is the monk because the greatest damage happens when a person enters into themselves and begins to live only for themselves.

True prayer, a proper vision of God, and standing in God always involve self-sacrifice. Where there is no sacrifice, there is pride. A proud person may turn inward, but eventually, a distortion occurs: they are no longer in God but in their own ego, delighting in themselves. The self replaces God. Why did the devil fall? He placed his ego above God, substituting himself for God. This often happens in our lives as well. We want God to follow our will, to fulfil our desires – even if they are good, they are still ours. That is why we must always ask, “Lord, but what do You want?” in everything we do. Even in the best of deeds, we can never forget to ask this question.

Let's talk a bit about the Divine Liturgy. The Liturgy is the centre of our lives. We spend a lot of time in church, and if not daily, then very often, we attend the Liturgy. However, the word ‘attend’ isn't quite fitting here. What I mean to say—though it may sound inelegant—is that we shouldn't just be at the Liturgy; we should serve the Liturgy. And it doesn't matter whether you are a priest, a monk, or a layperson. Everyone present at the Liturgy should actively participate, sharing in its essence. The Liturgy opens a window to another world: God's world descends to earth, and we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The actions taking place in the altar and the words spoken by the priest should be felt by each one of us. The Liturgy is always a communion with the

Kingdom of Heaven, a passage into it. In the prophecies of Diveyevo, it is said that when the last Liturgy is served in Diveyevo's Kazan Cathedral, some of the faithful will ascend to Heaven, while others will remain on earth. Whether this will come to pass or not, I think the meaning is this: some actively participate in the Divine Liturgy, while others remain as motionless idols. I want you to understand this and, to the extent possible, enter into this sacred service yourselves.

The central idea of my book *The Divine Liturgy: Its Experience and Understanding* is the work of the Holy Spirit during the service, when the Kingdom of Heaven descends to earth, and man ascends to Heaven, uniting with God. The lives of the saints recount how they lived in this reality, witnessing the Holy Spirit, the fire descending from Heaven, and the Angel present at the Liturgy. They entered this spiritual realm. And it was not only the clergy performing the Liturgy who experienced this, but also the faithful who were praying, immersing themselves in the spiritual world that descended to earth. The Church has always taught that everyone present at the service must participate in the sacred worship. They are not spectators but active participants.

The actions of the Church are aimed at drawing a person away from their own thoughts and fully involving them in what is happening. There are seven primary actions of the Holy Spirit during the Liturgy. The first occurs at the very beginning of the Liturgy, when the priest begins the Proskomedia, and the prosphora still lies on the altar table. The priest reads the prayer, “*By Your precious blood, You have redeemed us from the curse of the law. By being nailed to the cross and pierced by a spear, You have poured forth immortality upon men. O our Saviour, glory to You!*” God suffered for the human race and redeemed us with His Blood. God cannot ignore this prayer because it holds the truth, for this is the very reason He came into the world. When a person addresses God with these words, the Lord looks upon their request, after which the act itself takes place—the preparation of the Holy Gifts. This is the first moment—the divine gaze upon the Holy Gifts, upon the Liturgy itself. Interestingly, when the priest serves, this occurs at the very beginning, but when the bishop serves, even though the

Proskomedie has already been completed by the priest, he repeats these acts during the Cherubic Hymn. The mystery begins with the Cherubic Hymn, marking the start of the main actions of the Holy Spirit. This moment of the Proskomedie is something you must know and feel. Always keep in your mind and memory that at this moment, the Lord looks upon the Holy Gifts, upon the Offering, which is not only brought by the priest but by the entire people of God. It is performed by the hands of the priest but is offered for the sins of both the priest and the people. At this moment, Christ is about to die for each of us. Even if the heart remains cold and there is no prayerful mood, if these thoughts are in your memory, and you realize what is happening, then through this remembrance, the heart begins to come into the fear of God and reverence before what is taking place.

Secondly, the troparion is read: *“In the grave bodily, but in hades with Thy soul as God; in Paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit wast Thou Who fillest all things, O Christ the Inexpressible”*, censuring is performed around the altar and the table of oblation with the Offering, and the Kingdom of Heaven begins to descend upon those present, upon the Church, and upon the place where this sacred service is being conducted.

Thirdly, the Cherubic Hymn is sung. In the monastery of Dionysiou, there is an ancient fresco that depicts this sacred action: it shows the living Christ giving the Angel the air, which symbolizes the burial shroud on which the dead Christ lies. The angels take Him and, through the deacon's doors, carry Him across the solea and bring Him into the altar through the Royal Doors. The priests are not depicted in the fresco, only the angels because the living Christ is the priest, and the dead Christ is the Holy Offering. At the Holy Doors, the air, with Jesus Christ lying on it, is taken by Christ Himself – the living Christ. He gives Himself and receives Himself. During the Cherubic Hymn, the mystery of the death of the Saviour is enacted, and thus, the mystery of the salvation of mankind. The Holy Gifts on the altar are not yet the Body and Blood of Christ; they have not yet been transubstantiated. Divine action is required for them to become living and accessible to humans. The sacrament is performed by

Christ Himself through the words, thoughts, and body of the priest, which is why purity and integrity are required of the priest – Christ performs the sacrament in him and through him. According to the canons of the Church, he may have only one wife, and there should be no malice towards anyone – speak of how to become like Christ. Christ is in him, and he is in Christ. The main point here is that Christ must perform this sacrament, and from the Holy Offering, the bread and wine, the Gifts must become the Body and Blood of Christ.

At the placement of the Holy Gifts on the Altar, the removal of the covers, and their covering with the Aër, burial prayers are read: *«The noble Joseph...»*, *«In the grave bodily...»*, *«How life-giving...»*, and again, *«The noble Joseph...»*. This burial concludes with the final words of the fiftieth psalm, *«Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion»*. From this, it becomes evident that these are already the Body and Blood of Christ, but the bread and wine are likened to the dead body of the Saviour. Following the burial prayers, the transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts begins. The Holy Spirit starts to hover over them, and a concentration of Divine energy occurs over the offered bread and wine.

The fourth moment comes before the Anaphora, when the priest reads the prayer, “Mindful, therefore, of this saving commandment and all those things which came to pass for us: the cross, the grave, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into the heavens, the session at the right hand, the second and glorious coming again.” It is precisely on the basis that the Lord suffered, died, and rose again, thereby accomplishing the salvation of humankind, that He gives the commandment for people to be saved by uniting with Him through the partaking of His Body and Blood. The Lord Himself, through the hand of the priest, performs the consecration of the Holy Gifts, transforming the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Do you remember I told you about a girl, about fourteen or fifteen years old, who shared her experience of Communion? She said that when the priest gave her the Body of Christ, it burned her, and she even developed a burn. When she asked the priest about it, he replied that it meant she had unrepented sins. I would also add to his words: if someone approaches the Holy Gifts without the fear of God, in a

state of emptiness, such a thing can happen. The Body and Blood of Christ are fire. St. Paisios also said, “When invisible elders communed, he saw fire entering their mouths.” They partook not only of the Body and Blood under the appearance of bread and wine but also of the Divine Fire. At this moment of the Liturgy, the Holy Spirit truly descends and transforms the Holy Gifts. St. Philaret (Drozdov) writes that when the priest says, “Take, eat,” the Holy Spirit is already enveloping the Gifts. These words seem to come from within, creating the sense that Christ Himself is speaking, and the priest is merely voicing them. And it is not only the priest who must inwardly pronounce these words; you, too, should say them to yourself, for Christ is within you. When the exclamation “Thine own of Thine own” is made, the sacred actions are performed, and the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Only God can change bread and wine into His Body and Blood for the salvation of humanity so that, through this, a person may be saved and united with God. This path of salvation was established by the Lord because man is not only spiritual but also material, and union with Christ must be real.

The fifth moment comes before the breaking of the Lamb of God, when the priest says, “*Holy Things are for the holy.*” The Holy Bread is offered to us as a sanctifying sacrifice. Just as the Lord suffered on the Cross two thousand years ago for the salvation of mankind, He offers Himself so that people may partake of Him and be saved.

The sixth moment is Communion. Even if a person does not receive Communion, they still feel the union with God. After Communion, the priest places the particles in the Chalice, and all those who have been commemorated in the liturgy are united with God. This is also a sacrament. Although it is performed only by the priest, the understanding of what is happening must be present in you.

The seventh moment – the priest says to himself, “*Blessed is our God,*” and makes the sign of the cross over the chalice on the antimins, then turns to the people and says, “*Always, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.*” The faithful make a bow at this moment. Then the priest, with the chalice, approaches the altar and says, “Be Thou exalted, O

God, above the heavens, and Thy glory above all the earth.” From this moment, the ascent of the Holy Spirit begins and ends when the thanksgiving prayers are completed and the Royal Gates are closed. According to the rubrics, the Royal Gates must be closed after the thanksgiving prayers, when the priest has said the dismissal prayer.

If you know these seven moments that occur in the altar, the service becomes more comprehensible, and you begin to truly participate in it, uniting with Christ. Remember Saint Catherine of Pühtitsa, who often received Communion? Once, she approached the Chalice, but the priest did not commune her. At that moment, she swallowed her saliva as though it were Communion and then went to drink the zeon as if she had received the Eucharist. When a person experiences the Divine Liturgy, they participate in it and partake of its grace. Participation in the Liturgy grants great grace, though, of course, it is not equal to Communion itself. Nothing can replace Communion. However, a person does receive a share of grace because they enter into the Heavenly Kingdom. This is what you must live by. Do you remember how Elder Ephraim of Katounakia would sometimes lose consciousness during the Liturgy? His heart trembled so greatly with the love of Christ that he would faint and fall upon the Holy Table. These words about the Divine Liturgy are my attempt to make what the Holy Fathers experienced in this mystery more accessible and comprehensible. Now, if you have any questions, feel free to ask them.

– *Father, you said that obedience is internal rejection. What does that mean?*

– Obedience is when you have nothing of your own. In monasteries, there used to be a charter that did not allow saying, “It’s mine.” As soon as someone began to say that, the brethren would come up and humble them. How can you fulfil an obedience by appropriating something for yourself: my cup, my spoon, my place? From the very beginning, monastic life consisted of wandering, which is the main virtue of a monk. A wanderer has nothing of their own. When you feel like a stranger in this world, you’ll be able to fulfil the will of God. That’s one thing. And the second, more

significant one, is not to have your own desires. I told you – don't seek to fulfil your will so that everything is good. For example, a sister is preparing food, and the eldest tells her, "Don't add salt and pepper." She replies, "Bless me." And then the other sisters ate the food and started scolding her. She began to grumble, "The eldest sister blessed me to cook it her way, but the sisters were hungry and scolded me." But if she says, "Sisters, God wants it this way," then she'll be a nun and only then will she be a saint in life.

– *You spoke about a strong love for God, but is it possible to acquire it in our active monastery, which is neither a hermitage nor a skete?*

– Learn to live the life of a hermit, and everything will fall into place. Everything must be combined: a good, kind thought, a merciful heart, the virtue of asceticism, and prayer. One thing leads to another because everything is interconnected. If a person begins to be saved, all of this will be in them. You won't be able to pray if you have something dear, something you love. Your heart will turn away, and the devil knows where to catch you. Love is the sum of many virtues. By the way, let's speak about order.

Among the holy fathers, different practices are found. In the monastery of St. Paisios Velichkovsky, there was order in the monks' cells. Those who came to the Niametz Monastery were well-fed, and everything was clean and well-maintained externally, yet the brethren received salvation and reached a high spiritual life. Another rule was followed by Elder Hadji-Georgios on Mount Athos. He did not bless his spiritual children to clean their cells. You can imagine the dirt there. He did that to prevent them from dwelling on the external. Both practices are salvific. When a person begins to live by prayer with an elder beside them, and their life follows obedience, they won't be fixated on external cleanliness. They do it in obedience because the elder has blessed them. There is also a third practice from St. Symeon the New Theologian. Sometimes he would bless his spiritual children to fast, and sometimes to eat well, so they wouldn't follow their own will. All these three practices are aimed at preventing a person from having their own will. If you are blessed to keep order and cleanliness in the cells, do so, but do not become attached to it. But if you are not

blessed to maintain order, it seems to me that many of you will begin to complain. Remember St. Nilus of Sora. New gates were brought to the monastery and installed. The brethren said, "Oh, they look so nice!" The elder looked and said, "No, this won't benefit for your souls." He blessed them to make the gates slightly crooked, so they wouldn't close properly. "Now it's good", he said.

You perform many obediences incorrectly. You should do the work without admiring it, but instead, you start pouring your whole soul into the task. For example, you iron something for your sister, but she doesn't like it; the folds aren't in the right place or something else is wrong, and you get upset because of that. If you approached it more simply—if she doesn't like it, fine, we'll redo it. When my brother and I started doing something and I didn't want to, I would start grumbling, and he would always say, "If it's difficult, don't do it, I'll do everything myself"—and that's it. In the end, most of our frustrations don't come from physical difficulty in doing or redoing something, but from moral challenges, when someone makes a remark that touches our pride. That's one thing. The second thing is when a person begins to live by the external world, becoming dependent on many things and events that happen in the world. However, when you live with your heart, with your love inside, in any situation, you retreat inward and find your home there, connecting with Christ there. If you cannot immerse yourself within, you will always be in conversations, arguments, and your feelings will never settle. You will never achieve even the smallest spiritual perfection, the small indifference in which you could see Christ and unite with Him.

Each of us has problems and struggles, but this is not what a monk should live by. It doesn't matter whether you do something poorly or well – do it as best as you can. Use the strength and skill the Lord has given you to the fullest. You can do something according to your conscience, but do not live by it because when you die, none of this will matter – neither the things nor the deeds, and no one will need them. You will take nothing with you.

Why does the Gospel say that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts of the Apostles 14:22)?

Why did the Holy Fathers always avoid a comfortable, sweet life and even seek out hardships? What should happen in tribulations? If a person's soul is properly arranged, when things go wrong, when they are beaten from all sides, they, like a snail, retreat inside themselves and seek peace in God. If a person cannot do this, they begin to grumble, try to drown out their sorrow, and seek pleasure to calm their nerves. But this only leads them to a worse state. This is an incorrect approach. Tribulation helps to force our "self" inward. But if you focus on these problems and begin to live by them, you cannot stand firm inside yourself.

It's the same with attachments. You turn your will, your thoughts away from them and direct them to another love – to Christ. You need to immerse your thoughts in God. If you are offended, your feelings are disturbed, and the offence starts spinning in your mind, bring your mind to your heart. If you stand for prayer, your mind has to be there, no matter what happens to you.

The problem with all our misfortunes and inner complaints comes from not knowing God, from our mind not standing firm in our heart, from our lack of love. When a child is small and something bad happens to him, he is struck or offended, where does he immediately run? To his mother. That is natural, as seeking protection in love is inherent in human nature. In life with God, it should be the same: when something bitter, sorrowful happens to you – you should run to Him. And if you turn to Him but do not reach Him with your feelings, with your heart, then a setback occurs. You begin to live with the pain, the sorrow, and God cannot comfort you because you're not under His hand, you're not in Him.

What is humility? First of all, it is accepting everything from God's hand, when a person sees God's will in everything – this is God's will. This must be not just accepted, but endured, experienced, so it is necessary to go inside yourself, to enter into God. Accepting everything without going inside yourself can harm a person, because both good and bad, without going inside, do not nourish but rather empty him. Therefore, humility is always being within, while pretending humility is standing outwardly. But without fulfilling

God's will, the mind will not remain in the heart; it will leave because it will not unite with God. If God is not within, the mind will start to entertain itself and seek enjoyment in created love. Therefore, only by fulfilling these two commandments of humility can a person be saved. Now, let's pray.

June 26, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Thirteen

Every time the Lord gathers us so that we receive spiritual food for the mind and heart. Prayers, services, works, and communication with each other are not enough for a monk. These, albeit short, meetings and conversations about God and salvation should root Divine formulas in the heart and lead to spiritual fruits. And these fruits are our unity with God, our salvation. Every time I try to talk to you about what gives me food for thought and heartfelt emotions, that's what I share with you. Our experiences and topics change, but our conversations always return to our salvation and inner perfection in God, in Christ, because we must be Christians—that is, like God in everything: in thoughts, words, and deeds. That is why we read the Gospel, that is why we serve Him and love Him, because we want to be like Him. In the life of Father John of Kronstadt, all his thoughts, inner experiences, and reflections were directed toward becoming, as much as possible, like Christ here on earth. The miracles of this dear priest were performed when he ascended in his inner enlightenment, soulfully drawing closer to Christ and resembling Him in every way. Through him, the Lord performed great miracles. Today, I would like to talk about our love for God, our sonship, and His Fatherly love for us.

In the eighth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus Christ says to the Jews, "You do what you have seen with your father," and they reply to Him, "Abraham is our father." The conversation continues, and again the Lord points out to them, "You are doing the works of your father," but they respond, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—

God” (John 8:38-41). Here, we see two interesting points. The Jews point to their lineage from Abraham (a human ancestry) and to God (a spiritual ancestry). In the Gospel of Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus Christ begins with Abraham, emphasizing His human lineage (Matthew 1:2), while in the Gospel of Luke, it traces its roots to God – “the son of Adam, the son of God” (Luke 4:38). It’s fascinating how the Jews felt about God the Father. For them, God was very close, intimate – they felt this kinship deeply. God the Father is the source of the love from which absolutely everything flows. He is the essence that encompasses everything, into which one immerses themselves and in which they live. This is how the word ‘Father’ can be understood. Among the Jews, this sense of kinship with God, of being His children, is passed down from generation to generation, as if it is in their very blood.

However, our Lord Jesus Christ seems to challenge this and says to them, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). In other words, being born in God is not something self-evident; it is a rebirth from above. How, then, should this spiritual birth take place within a person? The Lord points out the Jews’ mistake – their perception of God, of God the Father, should go much deeper. We have to strive to resemble God in love. Through these words and this reference to the Holy Scripture, I want to help you uncover this love of God the Father within yourself, to recognize His fatherhood, His very nature in you. He is the dearest and closest one, and we trust Him with everything, like a little child.

People sometimes ask me, “Father, how can I pray about this? It’s such a small thing.” At times, I find myself saying, “Lord, I lost a screw – help me find it,” or “Lord, I’d like a candy – please send one my way.” It may seem like a trifle, and that one shouldn’t approach God with such small things. After all, He is exalted, deeply spiritual, and holy. But He is also my Father, and as His child, I lay everything before Him – my thoughts, my desire for salvation and union with Him, and even my smallest, most trivial requests. This is how it should be, because I love Him as I would my own flesh-and-blood mother or father. I don’t think about the fact that God is so great and mighty and I am so small. He is my Father, and I tell Him about what hurts, what I’m thinking, whether it’s bad or good. You have to understand this deeply.

We have been talking about spiritual birth, about being born again. For us, this spiritual connection with God is revealed in prayer because prayer is the thread that unites us with God. In prayer, especially in the Jesus Prayer, one can trace this state of birth, this discovery of God as one’s Father. You also have to understand something else: our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son, and we, as children of God, share a parallel with Him in sonship, but we possess it by grace, whereas Christ possesses it by His very essence. Just as the Son is eternally begotten of God the Father, so we, dwelling with our mind in our heart, must continually be born in God the Father. We must feel within ourselves this shared nature through grace.

When a person’s mind descends into the spiritual heart and is entirely immersed in it, they begin to sense this connection with God, or more precisely, their rebirth in Him. They feel their sonship – these currents of Divine love begin to flow throughout their soul and their entire being, like blood. In such moments, a person feels like a child of God and dares to address God as their Father.

The essence of God the Father in prayer is incomprehensible; it only reveals itself to the heart through the knowledge of God in His energies, in His love. This inward immersion, this birth in God the Father, should be experienced during the Jesus Prayer if it is practised correctly – that is, with self-denial, when the mind is no longer tied to created things, people, or even souls surrounding the person.

In this state, the person is like an infant in the womb, feeling only the warmth of the mother, living solely through her. Similarly, when a person immerses themselves in prayer, they begin to live solely through God, and everything else ceases to exist for them. This feeling should accompany prayer, and a person must feel their kinship and rebirth in God. This is not merely a metaphor; it is a particular state with its own roots and definitions.

We come to know God the Father in the sacrament of the Liturgy. In the Eucharistic Canon, the priest begins to pray to God the Father, asking Him to accept the offering – the sacrifice of His Son. He addresses Him as someone close and dear, asking the Lord to fulfil this sacrifice and accept it. When the Consecration of the Holy Gifts (the bread and

wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ) takes place, a litany of supplication is chanted, ending with the priest's exclamation: "*And vouchsafe us, O Master, that with boldness and without condemnation we may dare to call upon Thee the heavenly God as Father, and to say...*" This exclamation is made because the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, has come into the world and now appears before us in the Holy Gifts as His Body and Blood. Having the Son of God present with us, we also gain the boldness to call upon the name of God the Father. For God the Father, the sacrifice of giving His Son is immense and profound because, like any parent, it would have been far easier for Him to offer Himself rather than to give His Child up to death. The pain and love of God the Father are also a sacrifice – one that, if it can even be expressed this way, surpasses the sacrifice of the Son of God Himself. When we look upon the Cross of Christ and remember His suffering for us, we thank Him and pray to Him. However, there is also the sacrifice of God the Father, which is incomprehensible to our minds and unfathomable to our hearts. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – all together as the Holy Trinity – are indivisible. Thus, when a person enters into deep prayer, going inward into themselves, they begin to perceive the great love of God through the Holy Trinity in its entirety.

I already mentioned that in Abbess Thaisia's book, there is a story about a girl who was herding cattle. The abbess was walking past her on the road, and the girl asked her to teach her how to pray. She began explaining the Jesus Prayer to her and then asked, "How do you pray?" The girl replied, "Well, I don't know how to pray, I just know the Lord's Prayer..." And as soon as the girl said these words, tears streamed down her face. The abbess looked at her and said, "The Lord has already given you prayer." This story teaches us that when the Lord stands within and reveals Himself to a person in love, the person is born again, retreats into their own heart, internally perceives this love of God in all its grandeur, and then can no longer call upon the name of God without tears. God sacrifices everything, even His Only-Begotten Son, to restore humanity to its sonship, so that a person may once again become a child and find their Father. These are the feelings and experiences of the heart that I wanted to share with you.

You need to feel the emotions of the ancient Jews so that you too may become the new Israel, so that this spiritual kinship with God may dwell in your hearts. Then God will truly be your Father. And as a Father, He always sees and hears both our childish whims and our profound spiritual thirst, granting us everything in His love. Often, the Lord immediately responds to our childish whims and fulfils them quickly, but He does not rush to fulfil our spiritual desires. They remain unmet because spiritual gifts require humility from a person.

Humility is the realization of one's own weakness and sinfulness. When people come to me for confession, burdened by certain weaknesses and sins, I always say that they will not be able to resist these sins until they recognize how sinful they are. Only by realizing oneself as a sinner will a person protect themselves, avoiding those places, friends, and people that become a temptation for them. A person asks God for help, even while feeling unworthy of God, unworthy of the Kingdom of Heaven, and even unworthy to look toward heaven, for they are a sinner. It is then that the Lord grants them much and preserves them because there is humility in them. Recognizing one's weaknesses is the first step toward salvation, but it is also the most fundamental one, which must never escape a person's awareness.

I want to talk to you about obedience, a topic we often return to. The first sin of humanity was the sin of disobedience, when Adam and Eve's will opposed God's will, going against Him and breaking the unity between God and humanity. The soul must always be imbued with humility. In the Acts of the Apostles, the lives of the apostles Paul and Peter vividly illustrate how they loved and practised humility. It is particularly interesting that during Paul's time in Cilicia, the Spirit of God, through holy people, revealed that this apostle was destined to suffer in Rome. Many approached him, saying, "Do not go to Jerusalem; they will bind you there." Yet he went, because it was God's will (Acts 21:10-14). He was neither disheartened nor deterred, but remained calm and humble, knowing that fulfilling God's will meant embracing suffering and even death. However, humility does not make a person weak-willed. When the Jews seized Paul in Jerusalem and brought him before the Sanhedrin, he demonstrated human

ingenuity. Noticing that the Sanhedrin was composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees (the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead and in angels, while the Sadducees denied all of that), Paul exclaimed, “Brothers, I am being judged for my hope in the resurrection of the dead!”, which caused an uproar, splitting the assembly into two factions. A dispute erupted between them, and they began arguing amongst themselves (Acts 23:6–9). By acting in this way, with human wisdom, Paul remained in the spirit of humility. Had he taken a different approach by thinking, “I’m going to die anyway, let them kill me”, he would have fallen into false humility and departed from God’s will. Or take another example: when the soldiers arrested Paul, bound him, and prepared to scourge him, Paul called over a centurion and said, “I am a Roman citizen; you have no right to treat me this way.” The centurion reported to the commander, saying, “What should we do? He’s a Roman citizen.” The commander then came to Paul and asked, “How did you obtain this citizenship?” Paul replied, “I was born with it” (Acts 23:24–29). In another instance, when Paul and Silas were imprisoned, and later the authorities sought to release them secretly, Paul refused. He said, “No, you imprisoned us publicly, subjected us to humiliation, and now you want to release us quietly? You must come and apologize.” And they did come and apologize (Acts 16:35–39). Paul did not rush to escape when the opportunity arose. Instead, he ensured they acknowledged their wrongdoing. This shows that humility is not always about saying, “Forgive me, forgive me.”

We have to humble ourselves when God’s will is being fulfilled, but when we are being broken, we have to fight and resist, and not crumble like weaklings. However, we often misunderstand the boundary between humility and false humility; the line is very blurred. A person compromises true humility either by exalting themselves or, conversely, by adopting a servile attitude, always missing the golden mean. To be humble means to fulfil God’s will. People often accuse us of being spineless – they hit us, and we just keep saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” But no, we have to act as the Lord desires, according to His will. When a person has the right disposition and understanding, they always act

humbly and faithfully. The Apostle Paul teaches us this true, God-inspired humility: knowing when we should bow our head before circumstances and people, and when, on the contrary, we have to stand against hardships and those who offend or revile us.

We have to humble ourselves when God’s will is being fulfilled, but when we are being broken, we have to fight and resist, and not crumble like weaklings. However, we often misunderstand the boundary between humility and false humility; the line is very blurred. A person compromises true humility either by exalting themselves or, conversely, by adopting a servile attitude, always missing the golden mean. To be humble means to fulfil God’s will. People often accuse us of being spineless – they hit us, and we just keep saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” But no, we have to act as the Lord desires, according to His will. When a person has the right disposition and understanding, they always act humbly and faithfully. The Apostle Paul teaches us this true, God-inspired humility: knowing when we should bow our head before circumstances and people, and when, on the contrary, we have to stand against hardships and those who offend or revile us. There is an interesting moment in the Acts of the Apostles when King Herod intended to execute the Apostle Peter and ordered him to be taken into prison, but an angel freed him from his chains, and Peter walked out to freedom. When the king discovered that the prisoner was gone, he searched for him but couldn’t find him, so he ordered the guards to be executed (Acts 12:3-11, 19). However, Peter did not return to prison to spare the guards from death. In another instance, Paul and Silas were imprisoned in chains, and an angel loosed their bonds and opened the doors of the prison. At that moment, the jailer woke up, saw the open doors, and, thinking the prisoners had escaped, was about to kill himself. But Paul did not remain silent and cried out with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” The jailer then realized this was the power of God, fell at the apostle’s feet, and believed. He became a Christian, and his entire household was baptized (Acts 16:25-34). Isn’t that fascinating? In one case, the apostle does not interfere with the guards’ fate, and they are executed. In the other, he intervenes with a cry, saving the jailer from death and leading him to God. The Lord

keeps His holy prisoners in jail for the sake of the jailer, so that he might come to faith. These are the ways of God, and from these passages of Scripture, we see that for God, this temporary human life is not as important as salvation and eternal life.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how long a person will live on this earth. He is like a flower: he was here, and now he is gone. A person's life only has meaning when they can live with God because only in God is there goodness and eternity. I would like to remind you of one parable from the Gospel. A master prepared a feast and told his servants to go and invite the invited guests, but the invited guests refused to come. Then he commanded, "*Go and invite everyone you find: both good and bad.*" They went and brought them. When the people gathered and the master came to the feast, he saw among the guests a man who was not wearing wedding clothes, and he asked, "*How did you get in here without wedding clothes?*" The man was silent. And the master told the servants, "*Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and throw him into outer darkness*" (Matthew 22:2-13). They did so. Do you understand? Every person is born into this world with their own character and soul – some are gentle, some are harsh, some are kind, and some are not so kind. The Lord sees the heart and gives each person their own path to salvation. For God, the most important thing is that a person follows the path of salvation and lives according to God's will. And they will be saved – both the good and the bad, they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Who, then, are those who are not dressed in wedding clothes, who will not be saved? I believe that these are the ones who do not have the fear of God, that is, without the sense of God's presence, one cannot be saved.

In the Gospel, there are words saying that everything will be forgiven to a person, even blasphemy against the Son of Man, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Matthew 12:31-32). The Holy Fathers interpret these words as referring to those who reject God's providence and His love. The sense of God's presence both within oneself and outside oneself is love, and from this love, a person intertwines and unites with God. He is in God, and God is in him. Both monks and laypeople can only be saved when we live in

God, when we have the fear of God, and when we begin to live according to our conscience. Only by living in the fear of God can we confess, come before God, and bring our repentance. The holy fathers said that in the last times, people will be saved by repentance, and nothing else, but repentance without the fear of God does not exist. Without the sense of God's presence, conscience is silent, but this feeling is a gift, and it must be preserved. A person can lose it through sin, negligence, vanity, bitterness, or improper thoughts. This divine gift is very fragile and delicate. Any sinful movement of the heart can silence this feeling. A person can suppress it through indulgence, worldliness, or base desires. Acquire this feeling, keep it within you, and do not give it up for anything, even for all the blessings in the world. If you lose it, return to it because without it, it is impossible to be saved, impossible to attain not only spiritual gifts but also to have any connection with God. As soon as the sense of God's presence and His love is lost, despair, loneliness, and inner emptiness set in. This virtue of the soul must definitely be in your heart.

I want to share with you some of my observations and experiences. In our dining room, there is a flypaper – when flies approach it, they get stuck. I was once sitting and watching. Some flies would directly land on it, settle like helicopters, and dive into the sticky tape. That's it – they got stuck, tangled, and died. But others (there were far fewer of them) flew around, touching it with their feet, trying it out, sensing something was wrong. They got stuck, but only the tips of their legs were caught in the sticky substance, and they managed to pull away. They had enough strength to fly again because only the tips of their legs were trapped. Later, of course, it took some time for the stickiness to wear off their legs, they had to walk around for a bit until the substance was gone, but eventually, they would live. And they wouldn't fly back to the tape – they had learned from their experience. The same thing happens in our lives. A human is a human – a passionate creature. So, in our lives, if we come into contact with some sin, if bad thoughts arise, we need to act: if we try something and feel that we are losing God, we have to immediately pull away from that sin. If you come into contact with sin and feel passion burning, if there is a

burning sensation, immediately reject it in your mind and turn away from it. When you have touched sin and your heart has tasted the passion, it will take time to cleanse yourself and let all that burn away.

If you are completely, head to toe, immersed in passion – with your hands, feet, head, heart, feelings, and thoughts involved – then it's over, you're lost. The one who, after touching it, reaches for it, who likes it, and who completely surrenders to it – this is the true destruction. This can happen both in a monastery and in the world. If someone has plunged into this and says, “This is my life, I want this,” there will be no life there, no salvation can be found. As long as we are walking through life – I know this both from my own experience and from confessions – we encounter many things, many sins, much impurity that the heart will feel and endure. But each time, salvation comes from standing firm in the mind: «This is not mine, I don't want this, my life is elsewhere.» But if the will wavers and the mind shifts away from its standing in God, then things become bad.

– *Could you please bring an example of false humility?*

– Yes. Two people were sitting at the table, talking, and then got into an argument. One of them punched the other in the cheek. The other thought, «Time to humble myself,» and offered him the other cheek. The angry man struck him so hard on the second cheek that he suffered a concussion and was taken to the hospital. He knew the man was mentally unstable, and in the end, he both got hurt himself and provoked the other even more. Yes, the Gospel says that «If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also» (Matthew 5:39). Well, he offered him the other cheek, but was that humility? No. Each situation needs its own solution, and if you use the Gospel as a rigid formula, you can end up losing your mind.

I would also like to speak about monasteries. When a person enters a monastery, they begin to live a monastic life. The root of monastic life lies in inner obedience, that is, submitting one's own will to the will of God. This divine will is expressed through the will of one's spiritual father, the hegumen, senior brothers/sisters, and even the will of animals and insects. When a person submits their will to this divine will, they are saved and truly become a monk.

However, not all obedience is the same. Some become true novices in the proper, spiritual sense – novices of inner life and the renunciation of their own will. Others, however, become mere labourers. They focus on external obedience, on labour. You come to them, give a task, and they fulfil it without question, yet inwardly they remain attached to their own desires and thoughts. Based on my spiritual experience, I can say that a true monk or novice views their entire life through the lens of obedience and perceives their sins as disobedience, as opposition to God's will. But with labourers, it's different – they do not feel God's will or seem unaware of it. Overeating, oversleeping, or harbouring anger toward others seems normal to them, but they fail to realize that they have not submitted their will to God's or even sought it.

In 2002, when I was living on Mount Athos, I remember how Father Theologos was dying in the Greek cell of John the Apostle. He kept repeating, “I am dying because of my disobedience.” Indeed, a true novice, when living according to the teachings of the Holy Fathers, views their entire life through the lens of obedience and evaluates their spiritual growth solely through it. We have to measure our life against the will of God. Once again, I will emphasize: the foundation, the very core of our way of life, is obedience. Only after that come asceticism and good deeds. God's will is revealed in everything: in our surroundings, in the things that happen to us (scratching mice, noise, people, and many other things that disturb our prayer). When a person humbles themselves and accepts this as God's will, they gain peace of mind. Everything in our soul – despondency, passions, and other struggles – stems from disobedience. When a spiritual person who goes to church begins to live a life of passions, they perfectly realize the need to return to obedience. When they come to confession and acknowledge certain sins, the primary realization they have is that they went against God, against His will. Such a person feels their egoism and understands that unless they renounce self-will, pride will remain with them. And how, then, can one speak of salvation? There will be only separation from God and ruin.

– *Father, how can one discern God's will in everyday life?*

– You have to draw it from those around you, through the abbot/hegumen, the spiritual father, and the circumstances that happen to you.

– *I mean that when we humble ourselves before certain circumstances that God arranges for us – it's one thing, and another when we are left to ourselves. There is time for obedience, time for the monastic rule, but how can you make sure everything else is according to God's will?*

– God's will, how can I explain... it's like a spirit. God is spirit. A person lives, makes mistakes, but when they go through a kind of grinding process, with experience, they learn to sense this will. Many feel this spirit of God's presence, God's will within themselves, this energy—it's already a gift from God. The simplest way is to listen to your spiritual father, and then the Lord Himself provides everything – it's the most straightforward path.

– *And those who do not have this gift, what should they do?*

– Stay in humility. The most important thing is to avoid wrong thoughts. Many have been damaged by their own minds. For a person who has come to the monastery, the renunciation of their own will has always been required. Until this law is fulfilled, as long as the human «I» keeps presenting its own thoughts, judgments about people, events, and everything else, they will not become a true novice. We call ourselves both servants of God and sons of God. And one does not contradict the other. A servant is one who submits their will to someone else, while a son is one who thinks and acts in accordance with the Father.

– *Father, but what about Saint Seraphim of Sarov? He had the strength to scatter those robbers, but he chose not to do so and became a cripple...*

– This is what we are talking about. St. Seraphim felt the will of God. Or another, opposite example – St. Moses the Black. When robbers came to rob him, he tied them all up, dragged them to the monastery, and laid them at the feet of the hegumen. And when they realized that this was their former leader, who had left everything and turned to God, they repented and became monks, just like him. And those men who beat Saint Seraphim of Sarov needed his forgiveness

to repent and turn to God. When they committed this sin, almost murder, and saw that he forgave them and even interceded for them so that they wouldn't be punished, they changed their lifestyle.

I was once walking through the Trinity-Sergius Lavra and saw a beggar. 'Father, bless me' – I blessed him. 'Father, give me some money, please' – I didn't give. After that, the beggar insulted me. The question is, why are you asking me for money when you already hate me? If I give you something, I'll be good in your eyes, but if another person doesn't – he'll be bad. Where's the repentance in that? For each person, God has arranged their own path to salvation, and it's revealed to us how to bring others to God. When we talk about humility, we should not focus so much on the humble action, but rather on what God wants from us, on His will. If Apostle Paul had told the Jews, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." that would've been false humility and renouncing Christ.

– *Father, what did you mean when you used the term 'to break one's will'?*

– This means breaking one's bad will and acquiring a good, humble one. For example, I want some ice cream, and the desire for it makes my mouth water, but instead of eating it, I am breaking this desire in my mind. The same applies to any passion – it hurts, I want it, but I cut it off.

– *And what do you mean when you say that we should not suppress anyone's will?*

– When a person begins to break and suppress someone's will, both get harmed from that.

– *Is it when one begins to instill their own will instead of God's will?*

– In any case, neither your will nor God's will should be imposed, as it will harm both you and the other person. When you impose your own will, it's clear that this is a form of pride, but as for imposing God's will... Let me give you an example – an episode from the life of St. Sebastian of Karaganda. His spiritual daughter was about to marry, and he begged her not to marry that person. He pleaded with her until the very end. She was already on the train, heading to Almaty to her fiancé, but he continued to plead. Still, she went ahead with her

decision, and a year later, she became ill with tuberculosis and died. He never backed away from her, making it clear to her that God's will was not blessing this union. He didn't force her, but he continually gave her the opportunity to make her own choice, while hoping she would understand and feel God's will, realizing that she was going against it. Therefore, in calling people to salvation and fulfilling God's will, we must carry out our mission to the end.

– Father, there was one incident when people brought a possessed person to the elder, and in a fit, he struck him on the cheek. The elder turned the other cheek to him, and the demon couldn't withstand the humility and left.

– Yes, I remember this case. But that person was demonically possessed, and the elder knew whom to turn his cheek to – it wasn't the person striking the elder, but the demon who got afraid of humility. However, if it's a mental illness, that's a different matter. I once went to confession in a psychiatric hospital in Abramtsevo, and if you start offering your cheeks to everyone there, you'll either come out crippled or remain there, mistaken for one of them. Different situations require different approaches.

– Father, how should we relate to people who are unjust to someone, who scold others? Can we see God's providence in this or not?

– You have to learn to see and feel God's providence. The longer you live, the deeper and stronger this providence should be felt, not only for yourself but for those around you. God leads each person along their own path and saves them through their own sufferings. The Holy Fathers never isolated their children from society, nor protected them from temptations or tribulations. They only taught them to preserve their inner peace and maintain their connection with God. That's the whole task. Understand one thing: those who offend us, who strike us, are also vulnerable to the enemy. We have to resist this, but at the same time, we have to humble ourselves and not become embittered against the person. However, there is another case. In the Holy Scriptures, it is said that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 9:12), and in this evil, there was God's will. In all these cases, there is God's providence. And if there is God's will in this, who

am I to contradict it? Yet, in any case, be concerned for your neighbours and, in some cases, stand up for them. The Lord Himself will put on your heart how to act.

– Father, during the day I manage to fend off all kinds of thoughts, but at night I don't remember that God exists – my soul forgets about Him, and the same thoughts come. I wake up and immediately start asking for forgiveness for them, but during the dream, I don't attach any importance to them. How will the Lord ask for this? I even asked, "Lord, please help me remember You in my sleep," but still, all that sits in my subconscious comes out at night.

– Yes, you understand everything correctly. The Holy Fathers say that when the soul reaches purity, it fights against sin even in sleep, resists it, and does not submit to its will. This is already a high level of spirituality. Of course, we should strive for this, but the main thing is at least not to dwell on these dreams, not to get involved with them. There are already enough temptations, and if we start getting involved in our nighttime thoughts and living by them, there will be no rest for the soul. Reprove yourself for your sinfulness and calm down.

– It's frustrating that I don't think about God at all in my sleep. Sometimes, I don't remember anything, it's like I just switched off, and then wake up and feel like I have to run somewhere. Does that happen?

– Yes, it happens. Sometimes you dream of movies, you have these vivid dreams. Someone asked one of the Athonite fathers, "Father, how many hours should you sleep – 4.5 hours or 7 hours?" He replied, "Get up as soon as you wake up." Sleep as much as your body needs: sometimes you need seven hours, and sometimes only three. Sleep, wake up, and then get up. If you wake up and then go back to sleep, very often those 'movies' start, and those who enjoy them continue to sleep.

– It happens during the day, when you fall asleep on a day off.

– It happens all the time, which is why Saint Seraphim of Sarov was carrying a bag of stones to torment the one who torments us. This is the nature of man, always inclined to sin, and we should not give it any leniency.

– And when I wake up, I feel like didn't sleep at all...

– There are two reasons for that: either from weakness or from thoughts. Sleep is definitely necessary. The mind turns off, and the soul rests, and when a person wakes up, they begin to pray with new forces. If the mind doesn't turn off, the thoughts keep pressing all the time. You seem to be lying down, but at the same time, you're not resting. Sometimes you lie down, and something comes to your mind, everything starts to boil, thoughts begin to run, and you feel like you're not handling them. You can't fall asleep, they keep coming, and if you start pitying yourself and stay lying down, then for sure in your sleep there will be such a war, such movies, that you'll never wake up rested – they will be grinding you like through a meat grinder. Therefore, it's better to get up and do prostrations or engage in something else. Let it be a sleepless night, but either during the day or the next night, you'll lie down and get your rest, the main thing is not to pity yourself. That's the devil's war with us.

– *Father, I'm always busy with my monastic duties, so I don't even have time to sit down, let alone pray.*

– A person has a sense of pleasure. Adrenaline is produced from three sources: from labour, from married life, and from love for God. Even when addicts come and are loaded with hard work, they still get some pleasure from it. But sometimes work doesn't always serve for good. If you perform your work with attachment, with pleasure, giving all your strength and life to it, then you move away from God. This is also a form of delusion. Do you remember the elder from the Pskov Caves Monastery? He used to make lecterns. When he died, he saw how his lecterns were burning in the fire, all his work. And when he came to his senses again, he left all his works and started praying. Of course, if your work is done without any attachment, it truly becomes obedience for the sake of humility. The main thing is the connection with God. If you are not connecting with God through your work, but getting lost in the work itself, that is delusion. Therefore, check your own soul and see where it will be: in this cauldron or in God?

– *When I work with diligence, I feel the presence of God.*

– And when you work without diligence?

– *I don't really know because we don't make those patties for ourselves...*

– But what's the difference – for yourself or for others?

– *They are for God.*

– How so?

– *But the sisters... There's God in them, so we make the patties for God.*

– If you think this way, then you are performing your obedience with humility. It leads to your salvation, so keep it up. The key is not to become attached to anything, and for that, you must live an inner life. Many cooks were saints: St. Euphrosynus the Cook of Alexandria and Venerable Theodotus of the Glinsk Hermitage, for example. When Elder Theodotus prepared food, he would gaze at the fire and constantly remember the fire of Gehenna. This remembrance would stir in him a sense of God's presence, and the food would recede to the background. During work, one must always remain in prayer. Work is given to the monk not for its own result, but to enter into peacefulness. Therefore, after obedience, a person usually enters into humility.

When work is done with attachment, there is no peace in the soul. Sometimes you do something and then walk around admiring your work – how beautiful, how good it looks – but you still feel that something is wrong. Your soul becomes attached to it, and then you start running away from it, fighting against it. It's not easy to free yourself from this. Earthly beauty still attaches to the soul with attachment, until the inner motor kicks in and the mind dives into the inner world; without such immersion, avoiding this attachment is impossible. The Holy Fathers wrote about this: it is not he who is passionless who says that during work his thoughts disappear, but he who, in a state of peace, has no thoughts. Yes, indeed, when you work, there are far fewer thoughts, but when you enter the church, they attack you immediately. Sometimes you leave the church feeling beaten – though you've done nothing, just stood there – and you feel drained, thinking about resting and disconnecting from everything. Labour helps a person to cleanse the mind, but it does not make it completely passionless.

- *What should we do in that case?*
- Sit alone in your cell and see what thoughts arise. If the thoughts are about work, then it's passion.
- *All sisters are so different, and I have to please them all.*
- Be pleasing to God.
- *Of course, we want to please God, and pleasing God means pleasing our neighbours as well.*
- No, that would be people-pleasing. Treat them kindly, but require obedience from them.
- *Father, we were once told that in a certain monastery, some monks led a very ascetic life. The abbot instructed that during Great Lent, cabbage soup should be prepared with oil, but the brothers would protest and pour it out. Then the hegumen asked the abbess, "Should we stop preparing it since they pour it out anyway?" She replied, "No, keep cooking it. Everyone will act according to their own conscience: one will eat, another will not." So, can we do the same – some will eat five cutlets, while others just one?*
- There should be some kind of standard. When I was working in the refectory of the Koutloumousiou Monastery, it was customary for the hegumen to take a knife and cut a piece of cheese, and that piece was the standard for everyone. He would specify how much bread, apples, and tomatoes were needed per person, and that was the portion – no more, no less. Of course, this should be approached with discernment – if a person is large, they need a double portion.
- *«Father, when I am fulfilling my obedience, I want to be with God and pray all the time.*
- That's good. Now, let's talk more about the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer has two levels. There is the deep, immersing prayer, where a person's mind fully enters into the words: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,' becoming absorbed in them and standing firmly within. Sometimes there are severe attacks of thoughts, but the person holds on to these words and remains within the heart, not allowing the mind to rise upward – it's warm and peaceful there in the heart. Then there is a more superficial, lighter prayer, where the mind keeps leaping out of the heart, unable to fully embrace the prayer.

When St. Seraphim wrote about the Jesus Prayer, he specifically spoke of the deep, immersing prayer. The Elders of Optina, when teaching novices the Jesus Prayer, also referred to this kind. However, the initial level of prayer is the external one—superficial and not deep. It only touches the heart briefly and then departs, without being held there. When it does remain in the heart, you will immediately feel that connection with God the Father, your union with Him. For now, during external prayer, you may feel satisfaction simply from the fact that you are praying, that your mind is occupied, and you receive some spiritual nourishment—this is good, but it is not yet true prayer. True prayer occurs when you fully immerse yourself inwardly. You ask, "Father, how should we pray?"

I believe one should learn to pray with both open and closed eyes, though it is much easier with closed eyes. St. Seraphim advised to close your eyes, as if you have died. This sense of death, of dissolving and extinguishing your 'self,' draws the mind into the heart. For example, when I read canons in church, I experience distraction. But when St. John of Kronstadt read canons, his spirit was filled with sweetness, and he entered deep into himself. Each person has their own path. Elder Nikodim of Karoulia, for instance, would warm his heart by reading canons, then engage in the Jesus Prayer. He lived in solitude, in constant silence. Personally, I find it easier to sit alone in my cell and concentrate, as it is difficult for me to fully withdraw into prayer during services. I still consider myself a beginner, since both internal and external prayer are present within me. When I once asked Father Gervasius in the Koutloumousiou Monastery, "Elder, how do you pray?" He replied, "I pray as the spirit leads; you can't force it. The spirit knows how much it can bear and how much it cannot. If you pray and the spirit becomes immersed, let it stay there for a while. If it begins to rise, don't force it back – let it come out, rest for a bit, and then return." I believe he was right because the mind actually tends to get tired. But when a person reaches spiritual heights, the mind fully enters the heart and can remain there for a long time, constantly abiding in the memory of God. Let's practice both forms of prayer and strive for complete immersion in God.

- *When the prayer is going well, the mind gets tired.*
- It's always been said that prayer is hard work.
- *Do I have to stop praying when my mind is thinking about something else?*

– In this case, I immediately think of my father. When he began to go to church, he told me that it would be easier for him to unload a wagon of cement than to pray for two hours in church. Why does this happen? Because thoughts roll one after another, and a person doesn't cope with them. One of the gifts that prayer gives is stopping your thoughts. I have always told you that you should open all your problems and thoughts to God, "Lord, You manage and decide everything." Let's pray.

September 20, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Fourteen

Before we get together, I always think about what to talk about. When the conversation begins, I say what the Lord puts on my heart: about the inner world of a person, about how he lives, what his soul breathes, what it aches for, and what it lives. Each of us, having come to the monastery, decided to devote ourselves to this inner life to go with our whole being inside ourselves because inside a person is Christ, and our self meets Him there, lives with Him and loves Him. Talking about spiritual life means talking about your inner feelings. When I open my inner world to you (whatever it may be: good or bad, Divine or demonic), I want each of you to focus your inner gaze on your heart, on what is happening inside you, what you live with and with whom you live.

Now I want to talk to you about obedience. This topic is directly related to salvation, union with God, and reconciliation with Him. Obedience is the easiest way to accommodate the love of God within ourselves and gain Christ in our hearts. In my life, I've come into contact with obedience and novices of Russian and Greek monasteries on Mount Athos, and there's a very noticeable difference. What should a novice be

like? This is essentially a dead person who doesn't have his self because it belongs to God. He doesn't keep any desires or thoughts in the bosom of his soul. Thanks to this deadness to himself, a person comes to life for God, and from this, he becomes more alive than all the living people. There must be two main points in obedience. The first is being frank with your spiritual father so that a person doesn't hold anything to his soul and reveals all his thoughts and sins, no matter what they are – good or evil. But this is not enough. Secondly, a person shouldn't have any desire of his own. When an elder gives a novice some obedience with exact instructions, but the novice replies, "What's the point in this?" it makes you feel really sad. You don't show it, but your soul feels bad.

Among the Greek Athonites, there is no such self-willed reasoning at all. They live in perfect harmony, soul to soul. Wherever the elder sends the disciple – whether to the world for provisions, to the garden, or anywhere else – he does not question but simply goes. If the elder gives them only cheese or only olives, no one disputes or asks why this or that. Whatever the elder blesses, they do. Yet, even in obedience, the spiritual father discerns the measure of each person, both physically and spiritually. He never gives tasks so heavy that they would break a person, but he does assign enough obedience that the disciple feels the sacrifice, giving of himself and renouncing personal comfort. However, when a person begins to argue or resist, that's when problems arise. Such a person can no longer be a true disciple, cannot bear obedience, as they begin to hold on to their own reasoning. If they outwardly fulfil the task, but at the same time, inwardly cling to their own understanding or opinion, they will not become a genuine disciple.

In the history of monastic obedience in Russia, there were spiritual flourishes, but consistent, steady obedience was rare. The patristic spirit of obedience prevailed during the times of St. Barlaam of Khutyn, St. Sergius of Radonezh, and Elder Paisius Velichkovsky. In the Glinsk Hermitage and Optina Monastery – especially when St. Leo of Optina (Nagolkin) arrived – this patristic obedience became widespread, and the spirit of discipleship and eldership was preserved up until the closure of the monasteries.

Archimandrite Raphael Karelin wrote after the closure of the monastery that, unfortunately, the Glinsk elders did not pass on their experience of eldership to anyone. Many laypeople were spiritually guided by them, many were helped, and many souls were brought to God, but the very experience of obedience could not be preserved because there were no novices. That is why I pray in my heart to God that there may be at least a spark, some revival of good and proper monastic life in our Russian monasteries.

Neither asceticism, nor spiritual feats, nor labour bring one closer to God as much as this obedience – complete renunciation of one's 'self'. And no matter the conditions in the monastery, no matter how restless it may be, if the 'elder-novice' model is present and people live in full obedience, then, even in this life, they reach an inner, spiritual dawn and great love. But for now, only isolated sparks appear. This was the case with fathers Kirill Pavlov and John Krestiankin – elders who had already reached dispassion yet did not leave behind such an institution of obedience. They gave us direction, the right, true spirit, but there was no direct succession left. Among the Optina Elders, there was always succession – someone would take the place of the elder – so now there is such pain and sorrow in the heart.

By and large, the Greeks don't recognize Russian monasticism as true monasticism. They consider it too secular because the very foundation of monasticism, the 'elder-novice model, has been broken. Just like in sports, when training, the bar is initially set low and then gradually raised higher to achieve success, so too in the spiritual life. Our spiritual bar is set very low, which is why we measure ourselves against this low standard. I have already mentioned that when Elder Ephraim of Vatopedi, the hegumen of the monastery, visited our skete, he said that the mistake of Russian monasticism is that there is no schema monasticism.

The great schema monasticism is the aspiration of a person towards the Heavenly, regardless of whether they are in a monastery or in the world – their spirit is always directed towards God. But at the same time, the person must die to this world, and nothing should burden them. The schema is not just monastic clothing; it's a certain arrangement

of the soul, a direction – how one should be. And this has been destroyed, we are left with the form itself, but such an inner arrangement is no longer there. Who do we accept into the schema? Elderly people, who succeeded as good monks, but already nearing the end of their lives. It's clear that they no longer need anything, but scheming is also a feat, a purification of the soul, and enrichment in love. Therefore, this practice is not entirely correct. The main thing is not the schema itself, but the spirit. In Russia, during the times of the eldership in Optina and the Glinsk Hermitage, the great schema monasticism was an arrangement of the soul, it was even present among those monks who didn't wear the great schema. The life of a monk is built on the fact that they must die to the world; nothing earthly should cling to their soul, they should not hold on to anything. And if they go down this path, they are saved. But if they remain in their desires and thoughts, all earthly things slowly begin to cling to them.

We also discussed that in the spiritual life, it's dangerous to stop and accept the idea that 'this is how I live and this is how I will always be.' As soon as you stop, the devil does not leave you and continually offers something to cling to, leading your soul to become attached to that. This attachment can take many forms, unique to each individual. As St. Ephraim the Syrian said, the devil holds each person by their passions. One is held by pride, another by greed, a third by something else – each person has their own specific passion, whether big or small.

The path of obedience is the path of dying. It should be practised by those who live the monastic life. The Holy Fathers say that a person must pray, fast, and engage in asceticism, but as soon as they are called to obedience, they should immediately burn with zeal and fulfil it – that's the most important thing. The right attitude is cultivated when obedience is given by an elder or superiors with love. However, if a person is burdened with obediences without love, and the novice lacks enough humility, they begin to break down, unable to withstand it, and become embittered. Thus, obedience is not the same in every case, and careful discernment is needed. There are situations where obedience, beyond a person's strength and lacking love, can break

even a humble and obedient soul, leading not to bitterness, but rather to apathy and insensitivity. Therefore, protect your inner world, it is very delicate and fragile. It can be easily disturbed or broken by others or by one's own sins. Always check your inner state, and an analysis of your feelings will help you root yourself in obedience and avoid the temptation of self-deception.

Each of you has your own spiritual disposition: some are more enlightened, more wise in God, while others are less so, but that's not the point. If there's a high standard, the soul, regardless of its current state, will always strive toward the higher, the better, because it knows what it should be. The knowledge of what you should be must be present in your mind. And this will be reflected in your soul and your feelings; you will strive for something, and you'll be able to orient yourselves in this life, understanding whether you are walking correctly, whether you are in obedience or not. When you fulfil an obedience, you'll be able to discern whether it comes from God or whether it breaks you. So, please, never stop at what you have.

Always strive for the better, the greater, and the rest will be done by the Lord. The Lord gives us according to our will, but this will must be shown to God: 'Lord, we want this!' In order for it not to remain only in the mind, we have to take some steps. And if the Lord does not respond to them, then, when you stand before the Judgment Seat, you can say, "Lord, I wanted to be a better and more diligent monk, I did this for You" And the Lord will give you His love There. But if you come and say only, "I wanted to..." and the Lord asks, "What did you do for this? What step did you take?" And when your answer is silence, what love will the Lord give you then? We do everything for Christ and His love. For the love of God, we came to the monastery, and for the love of God, we renounced everything. But it turns out that a person renounces everything, and when they begin to live in this renunciation, they get attached again to the lower through small things, through something earthly, and they can no longer soar and begin to return to the worldly life again.

All human passions – lust, resentment, pride, everything inside a person – are present to a greater or lesser extent in everyone,

but they begin to act only when the mind starts living externally. When a person begins to live by what surrounds them, these passions begin to grow. And only when a person starts turning inward, they no longer get nourished because the person does not respond to them; they despise them, seeing them as the work of the devil. At the same time, they realize that they exist and bring unpleasant feelings, but they do not react to them. Without inner work, you'll never be able to free yourself from your passions. If you do not turn inward, remaining in your spiritual and inner world, you'll remain in bondage to your passions. That's why, when a person enters the monastery, they are given prayer beads; their purpose is to help the person turn inward. As long as a person is not living in their inner world, in the Kingdom of Heaven, with God, they will not be able to escape this external life. By your life, by your thoughts, by your reactions to events, one can tell what you live by, what you are preoccupied with.

In addition, I want to repeat that in the monastery, we should support each other, and not drown our neighbours in their good endeavours. Always remember that the spirit of pride and competition lives within us. If you see that some sister is working better, don't put her on the same level as you, or worse, below you. Don't humble her or pull her back because you'll harm both yourself and her. The most disgusting thing is to humiliate others. If a person is praying and struggling, never interrupt their prayer because God will demand from you for breaking the connection between God and the person. And if they are doing something for Christ, sacrificing themselves (even if it doesn't fit within the monastery's frameworks – that's fine, they'll understand how it should be), do not hinder their disposition by referring to their inexperience or the monastery's traditions. The tradition should be one – obedience and striving toward God. This is what I ask of you....

Another thing that I've always told you: when you come to the monastery, always keep in mind that you are a newcomer, a beginner. The moment you feel like you are already 'old', you start to exalt yourself and teach others. This should not be done. And if bad feelings arise (dislike or anything else), do not get confused; approach them

calmly. If you have humility and a kind attitude toward people, then patience in suffering and other virtues will follow. The Lord will purify your soul for your humility. And if He doesn't give you that inner purity and freedom from passions right now, that's okay. Everything has its time, and you need to accept it as God's will, because we ask for only one thing: «Lord, do as You will.» God will give you everything in His time. But the main thing you must know and not lose is to remain within yourself, which is achieved through prayer. Prayer should foster love for God and for others. Prayer is not just about reciting words or practicing skills – yes, practice is necessary, but if a person stops at mere technique and doesn't strive for love and sacrifice, they will fall into spiritual deception (prayer and asceticism without love and humility). In confession, I often hear that a person goes through some difficult events, like a meat grinder of suffering, to come to the realization that they need to humble themselves, that without God, they are nothing. A person can endure this for years, even decades, draining their strength, exhausting their psyche, taking pills, just to realize one thing – that they are nothing in this world. And the Lord seems almost merciless to such a person, because if they don't understand this, how can they be saved from their pride? Therefore, in our lives, we often encounter many sorrows, and they are all meant to make us understand who we are and what our purpose is on this earth. Analyse your life, your illnesses, your ups and downs, and then God will reveal His will to you, and through it, you will obtain humility.

There's also another situation: a person may be good and obedient, but they have a weakness – they've made a vow not to seek treatment from doctors. But when the spiritual father tells them to go to the doctor, a contradiction arises. If they don't listen due to their own decision, which might seem ascetical, noble, and good, all their asceticism and humility get destroyed, and this flaw in their soul becomes revealed. And if, at the threshold of death, a person's soul's sickness becomes evident, they endure demonic fears, the rising of passions, and inner turmoil, holding resentment towards everything and everyone, all because of their own wilfulness. You should not take

on such feats. Do not have even the slightest desire of your own. Deep down, you always feel what burdens your soul, what it is attached to, what it prefers. Strive to expel even this small wilfulness from your soul, to not possess it.

A woman is a being of extremes: either she will be like the wife-myrth-bearer, giving herself completely to God, or, on the contrary, she will become a vessel of pride. If you provide her with the proper upbringing, the right direction for her heart, it will be soft, very kind, and loving; but if she receives the wrong guidance, it will change drastically and become hardened. It changes when a woman begins to assert her own will. This is no longer a woman but the devil. When a man is wilful, it's bad, but at least it's somewhat understandable, as he lives with his mind. But when you see such a woman, it is frightening because it has always been said that the main quality of a woman is meekness. Therefore, the qualities of the soul that are given to you by nature, preserve and multiply them, and avoid anything that destroys this meek soul disposition.

Recently, I read a newly published book translated from Greek, which tells the story of one of the Holy Fathers who lived in the desert. When he was still a youth, while playing with children, he accidentally killed one of them. He saw what he had done, went into the mountains, and lived under the open sky for three years, repenting so that the Lord would forgive him. Then he built a cell for himself in the desert and lived there for another twenty-five years. One day, a father came to him and asked, “Tell me, abba, when you remember your past sin, what do you feel?” He replied, “Nothing, my conscience is at peace. I only thank God for allowing me to come to Him through this.” So, despite the death of a person, he thanks God.

Another example – one of the fathers went into the desert and lived there in solitude. The Lord gave him the gift of not despairing and the gift of solitude, meaning he felt love for stillness (*hesychia*). Among the ascetic fathers who lived in the Caucasus, whom I had the chance to meet, there was also love for solitude; they couldn't live in society. I remember when we came with Father Gabriel to Krasnaya Polyana. He went 300–400 meters away from the house where we

were staying, set up a hut, lit a fire, and lived there alone – that’s a gift. The Lord gives each person their own special gifts.

If someone has had falls, sins, or addictions, if a person lives with God and truly strives for their salvation, then the evil that was in their life will be transformed and become a stepping stone for them to become higher, more spiritual, more loving. Therefore, never allow despair, hopelessness, or stagnation; always strive for the better, the greater, and most importantly – know the Christian spirit, the spirit of Orthodoxy. If you depart from this spirit, you will be in the Church with your body, but your soul will be with the devil. This can also happen. Not everyone who calls themselves an Orthodox Christian is one in reality. Everything depends on the soul of the person; we unite with God and receive kinship by spirit and our inner content, which is in love.

The spirit of Orthodoxy is primarily inner silence and peace, not euphoria and ecstasy. Young people seek sensual love and emotional thrills, and when they come to the Church and don’t find this, they continue their search elsewhere and end up in sects. The devil offers all of this quickly. As soon as a person desires it, they are presented with this false state, and the person will receive a spiritual drug, a demonic joy, and become dependent on it. But the spirit of Christ is different; it is a thorny path. Many years may pass in sorrow, patience, and tribulation, all for the sake of acquiring humility and love. Many turn away from Orthodoxy because it eradicates passions and offers a way of sacrifice. Those who are not willing to sacrifice themselves, who don’t want to walk this path, turn away.

Currently, the world faces great problems: crisis, poverty, unemployment; as a result, people begin to sorrow, and large problems arise. Here, we don’t feel this human sorrow directly; we have everything we need. But don’t forget that the world is suffering, and that is why there is a taste of salt from human tears and grief in our food. Try to accept human sorrows as your own; remember this as well.

Saint Paisios said that the world is currently suffering from three things: divorces, cancer, and mental illnesses. He asked the Lord to give him the opportunity to somehow sympathize with the world, to

taste its sufferings. ‘I am not married, so there will be no divorces,’ he thought, and asked God for cancer, and the Lord gave it to him. Of course, I don’t encourage you to ask God for cancer. This is the lot of holy people; they make the ultimate sacrifice, no longer loving their own bodies. I simply want to urge all of us to feel the sorrow of this world and to sympathize with it in some way. If we don’t sympathize, if we don’t mourn what is happening around us, we will become spiritual deformities. A Christian without compassion is not a Christian, and an obese monk is not a monk.

Now I want to listen to you. Perhaps someone has something to ask? If we recall the ancient fathers and their conversations, it was usually a dialogue, an exchange of experiences and inner thoughts. Sometimes I feel like I am a talking bird, sitting here, speaking and speaking, and I don’t know if you understand me, and if you are living through the same things. Just understand – there must always be some analysis of your inner world. The soul lives through experiences, and experiences are life. When our mind begins to decipher these feelings, it tries to express them in words and forms its thoughts. For some sisters, this process of forming thoughts happens incorrectly. Not because the experiences are wrong, but because they fail to form these thoughts correctly. They fail to capture the inner content in the right forms, meaning they cannot find the right words. And when they start to speak about something, you often don’t understand them, or they talk about something that is not what they are truly living through.

Obviously, experiences can be different. God’s emotions are always filled with love, compassion, and humility, while the devil’s emotions are filled with malice and judgment. Once, a sister came up to me and started pouring out a bucket of sins about her neighbour, “She’s like this and like that.” I told her, “Mother, all of that is true, but you see, you don’t have humility.” If there’s no humility, life passes by in vain – no matter what you do. You work, do everything, ruin your health, but you don’t gain humility – therefore, life becomes empty. This is a law you cannot go against. Therefore, not all experiences are the same. I am not only talking about experiences related to events or difficulties, but also those experiences that arise when you turn to God. If I say,

“Lord, have mercy,” something should happen inside as well. If I begin to repent, the soul should participate in that, experience it. But if I just read off a list of sins on a piece of paper, the soul remains indifferent.

Confession is a turning to God, and connection with God is always life. There is also another life, when a person connects with the devil; excitement arises, and the person loses peace. The soul, like the body, constantly asks for food, “Give me, give me, give me”, and the passions further ignite the soul, making it empty and insatiable. Therefore, the Christian life begins with patience. Every person is a sinner, everyone has their own passions, which must be endured because in this endurance, there is God. No patience – no God, no divine providence over the person. If you don’t endure, God cannot save you. The Lord leads us on the path of renunciation and sacrifice, constantly cutting off our sinful will, but we also have to cut off our passions on our own.

Once you’ve come to the monastery, there should be no worldly relationships because you are already walking the path of renunciation of your will and asceticism, beginning to practice solitude, work, and prayer. You are already living a different life. And the worst thing is when we do not live by these experiences, when we are not interested in them, when we do not connect with God and life in Him, when we do not value it or move toward it. Then our life goes in vain: we go to work, do something, go to church, have lunch, have dinner, the day passes, but the soul is empty. I myself increasingly feel that when my soul begins to be filled with God, I immediately feel the slightest deviation toward worldly or material life, which leads to feeling of emptiness. Therefore, if we get attached to the earthly, grace departs immediately, and we need to recover. The first step to recovery is repentance. This means not just coming and confessing to a priest, but diving within yourself, lamenting your own shortcomings, stirring up feelings of your own inadequacy, repenting, asking God for forgiveness, and starting to live with God. When the mind immerses in all of this for a long time, the feelings begin to awaken, fill the emptiness, and love comes. In another form, repentance can come through some afflictions. Remember, St. Ephraim of Katounakia, in the world, lay in the hospital, and people came to him for confession.

When he returned to Mount Athos, it took him six months to recover his previous spiritual state, which he had on Athos. Therefore, be aware that you can lose your inner, spiritual world, this fullness of grace, of God’s love. And restoring it is a long and difficult process.

– *Father, but how should we treat music?*

– That’s also interesting. A person has an inner rhythm of the soul, and there is a lot of different music in this world: classical, jazz, rock. When a person listens, different states of the soul arise. When a person listens to jazz and rock, it starts to press on them, to disrupt the rhythm of the soul – gentle, divine, quiet (each person has their own). These genres impose their own demonic rhythm, and the person experiences this agitation and no longer lives in God. Therefore, we cannot speak of any ‘Orthodox rock,’ because it simply does not exist, as the rhythm itself is not from God. Classical music is more soulful and can lead a person to God, but if a person becomes fixated on it and lives by it alone, they will stop spiritually. Classical music mainly reflects the earthly world, the beauty of creation. It cannot express heavenly beauty. If a person lives a spiritual life, they should go beyond it into other spheres – church music and hesychia. Anyone who has experienced the influence of various musical genres feels the difference, and when they enter spiritual realms, classical music, not to mention other types, begins to weigh them down and pull them downward.

I have nothing against spiritual chants. One can hum them in mourning. St. Paisios wrote that troparions or other spiritual chants help when your soul is discouraged. You sing a little, the soul calms down, and you moved into prayer, delving into myself. I’ll slightly deviate from the topic. Remember I told you about the celebration in Lohusuu on the feast of Holy Great Prince Vladimir? After the service, there was a meal during which the elderly women were singing. The bishop, parishioners, and others were sitting at the table, and they were singing. Now, about the singing of these elderly women. You can be indifferent to music, just eating and drinking detachedly, but such singing draws you in, the words focus your thoughts. I heard similar singing in Vasknarva as well. About seven years ago, when I served there, Tatiana, who was already over ninety,

was singing the antiphon. She was singing while I stood in the altar. Usually, you hear the singing from the choir but don't focus on the words. But when she began singing, my mind immediately went into those words. The elderly women were singing from the heart; they were living by this — those were their sorrows. When a person speaks or sings wholeheartedly, it captivates.

And we, it would seem, live in the monastery, in prayer, everything around us is spiritual, yet when we sing, we cannot warm either our own soul or anyone else's. You see, a person's soul, their inner world, reveals itself through words, singing, icon painting. When someone paints an icon, they paint it with their soul, just as it flows from the heart. One novice woman, an iconographer from the Holy Trinity Saint Seraphim-Diveyevo Monastery, once told me, "Father, I painted an icon, but I was told that this and that were done poorly, so I erased it all." I told her, "That was wrong, you shouldn't have done that. Don't touch what your soul has depicted! Even if there are some imperfections, it's normal — that's the human factor. Just correct it slightly, but don't erase the rest." Same thing with singing — the soul expresses itself through it.

We also talked about how part song (polyphonic singing) was introduced into our church singing due to spiritual decline, as a way to conceal the inner world of a person. In polyphonic singing, the beauty of the sound overshadows the inner beauty: there are many voices, all different, and this somehow masks the soul. But when a single voice sings, you immediately feel how and with what the person lives... Perhaps one day they will invent a computer capable of reading thoughts.

– *In what way?*

– Technology is developing so rapidly that the time will come when it will be able to capture human fantasies. People will watch their own movies on a screen. Everything you have, everything you've lived through, could be displayed for everyone to see. And it will happen because fantasy comes from the devil. If it's from the devil, it means it can be recorded and deciphered, that is, turned into light and sound. Do you know what kinds of movies would

come from that? There won't even be a need to film anything. This is just my thought, but I believe it is largely true and will eventually become reality. The devil provides these images and sees that a person accepts them, and then emotions become involved. His goal is not just to affect the mind, but to engage the emotions.

Why is television so harmful? Because it engages the emotions. Television does not convey reality. Nature, by its essence, is dispassionate and calms the soul. That's why people look at water and the sky — to feel God and His peace. But television transmits these same images of nature through the lens of human perception, which excites the soul and stirs up imagination. That's why television is forbidden. If you watch TV, prayer will never come. That's a spiritual law. Only a saint can watch television. Once, in the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, the brethren showed the film *The Passion of the Christ* to Mother Mamica. She was already elderly, sitting there, crying, and saying, "They are crucifying Christ." But for her, it wasn't forbidden to watch it, as she was near dispassion. Yet for those still struggling with passions, it's dangerous to watch. I also think that without fantasy, thoughts cannot be captured, as they are formless.

– Mother, do you practice the Jesus prayer?

– *Well, I can't say that I engage in it, I just read it.*

– Do you read it regularly?

– *Not regularly, just during the day.*

– It's interesting that once upon a time, monks would ask each other at the meeting not about news or health, but about how their prayer was going. Mother, do you feel when you have prayer and when not?

– *I don't know when it's going, and when it's not, but it brings peace to my soul. I can't say that there are some strict conditions...*

– I see. When prayer is going, a sense of tenderness arises, and you are immersed within yourself, with no care for the earthly, external world. If you are working or doing something and someone stops you, takes your hand, it will immediately be noticeable whether there is prayer within you or not, even in your eyes. It has always been said that the eyes are the inner eye of the soul.

When I talk with children about spiritual topics, some cry, while others have completely empty eyes. Similarly, for a person who is engaged in prayer, their eyes are different. Look at an icon, at the gaze of the saints—they look at this world, but they don't live in it; they turn their focus to the divine world. In documentary footage of speeches by Stalin, Lenin, or Hitler, you can see the eyes of the frenzied crowd—like those of the possessed. The same can be seen in the photographs of people who threw the bells at the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra.

Prayer connects a person with God. Through prayer, the soul, the gaze, the walk – everything changes. A person retreats inward to varying degrees. One can dive in slightly, or one can go fully inside. When a person fully immerses themselves, something similar to what happened with St. Procopius of Ustyug can occur: he went into ecstasy and stood with his arms raised for three days – there are different levels of prayer. A prayerful state is always accompanied by a sense of tenderness and peace. If, during prayer, you do not detach from everything and do not experience some semblance of dying, then it's not prayer yet mere words.

– *Father, you said that there has to be revelation to the elder, but we do not have that.*

– You don't have elders, but that's not a problem because you still open up when you come to confession. Many of you have spiritual revelations. Your problem is not that you are closed off or hiding your sins, but rather that you have your own desires, your own thoughts. And to cut off your own desires and fulfil God's will, you need a spiritual father. The spiritual guide who shepherds and cares for you must be only one person. But when there is no spiritual guide, any priest can become a conduit for God's will. This is how St. Silouan the Athonite approached the priest with faith, to hear God's will through him – this practice can also work. But the simplest, patristic way is having a spiritual father. You confess to priests who are nearby, but the spiritual guide, to whom you open yourself and who knows all your difficulties and desires, may be far away, but he still leads you to God.

– *Father, you mentioned that thoughts do not always form into words or are formed incorrectly... But then, how can we express our feelings and communicate them to you if they are not formed that way?*

– If you cannot express yourself, the spiritual father will tell you everything. In the third volume of the Philokalia, it's said that some people are given both the gift of understanding and speaking, while others are given only understanding – that is, a person lives rightly and spiritually, but cannot express it. What can you do? Do not strive for what is not given. Many sisters who began to do what was not given to them by God became damaged. This applies to everything, not just the gift of speech – so, even something good, without God's blessing, can become bad and destructive to the soul.

– *Father, you mentioned that there are different kinds of obediences. But can there be an obedience that breaks the soul?*

– Yes, there are many of them.

– *So how should we act then? Should we have our own will to refuse, or should we bear everything? After all, it's true that something may not be beneficial for a person.*

– We learn the spiritual life in two ways: either through the Holy Fathers or through our own experience. Through the Holy Fathers – this is when the spiritual father guides us, and there is trust in him; he'll tell you what's right and what's wrong. This is the simplest and most reliable way. The second path (if you don't have a spiritual father) – through your own experience and mistakes, through falls and bruises. There is no other way. Just like when making a stool – you spoil the first two pieces, and the third one you make properly. So it is in the spiritual life – through our mistakes we come to truth and correctness. But if you are stubborn and unreasonable, you won't learn the spiritual life and comprehend God's will. But if you feel that something is wrong in your soul, you'll search for that exact thing, and your soul will start sending out SOS. So, it's important to be sensitive to your soul.

Many novices live in true obedience, but there are also those who live according to their own thoughts. In our hermitage, there is one novice who lives by his own logic, with his own formulas; it's just

dreadful. For example, they tell him, “Come on, open the door faster!” Yet he still walks slowly and calmly. Then they say, “Hurry up, what’s wrong with you?” And he responds, “The Holy Fathers said, don’t overtake anyone and don’t run.” – and that’s it. In his mind, he has his own reasoning. Yet, although it’s based on the teachings of the Holy Fathers, it’s always wrong to have your own reasoning.

– *Father, but are Greek saints higher than Russian saints?*

– No, no, perhaps they went to God by different paths, and the national character might also play a role, but in essence, they reached the same spiritual growth.

– *But why are there more fools for Christ in Russia? Is it a national character?*

– I remember that in some historical notes it was written that after the revolution, during that communist period, almost all church people were in exile, and the word of God could not be preached openly. Therefore, the Lord sent many fools for Christ at that time. They would strip themselves naked, what could be taken from them? You can’t imprison them, they are fools for Christ. During that period, there were many such fools, and they kept and carried the word of God into the world. The national character also has to do with it. Russians have a large country and a broad soul, which needs space for love.

Here’s another interesting question. One novice once told me, “Father, in the life of St. Seraphim of Vyritsa, there was such a moment: he came to a spiritual elder in the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, who blessed him to get married. Later, when Fr. Seraphim came to St. Barnabas of Gethsemane (to have more confidence), Fr. Barnabas said, “Do as the elder blessed you.” Then, the novice asked me, “Was the elder who blessed Fr. Seraphim to marry, right? If Fr. Seraphim had become a monk before getting married, wouldn’t he have achieved even greater holiness?” Well, here, I think that the Lord calls each person in their own time, and everyone goes through their own life school. The soul is shaped gradually, and when a person does not pass through this ‘meat grinder,’ they might fail to become a monk. Perhaps if St. Seraphim had come to the monastery right away, he wouldn’t have become a saint because he had to go through his life’s hardships. Many people who

took up the monastic path prematurely have been damaged. That’s why we have to do everything in your life according to God’s will. Sometimes it happens that a person has not gone through a certain stage of their life, their soul has not been formed, and in the monastery, they cannot form either – they become like an amoeba. A person should come to the monastery already formed, meaning purposeful. When they do not receive this Divine grace and have no worldly feelings, the soul becomes empty. This is unnatural for the soul, and it starts to suffer.

October 30, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Fifteen

We’ve gathered together again to talk about God and about how we can connect with Him. When we are together, God can enter our hearts and souls because being born as a human and even being baptized is not enough. We must also have a heart about which the Lord said in the Gospel, “Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Therefore, the goal of human life is the acquisition of meekness and humility; all spiritual laws are built upon these virtues, upon this state of the heart. Everything that happens to us is given by God for the sake of humility. Our heart must become a kind of workshop that transforms everything that comes to us – both evil and good – into humility.

God always has one goal – that we acquire humility. If facing certain circumstances, we become embittered and lose inner peace and calm, there can no longer be any talk of humility, and God’s providence for us begins to change. By violating God’s laws, we begin to live with the devil. Therefore, I deeply desire that, as we live out the days God has given each of us, we live not only the external life that surrounds us but also the inner life. Because when we stop living by our inner feelings and seeking this reunion with God, deification, spiritual transformation, our life becomes empty and uninteresting. All the passions within the soul become tiresome, everything grows dull, and in the end, they bring nothing but satiety and emptiness.

I remember that many people who came to the Church and turned to Christ, often took on monastic labours and made vows. But if they strayed from that path, their lives became miserable and aimless. Having renounced everything, they began to drift away and live according to their passions and emptiness, trying to fill their inner world with idle talk and indulgence in sinful desires, which only led to even greater inner destruction.

I also want to speak about God's providence, about how the Lord cares for each person, and how everyone possesses not only physical strength but also spiritual strength, each in different measures. What may lead to salvation for one person could become destructive for another. Some receive a blessing to go to a monastery, while others are called to remain in the world. For one, monastic life may indeed be salvific, as it seems to be the most virtuous way of living, while for another, it could lead to ruin. It's always crucial to discern the path by which the Lord is leading us, this providential course.

I want to share my impressions with you. While travelling from Smolensk to Pskov, the bus driver played the film *Wolf Messing*. It's a very long series (~16 episodes) about a hypnotist and clairvoyant. He not only read people's thoughts and issued mental commands but also seemed to enter both the past and the future. And this made me wonder—how does such a thing happen? Where is the divine, and where, perhaps, is the demonic? What leads to salvation, and what leads to destruction? I haven't seen anyone really explore these questions deeply, so I'd like to reflect on them a bit. In this film, Messing reads people's thoughts. The Holy Fathers teach that the devil cannot know a person's thoughts. This question interests me deeply – how far can this be true? The Fathers wrote that a person must 'die before death', meaning to detach from earthly things so that he becomes alive to God and dead to the world and the devil. So when Messing reads thoughts, my mind suggests that the thoughts of a believing person cannot be read by another unless that person is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Many saints, when revealing someone's thoughts or the future, always said that the Lord revealed it to them. Once, a monk visited St. Anthony the Great, and the saint responded

that the Lord had not revealed his arrival—indicating that true spiritual insight comes only by God's will, not human desire or effort. I believe that supernatural access to people's minds and thoughts will be connected to the coming of the Antichrist, who will perform signs and 'miracles' similar to those of the saints.

Once, during a lecture on the history of religion (as far as I remember, it was about buddhism), the professor told us a story. A guru had two disciples. He sent them to the mountains, gave them mantras, and taught them what they needed to do. After fifteen years, they returned to him. The guru asked them to show him what they had learned. He looked at an elephant, and after a few seconds, the elephant fell and died – he killed it with his thought. Then the guru asked the second disciple what he had learned. He approached a river where a boat with a rower was sailing. The disciple looked at the rower, and the rower suddenly turned the boat in the opposite direction. He also influenced the person with his thought. The teacher then asked, "And you spent fifteen years on this?" (Their goal was different – to reach nirvana, that's what they were supposed to strive for). With their thought, a person can kill an animal, a human, or implant their own idea, forcing someone else to carry it out. I believe that when it's said that there will be a great apostasy from God and people will submit to the Antichrist, it will happen through telepathy/suggestion. But only those who have fallen away from God may succumb to this suggestion. They will become like objects, and at that point, they can be manipulated however one wants.

The coming of the Antichrist has always been associated with people's departure from God and spiritual decay. In monasteries and Christian life, the practice of constant prayer and remembrance of God has always been central. This remembrance—being aware of God's presence both within and around oneself—creates, so to speak, a spiritual armour from the grace of God. Through this, a person receives both inner and outer protection from the Lord. During church services, we often hear the words "Help us, save us, have mercy on us..." But how does the Lord protect, save, and have mercy? Only through His love. We pray not merely to keep busy in the monastery

or our Christian life, but to find God—to attain that state of being in Christ, in God. Anything that distracts or draws us away from this goal must be cut off and avoided.

The world is set up to scatter us and distract us from our inner life. The devil's goal is to disrupt our inner self, drawing us into a purely external way of living. If he fails to achieve this, he cannot influence or control us. When we descend into our heart, the external evil that comes from the outside loses its power, as it cannot disturb or destroy the inner world. That is why everything in our life is governed by spiritual laws, grounded in divine love.

It's interesting how salvific were the gifts that Messing had. After all, such gifts as the ability to foresee the future could only be possessed by saints, but he was a secular, unbaptised man. The Holy Fathers wrote that if a person raises the dead but lacks humility, then it's nothing. Therefore, the various gifts of a person will not serve for salvation if they do not have humility.

In the prophecies of St. Anthony the Great, it's written that at the end of times, many of the last Christians will possess great gifts and will go into the deserts, caves, and hide themselves. They will not reveal those gifts or use them due to a lack of humility, knowing that the ability to see the future and read minds stirs up pride. Therefore, I think they'll be hiding their gifts to avoid falling. Few of the fathers who had the gifts of healing and prophecy went out into the world and were known to people. However, many fathers lived in the deserts, and the world simply didn't know about them.

Another interesting point from the history of Messing. When he was asked, "How do you do this?" he replied, "I don't know, I just see. For example, you take a deck of cards, draw a card, and I see which card it is. Or I think about a person and see what's happening to them." When they brought him a photograph, he would look at it and then say where that person was, and what was happening to them, whether they were alive or dead. Pictures of life would pass before his eyes, and he would see them – for example, the war: Germans marching through Minsk and Smolensk.

Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia, who lived in Omonoia Square in Athens, shared how he perceives and sees things. He also said that it appears before him like a picture. A doctor observed Messing in this state and noted that his pupils dilated, and his pulse became slower and slower. It was as if he was entering a state of death, meaning he had to disconnect from everything earthly. This vision (both in the case of holy people and Messing) is not like a movie but has a different nature, as these visions of perceiving the future, past, or present in a person are not affected by the senses, they are not enveloped by flesh but are something immaterial and subtle.

There's a very similar moment in the Apocalypse: John the Apostle sees creatures with tails that sting like scorpions. Of course, he wouldn't call them an airplane or a tank. In his descriptions, he used similar phenomena from the world around him as comparisons; that's how he described these visions, using concepts familiar to him. These visions are very different from fleshly images. In a deceptive state, visions can be sensual and passionate. Dreams can be of different kinds as well. When a vision or dream comes from God, we experience peace because it's spiritual and not associated with the senses, but when a dream comes from the devil, everything inside us starts moving, and we lose inner peace – that's the whole difference. It seems like a thin line, but you have to notice it. When you cross this line, you've moved from the spiritual to the fleshly. This is what I wanted to talk about. These thoughts are not fully refined yet, I'm just sharing them with you now.

– *And was that a real person?*

– Yes.

– *Was he given that from God?*

– Yes, from God. These gifts are given to some by nature. Adam possessed them in his very being, but because of the fall, they remained hidden within humanity. In some people, these gifts are revealed either from childhood, or after certain life events, or through holiness. I read a book where the author wrote about her grandmother, who lived in a village near the city of Sumy before the war. She fell into a lethargic sleep for nine days, and when she awoke, she began to

prophecy and see the future, present, and past. This ability was revealed to her only after she had experienced that state. Messing, too, fell into a deep sleep as a child and, during that sleep, he experienced immersion into another world. So, it happens that some are given the ability to enter that otherworldly realm by nature, while others gain it through holiness. Saints who had such gifts also reached these states of contemplation and detachment from all earthly things. If a person can enter a state of complete detachment from the earthly, they can also enter a state often referred to as ‘telepathy’ and possess such abilities and gifts.

– *When the saints had some visions, nothing happened to them, whereas Messing, after his visions, felt very unwell physically. His energy was consumed, as it was expended on all of those experiences, and, as a result, he became very weak.*

– Yes, that’s also an interesting point, I’ve noticed it too, but how reliable is this account? It’s a movie – someone could have made it up. As I mentioned earlier, God revealed everything to the saints at His own will – they did not compel Him. Saint Porphyrios didn’t have any visions the first time he visited the cave of John the Apostle. Then he went outside, smelled the flowers, looked at the sky, entered a state of detachment, and when he returned to the cave, he began to see how John the Apostle was writing the Apocalypse, and the voice that came to him was from God. Father Porphyrios said that one should never force God to reveal anything. But regarding Messing, I think something happened by an effort of his own will – that’s why he was suffering from those exhaustions. He didn’t ask God to reveal something to him, but rather, by his own strength, skill, and detachment, set himself the task of seeing something, entered the state, and observed that. I think it was like that.

– *Was it the sign that something was wrong?*

– Of course. If a person does something not according to God’s will, this gift will not serve their salvation because by entering the future or the past, they gain nothing for themselves and do not acquire humility. However, a saint, having this gift, enters the future and, seeing all of it, gains love and becomes humbler.

I already told you about how I came to Blessed Elder Joseph of Vatopedi and the conversation turned to the fact that Russians were being driven out of Mount Athos. Then I asked him whether we should resist this, and he said no. The Fathers see God’s providence, and if the Lord allowed evil to happen because of our sins, and you go against it, you will harm yourself. For example, Messing foresaw a plane crash in which a hockey team was flying, as well as the death of Stalin’s son, and to change the future, he interfered with his mind: “If they don’t fly, they will survive.” The Holy Fathers never did anything like this. Remember when St. John of Kronstadt was being taken, supposedly for a prayer service, but in fact, they were waiting at the house to sacrifice him. Father told his assistant, “You are taking me to slaughter... to slaughter,” but she replied, “Father, what slaughter?” They brought him there, and he went without resisting anything. Everything had been revealed to him by God, but he surrendered his life to God’s will, however the Lord would arrange it. He believed that if God willed for him to perish and shed his blood for Him, then so be it.

There’s one moment described in the life of Saint Paisios about Elder Tikhon. Fr. Paisios came to his cell, confessed, and was about to leave. As he was walking out, he suddenly turned around and saw Fr. Tikhon crossing him with the sign of the cross from behind. He had never done this before, but now he was crossing him repeatedly. Afterward, as he went out onto the path, he met a hunter who had his finger on the trigger of his rifle. The hunter, upon seeing the man, quickly pulled his finger off the trigger and said, “Father, you were born in a shirt. I thought you were a wild boar.” Only then did it occur to Fr. Paisios why St. Tikhon was crossing him. Fr. Paisios quickly returned to him and asked, “Elder, why didn’t you tell me what was going to happen to me?” And the elder replied, “That was God’s will.” Yes, the elder saw everything, but did not interfere with God’s providence.

Saint Sebastian of Karaganda also had a case. He told his child, «Don’t get married, don’t do this, don’t go to Almaty.» He even came to the station and persuaded her until the end. He saw what would happen but did not tell her what would become of her. So she boarded the train, left, and then, about a year later, contracted tuberculosis and died.

The Holy Fathers never violated God's will. If the Lord revealed something to them, they accepted it as coming from His hand — 'If the Lord wills it, so it shall be.' I remember how Hegumen Christodoulos gathered us in the Koutloumousiou Monastery and said, "Europe wants to allow women onto Athos and turn the monasteries into hotels — such is the fate awaiting us." However, he immediately emphasized, "We must accept this as proper, with repentance. Just as Russia faced such suffering and tribulation in 1917 for its turning away from God, so must we accept these events with repentance." Then he gave each of us a prayer rope, so that we would make it a rule to pray to the Mother of God, and beyond that — as the Lord wills. This is God's allowance for the sins of people. Strive in your life to acquire and maintain inner peace, each as much as they can. If you lose it, gather yourself quickly and return to your senses.

About three kilometres from my mother's house in Smolensk, there is a fallen Polish plane. My brother told me that when he went to work at seven in the morning, the sun was shining, and the weather was clear. Later, when he left the factory around ten o'clock, a very dense fog had already set in (visibility ~5 meters). He heard the hum of an airplane but couldn't see it. He returned to the factory. At eleven, he went for lunch, and on his way back, he saw that near the garages, the plane was already lying flat on the ground. It had crashed about ten minutes earlier, and the area hadn't been cordoned off yet. Within just twenty minutes, the fog, which had lasted only a few hours, completely cleared. My brother was very surprised, saying, "This is some kind of mystery... Fog is very rare there because it's an elevated area with no swamps. But the strangest thing was that the fog was only in that exact spot." When a plane is landing, the ground operator guides it down to sixty meters, after which the pilot must visually direct the aircraft onto the runway. The pilot made three landing attempts. On the fourth, he began to descend but lost visual orientation. He drifted slightly off the runway, started to land, and realized he was too low. He tried to ascend, but it was too late — the speed was too high. The plane struck power lines, flipped in the air, and crashed upside down. There were ninety-six people on board.

Just an hour before, another plane had landed successfully. It's a military airfield, but currently, no military planes are stationed there. The runway is good and wide.

When this happened, I was at the skete, and the fathers told me about the tragedy, «The pilot should've been humbler. He was informed that visibility was too poor, so he shouldn't have attempted to land — he should've obeyed and flown further.» But he didn't listen. He kept trying for the third and fourth time — it was still unclear, it wasn't working. Why persist? However, the president gave the order, and through his stubbornness and pride, he caused the death of both himself and innocent people — the crew and all the passengers. There is a voice recording of that flight. When the plane began its descent, the people realized they were about to die; they had only a few seconds left to live. They understood there was no way out of that situation, that they had just a brief moment left... All their final emotions and inner feelings as they left this life were captured in the recording, but it was never made public. What they said — whether they were cursing or, on the contrary, forgiving each other — remains undisclosed. The Polish Orthodox Archbishop Miron was also on that plane and died. He had visited Pühtitsa in 2001.

– *Was that God's will?*

– Of course not. It was God's allowance for spiritual delusion. This can also happen in monasteries, especially often on Mount Athos among hermits, when they turn inward and fall into spiritual delusion. Then they not only become spiritually damaged, but often start having visions, and some even throw themselves off cliffs or into the sea, perishing. In the world, it's simpler — if you're in delusion, you can also perish, but it's easier to come out of this state, because events, people, and the hustle of life pull you out and prevent you from remaining trapped within yourself. The same applies to this plane crash — it was God's allowance. The Lord was warning this president, "Look, there is fog, don't land! Humble yourself and fly to Minsk!" The pilot couldn't see the runway once, twice, but the Lord was telling him, "Humble yourself, why are you trying to land?" He tried a third time and still couldn't see, but on the fourth attempt, the president

forced the pilot to land. But how could he land when nothing was visible? The person fell into a state of spiritual delusion, stubbornness, and pride. Pride makes a person foolish. It's clear here that God was protecting him and giving him signs, "Don't do it!", but it was a clear violation of God's will. I gave this example because any of us can find ourselves in a similar situation, but God always warns us, clearly showing His will. However, if we violate it, it means we are spiritually damaged and have fallen into a state of delusion.

– *Father, do you think it was the pilot's fault or the president's?*

– The president, of course, as he was the one who forced it. When this president was in Georgia, there was a similar situation – the plane couldn't land either. The pilot was ordered to land, but he refused and landed the plane in Yerevan instead. For disobeying the order, the pilot was dismissed, even though he was highly skilled, and the plane was functioning properly. But the first pilot showed faint-heartedness by obeying the order, which resulted in the air disaster. Anyone can find themselves in such a situation. If you give in to stubbornness and pride, it can end tragically for you. So many people die on the roads for the same reason. People often die because of pride – for example, a person knows that there are some bullies and thugs walking around, but still goes out alone or comes home late. Why take such risks? These are just my thoughts and feelings, which are, of course, connected to that tragedy. When you pass the place where they died, a deep sorrow comes over you. Perhaps it's the senselessness of their death that stirs such emotions.

– *Father, what kind of death is called untimely? In the Menaion, there are commemorations on Meatfare Saturday for those who died an untimely death. How should we understand that? Does it mean at the wrong time?*

– Yes, at the wrong time — that is, God gives a person life, a long life, one could say, until old age, but they die prematurely for some reason, whether due to an accident or something else. All such cases are included here: some due to their own carelessness, some because of pride, and some while saving others. They, too, are considered among those who died untimely or prematurely.

– *I read in the life of St. John of Kronstadt about a case where the parents of one young girl who was very ill sought his help, but they were too late — when they turned to him, the girl had already passed away. When Fr. John arrived, he grieved greatly, saying, "Why didn't you call me earlier?" How can this case be reconciled with God's will? Fr. John said that she would've either become a saint or someone great, but she died in infancy.*

– I don't know. I think he was grieving in a human way. After all, St. John had instances of raising the dead; I've read about that. For example, a child died in the mother's womb, and through the saint's prayers, the child was brought back to life. I believe he could have resurrected that little girl, too, if it was God's will for her to live. This question has always intrigued and concerned me — what is God's will? In the Gospel, the Lord healed the possessed, everyone who came to Him, and even the man born blind who was lying by the Pool of Siloam for thirty-eight years. And later, (it's written in the Triodion and the Synaxarion) this same blind man, whom Christ healed, struck Him on the cheek. I want to emphasize that the Lord gives grace and healing to everyone. He even called Judas and gave him everything for his salvation, but he rejected it and even betrayed the Lord, Who gave him everything.

– *So was it a clouding of the mind for those two (the man blind from birth and Judas)?*

– Their mind was actually functioning normally. That was hardness of heart. The heart becomes hardened precisely by this stubbornness. What were we just talking about? About that airplane. See how stubborn he was – he no longer cared. This stubbornness arises from our strength and will, but we can manage it, turning it in one direction or another. And then comes the fog, the person makes a decision, takes the first loop, insists on his way, goes for a second, and already reaches the point of delusion, goes for landing, and doesn't change his decision anymore. No matter how much the pilot said that he couldn't see where to land, the president still forced him to land.

– *So, is the president considered a murderer?*

– Perhaps, yes. I read this in the life of St. John of Kronstadt – he healed many, but then those people became Red Army soldiers during

the revolution. It's clear that they participated in battles and shootings, but he still did good to people. I've always wondered, "Why give someone the power to do evil?" God's providence and destinies are not always understandable. The only thing we can understand is that God can turn evil into good. The Holy Fathers also wrote that no one will be justified by the fact that God did not give them the opportunity for salvation, even Judas. Yes, Christ knew that Judas was the worst person, but still, He brought him closer to Himself, making him His apostle. Judas will not be justified by not knowing Christ because he saw His miracles and His love. So, Judas' rejection of God, of Christ, was by his own will. I believe that in hell, there will be people who did not accept God. A person who consciously hates God and renounces Him by their own will won't be able to unite with God because they are in a state of hell, where there is no love.

– *But why did Judas become angry at Christ?*

– When a person has a passion, but the Lord does not allow them to live with it, then if the person does not have humility, God becomes their enemy.

– *Father, one sister told me that she read in some ancient book that when the Lord comes to judge the dead, He will first have mercy on Judas.*

– That's Origen. His teaching of apokatastasis was condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

– *Father, I feel sorry for Judas because he will be in hell forever.*

– You see, the problem here is not in hell, not in the fact that it exists. St. Ephrem the Syrian wrote, «Good is God, that he created hell.» The problem is in man himself. For someone who does not love God, heaven will be a torment, and hell, a place of separation from God, will be for them as some kind of mercy.

– *Father, I am still interested in this. After all, most people have such a darkened mind that they don't make any decisions about God, they just live. What will happen to these people? They are neither 'against' nor 'for' – such an amorphous state.*

– I don't know. In the Gospel, the Lord says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."

And at the same, He says, "For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward" (Mark 9:41).

I am speaking only of those who consciously deny and hate God. They end up in hell not because God doesn't love them, but because they don't accept Him. For them, God's love becomes torment and eternal fire.

– *The Holy Fathers write that there is only one fire – some it enlightens, and others is burns.*

– Right, the nature of fire is God. And in hell, besides God, there is nothing. Where would the bodily fire come from? If hell is depicted with fire, as I understand it, it's still the fire of love, it is God, but for them, He becomes the tormenting fire. God loves them, but they suffer from that fire, from that love. In theology, the emphasis is placed on the volitional aspect. The Holy Fathers often speak about the will of man. It is with the will that we must connect both our sins and our love. In the life of St. Macarius the Egyptian, there is one story. A disciple asked the saint, «Abba, tell me, if a person has sinned and repented throughout their life, where will their soul be after death?» The saint replied, «Their soul will be there, where their heart was.» That is, where their will and desires were.

– *For most people, it's just worldly life, existence.*

– Recently I went to Moscow and spoke there with many people. I became so sad when I realized that they do not live with God. They have family, loved ones, but on the first place in their lives is everything earthly: gardening, cars, work, and the most important question is: why do they do all of this? Yes, the daily bread is needed, of course, but the main thing is different. There is no movement of the soul, no labour directed towards acquiring love and God. People become amorphous – they live, they work, but they become empty, and this is how the majority of people are now. Their understanding of human purpose and eternal life becomes blurred; a person stops fulfilling their purpose, God's will, for which they were created. Not to come into this world, live for however long, and then die. No! But for a person to unite with God in grace, to feel this communion, to live

with Him and enjoy it – this is the goal. With you, I feel good because we can talk about the salvation of the soul, about love, about how we dedicate all our strength, health, and desires to acquiring this love for God, this union with Him, and about how you live by this.

– *Father, how should we treat Mother Arsenia?*

– With love and gratitude.

– *For what?*

– What do you mean for what? For her labours and feats. And by the way, about gratitude.. I began to remember this very often. The Holy Fathers wrote that one of the signs of salvation is the respectful, grateful attitude of old monks to the young. When new, young ones come, the old monks value in them the fact that they have renounced the world and have come to the feat because they love God. They might have some weaknesses, sins, something else, but their choice to renounce the world is appreciated very highly, you understand? And Mother Arsenia has both care and respect for the young sisters.

– *But she has bred so many cats both in her cell and in the fence – that's not normal.*

– *Another nun: That's her feat. Try living with these kittens: they do their business under the bed, there is fur everywhere, and you have to clean it all up and feed them. She was crying when she told me that someone drops them at her place, and she feels very sorry for them. She doesn't want them, but she feels pity.*

– I think she doesn't even reflect on whether it's a feat for her or not; she just lives as her heart tells her.

– *There was a sister living in the farmyard, and whenever things got tough, she would go to Mother Arsenia, and through her prayers, everything would be granted to her.*

– Yes, the Lord Himself will decide how to manage things, and it's better for us not to interfere. The Lord knows what's in a person's heart without our assumptions. We need to learn to be kinder and more compassionate toward the weaknesses of others. If we forgive others, the Lord will forgive us too. Each of us has sins, which hinder our salvation. If we do not cover the weaknesses of our loved ones, how will the Lord cover our sins? I remember hearing about Archimandrite

Modest, who lived in the Holy Dormition Pochayiv Lavra. He once heard a monk being harshly judged. He told the one who was condemning him, "Listen, why do you wear the mantle? The mantle is meant to cover others. But why do you wear it when you uncover their weaknesses? Take it off and go into the world." You speak the truth, but truth without love is from the devil. Remember, if you cover a person's sin with love, it is from God. Therefore, when a person begins to strive for salvation, they become kinder, meaning they begin to cover people's weaknesses with love.

– *Father, I've been looking at a dump for twenty years, I'm tired.*

– Strictly speaking, we have not yet become true monks. Remember our fathers and grandfathers, whose lives were spent in prisons and exiles. Bishop Athanasius (Sakharov) was glorified among the saints. He spent around 27 years in prisons and exile. And now, five or ten years in a monastery is nothing, just a novice. Spend thirty years in humility and meekness, and then you can speak of having acquired the monastic spirit. So let's simply live in patience and humility, lest it happen that life humbles us, but we don't humble ourselves.

– *That's why we go through various trials – to acquire humility.*

– You see, the Lord first gives us the chance to do His will through our own will. But when we don't fulfil it, God does everything His way and leads us through temptations to the right path. I've now recalled the fathers who were in the camps. Many of those who later became saints led careless lives before, and then they ended up in prisons and labour camps, and those conditions transformed their souls. Those people used those conditions for their own benefit. All that was required from a person was to humble himself, but if they didn't, it became even worse – they developed resentment.

In St. John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the concept of humility is described as a spiritual death before physical death. It's often likened to the dying of one's own will and sinful desires. Humility is portrayed as the key to spiritual progress and is understood as seeing oneself as lower than all others. This attitude aligns one's heart and mind with God's will. Each father who was asked about humility provided a personal perspective, but the common thread is that

humility involves complete submission to God's plan, letting go of one's desires in favour of divine guidance. St. John writes that true humility is not just about outward actions but about a deep internal surrender of pride, allowing one's thoughts to be pure and one's life to align with God's will, saying, «Lord, let it be as You wish.» This resonates with the idea of humility as a total transformation of the self, where the ego dies to make room for God's presence.

In the writings of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, there is a recurring theme about humility – that it's the ability to feel oneself as dust and ashes. Each person walked their own path and understood this differently, but in general, the state of humility is the same for all. So it is with us – we come into contact with God, and this contact always depends on humility. Although it's expressed differently in each person, the inner state is the same for all. In humility, we experience the same feelings as the Holy Fathers, walk the path that they walked, and receive salvation.

In the Trebnik⁴, there is a prayer rite for those in conflict. It includes several prayers, and at the end of the rite, there is a prayer to the Mother of God. You may remember this prayer from the morning rule: “O my Most Holy Sovereign Lady Mother of God, by Thy holy and all-powerful prayers drive away from me, thy humble and wretched servant...” But in the prayer for those in conflict, the word ‘humble’ is removed: “O my Most Holy Sovereign Lady Mother of God, by Thy holy and all-powerful prayers drive away from me, thy wretched servant...” It means that when a person becomes embittered and has some hostility toward another person, they lose humility. In this state occurred the rift between man and God. Even when we speak of a sinful state, such as in cases of fornication or other sins, this word is still used. There are many examples from the lives of saints showing their struggles – they were constantly falling and then getting up, and in the end, they were saved, but there are some other examples too.

⁴ Book of Needs of the Holy Orthodox Church – a liturgical book, which describes the observance of Sacraments and other sacred actions performed by the Orthodox Church on special occasions, and which are not included in the regular church service.

In the life of Saint Nikephoros the Leper, it is told that there was a priest named Saprikios, who was captured by pagans for confessing the Christian faith. They were torturing him for a long time and eventually led him to execution. He had a conflict with a layman named Nikephoros. As Saprikios was about to be executed, Nikephoros ran up to him and said, “Forgive me, martyr of Christ, I have wronged you.” And the priest replied, “No, I will not forgive you, neither in this age nor in the age to come.” As soon as he said that, grace departed from him. They lowered his head to the block, and he shouted, “That's it, I renounce Christ, just don't execute me!” Why did this happen? Was he a sinner? Well, no, he was a priest. He didn't have big sins, only enmity. When he lost humility, he lost God Himself. Even in the final moment, before his execution, the Lord gave him an opportunity – “Repent, and you will be a saint. Just accept this man, love him, don't be angry with him.” But no, he said, “I won't forgive you,” and he renounced Christ, perishing both spiritually and physically. Hostility is death for the soul.

– Alright, seems like you're falling asleep.

– *No, Father, we are not falling asleep. We are thinking about ourselves, how unrepentant we are. What should we do? We want salvation. We need to repent and keep going to confession.*

– By the way, about confession. Confession or Reconciliation is not about just naming some sins because the Sacrament of Confession, just like any other Sacrament. If you remove the movements of a person's heart, that is, the feeling that they want to be rid of their sins, then repentance becomes dead. I've always told you that there is a very thin line between holiness and falling away from it – hardness of heart and emptiness – such a deceptive state. If someone makes you repent forcibly, even a saint would experience rejection from such a thing.

It's like with food – it's necessary for the body, and without it, you'll die, but if you're forced to eat all the time, you'll vomit. The same is true in spiritual life – everyone has their own measure. At one time, a person can take in a lot, but at another time, just a little. When a person is in a calm, peaceful state, they can take in much – the

Divine words settle in their heart, and they are able to absorb them. But when they are nervous, they can hardly take in anything spiritual, and at this moment, they should not be forced to pray. It's not because they don't love God, but because they are in such a state. They just need to find the strength to endure the sorrow and their struggles.

In our skete, the hegumen said in his Paschal sermon, "Whoever does not have joy is not Orthodox" (he meant Paschal joy). But joy can be of different kinds – sensory, spiritual, quiet, and joy of the mind (meaning, "I understand and know that Christ is Risen, but at the moment I have my own personal struggles – someone has died or something else"). This joy of mind might not be felt deeply, but in my mind, I know that Christ is Risen, and there is joy in my soul as well, though it's quiet.

That's why I want to say that life with God is not limited to your heart, as it can also dwell in your mind and consciousness. One person came to confess to me holding anger against another person.

I asked him, "Are you angry?"

– "Yes."

– "But it's wrong, you can't have anger. But at least, do you forgive him in your mind? Do you want to forgive him?"

– "Yes, I do."

And that's it – God is already entering that person and uniting with him. When we, by our will and desire, refuse to cling to anger, God will dwell in us, and accept this confession and repentance, even though resentment may linger in our souls for many years. The key is that we continuously repent and don't want this anger within us.

– *Father, how can we be sure that we have enmity toward someone?*

– Hostile feelings. Antipathy is the loss of inner peace due to enmity toward someone – it feels like an arrow piercing the heart. Remember, I told you about Father Theodosius, who lived on Karoulia? Once, we were walking together across Athos and arrived at the Greek monastery of Xenophontos. They let us stay overnight, and during the night, we attended the service, praying in stasidia (pews). When the Litany of Fervent Supplication began, and the name of His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew was mentioned, Father Theodosius

abruptly left his pew and almost ran to his cell. After the service, when we returned, he was lying on the bed. I asked him, "Father, why did you leave so suddenly?" He replied, "As soon as I hear the name Bartholomew, it feels like an arrow pierces my heart, and I cannot bear this anger. That's why I ran away." So you see – harbouring hostility toward someone is surprisingly easy. You might not even see the person; it's enough to keep your thoughts fixated on your anger toward them. When this antipathy takes root in the heart, you don't even need any malicious thoughts – just hearing their name can ignite wrath.

– *But what if I just want to avoid someone?*

– No, don't do it. If you can't love someone, then, at least, tolerate him.

April 16, 2009. Pühtitsa Dormition Convent

Conversation Sixteen

– *Father, we've been to Crete, where Saint Lazarus of Bethany is greatly venerated. He is also venerated in Russia – there are fourteen churches dedicated to him. Russia itself is like the risen Lazarus. What can you say about this?*

– I wouldn't say that Saint Lazarus is very close to the heart of the Russian people. Many know him because he is a Biblical figure. He became a symbol of the Resurrection, and this symbol can certainly be close to people's hearts. Lazarus revealed himself as dead and resurrected, but he was not resurrected by his own power – it was Christ Who raised him. And this resurrection is different from the raising of the son of the widow of Nain and the raising of Jairus' daughter. The resurrections of the widow's son and the young girl were miracles, acts showing that God performs such wonders; both were witnesses to God's Divine power. But the resurrection of Lazarus was a foretelling of the Resurrection of Christ Himself. In other words, our Lord Jesus Christ, through Lazarus, showed His Resurrection and the future resurrection of all people.

Why was the resurrection of Lazarus a foreshadowing of the Resurrection of Christ? Firstly, because of the personal feelings of the Saviour towards Lazarus. Lazarus was a friend of Christ, and He loved him. He was a person whom the Lord knew along with his entire family, and how they lived. I recently read this Gospel passage and reflected on it. When the Lord was still beyond the Jordan preaching, people came to Him from Bethany and said, "Lazarus, Your friend, is sick; come and heal him." And while previously the Lord would respond to such requests immediately, this time He remained there for two more days and then said, "Lazarus has fallen asleep." The disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." The Lord saw that they didn't understand what He was saying and explained directly that Lazarus had died.

An interesting point here is that this Gospel story begins with the Lord knowing what will happen, yet He first speaks of the coming events figuratively, and only when the time comes does He speak plainly. The first reaction of the people to this truth was the response of the Apostle Thomas – "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:3-16). This phrase seems strange – where does it come from, and why did Thomas say it? Could it have been out of his love for Lazarus? Or was he expressing something revealed to him by God? Or perhaps it was due to his misunderstanding that Christ was going willingly to His death? After all, the Jews had just recently wanted to kill Him, and now He Himself was going to them. The Lord does not respond to this remark, and these words are left hanging without any explanation or interpretation.

The Lord goes to the place where Lazarus was buried. Martha is the first to meet Him and says, «Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.» Afterward, Mary leaves everything behind and comes to Christ. Mary, apparently, was more loved by Christ than Martha. But the point is not even in that; rather, she was a more heartfelt and sensitive person. When she came, she fell at His feet and, seemingly, spoke the same words as Martha, «Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.» Nothing changed in her words. Yet, hearing Mary's words and the weeping of those who came with her, Jesus was moved to tears. Martha's words about her brother's

death did not stir the Saviour, but when He saw Mary's grief and the sorrow of the people, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Then, as if composing Himself, He says, «Take away the stone.» Martha replies, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days". But He insists, «Do what I say.» And when they took the stone away, He cried with a loud voice, «Lazarus, come forth!» (John 11:20-44). That is how his resurrection happened.

And secondly, the resurrection of Lazarus prefigured the Resurrection of Christ because this event took place just before the crucifixion and resurrection of the Saviour. In other words, through the resurrection of Lazarus, the Lord seems to be saying, "Just as it happened to him, so it will happen to Me – I will be dead and will rise again."

This resurrection is also called a 'miracle within a miracle' because Lazarus came out of the tomb bound in burial cloths from head to toe. Not only was he raised from the dead, but God's power also brought him out of the tomb. Therefore, it's a double miracle – God's power not only restores a person to life and health but also moves him, carrying him as a mother carries her infant. And as God commands, so it happens – not only the resurrection itself, but also Lazarus's very emergence from the tomb. After all, he couldn't have come out on his own since he was bound, but God, by His power, led him out of that cave of death.

I'm not sure how closely the image of Lazarus can be linked to the image of Russia. Perhaps it is possible, but I would prefer that the image of the resurrected Lazarus be understood without complexity. I would probably connect this image primarily with Christ's action, for God loves His children and will never abandon them anywhere or under any circumstances. He gives them life, moves them, and guides their paths. Therefore, I believe that this example vividly reveals God's love for His children. In the letters of Saint Elizabeth Feodorovna, she writes that a mother loves her sick child more than a healthy one. Likewise, the Lord loves His children even more when they turn away from Him, and His mercy and grace are more abundantly given to such a child than to one who is spiritually well. Look here – Lazarus was not just sick, but dead. He couldn't ask for anything or do anything

at all, yet God's love for him remained alive and did not disappear even after his death. The same can be said for Russia: if the Lord has chosen it, sealed the Russian people in His heart, and they are walking the path of salvation, then He will never abandon them but, by His power and love, will continue to lead them toward salvation.

Therefore, for me, the image of Lazarus reveals more clearly the image of Christ – His power and love for us. Perhaps, in the Russian people, the image of Christ is more vividly and clearly perceived through the lives of the saints. On our cemetery grounds, the Church of St. Lazarus was built precisely as a symbol of resurrection. Perhaps for some, the image of St. Lazarus himself is closer, but ultimately, we know very little about his life – few could recount his hagiography. Everyone knows only the Gospel account of his resurrection, but nothing more is known about him. Therefore, in the resurrection of Lazarus, what is most revealed is God's love for humanity and the truth that Christ is not only God but also Man – He loves deeply, feels sorrow, weeps, and empathizes as all people do, perhaps even more profoundly. Thus, I see and understand the image of Lazarus in this way – behind the figure of Lazarus stands Christ, or perhaps, better said, behind Christ stands Lazarus. With Christ's love for the righteous Lazarus, this saint also entered our hearts.

– May the Lord save you, father, may the Lord save you.. Now, let's talk about prayer, if possible.

– The Jesus Prayer can only flourish and spread widely when the entire body of the Church functions in its fullness, meaning when monasteries and churches live primarily an inner spiritual life before turning outward. This is why, during certain historical periods when eldership thrived, there was also a spiritual awakening among the people, as they looked to the monastic life for guidance. Hence, the saying: «For monks, the model is the angels, and for laypeople, the monks.» However, today, everything is not merely in decline but in a certain unformed state. Therefore, I think that speaking of a widespread practice of the Jesus Prayer would be and incorrect.

The Jesus Prayer is always connected with a person's spiritual heart, and for this reason, a spiritual guide is necessary – not so much

to dictate the prayer method or monitor whether it aligns with breathing or other techniques, but to humble the soul. The danger lies in spiritual pride, as practising the prayer reveals one's inner self and can bring visible results from the effort. A humble soul filled with prayer will experience spiritual growth. However, if pride takes root and the person focuses on mental prayer in a self-absorbed way, detaching from reality, it leads to spiritual delusion and damage.

God, in His perfect wisdom, has arranged everything with great care: in the absence of humility and experienced spiritual guides, we are given many temptations and worldly distractions to prevent us from delving too deeply into ourselves without proper guidance. These trials help humble us by revealing our passions and keeping us from spiritual pride. The primary task in our spiritual life must be the purification of the soul from pride. Yes, prayer and other spiritual efforts are essential, but they are merely tools. And like any tool, they can be used either for good or harm. This is a very delicate matter, requiring caution. Often, the issue is not in performing the Jesus Prayer poorly, but in the pride we carry. Therefore, the trials and sorrows of life serve to cleanse our hearts. The Jesus Prayer should be closely linked with a compassionate, contrite heart. St. John Climacus said, “The most important thing is to acquire a heart that feels pain for others.” Without such a heart, all our ascetic efforts and our entire spiritual life remain empty. That's the most important thing.

If a person strives to engage in prayer, it's certainly good, but first and foremost, I believe we must speak of the purification of the heart, of the need for a person to rid themselves of pride and to recognize that it is present in them. And if I am reciting the Jesus Prayer and calling upon God's name, I do so because I am fallen and unworthy, hoping that God, in His mercy, will turn His gaze upon me, heal me, and save me. You don't want to simply repeat the prayer, mechanically moving your fingers along the prayer rope and thinking, “I'm praying, I love God more than anyone, and therefore He loves me more than anyone.” That's why God's providence often leads a person from suffering to prayer, and sometimes prayer and trials go hand in hand, to prevent pride from arising, so that the prayer corresponds to the

humility of the heart. Therefore, not everyone should engage in the Jesus Prayer, as it can harm many.

– Father, I didn't bring up this topic by chance. I've been a teacher for a long time, and my students often ask me how to be saved. They come in a state of spiritual searching, realizing that life's questions are meaningless if they are not grounded in spirituality. They ask me that question, I tell them about the Church, and they respond that they come to the temple but do not find answers to their questions there. And I wonder what I should say to those young people seeking salvation. They understand that something is out there, but they don't know how to approach it.

– As I understand it, the word 'churchgoing' means that a person feels God's hand over them, feels as just a small screw, a cog in the large mechanism that is God. If a person doesn't feel that they walk under God's hand, then no church sacraments, no prayers, nothing will help. You need to have such a perception of this world and your life that comes from the heart: God moves everything, God controls everything. No matter how difficult, challenging, or perhaps sinful the circumstances of life may be, it is still from God. There is nothing meaningless. God leads a person through life, but in this life, a person must also feel that Christ is with them. This, I believe, is what it means to be churchgoing.

In the Gospel, the Lord says, "Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Heaven" (Matthew 7:21). This means that we have to perceive and feel this will. We have to feel that we are living according to God's will and that the purpose of our coming into this world is to be filled with love to the extent we are capable of (everyone has their own capacity, their own measure, and have to fill their soul with love as much as they can). Some may attain this love through family, or through love for others, while others may receive it directly from God – each in their own way. But everyone has to strive to be filled with love. If this idea of love is forgotten, life becomes aimless, and if people live solely for pleasures, immerse themselves in digital distractions, and neglect their inner world, their soul will grow lifeless.

I recently read poems by an emigrant and White Army officer, Petrushevsky, where he writes about his homeland and the feeling of

love for it. It made me think: when you live in your homeland for a long time, those feelings remain silent. But when you are deprived of it and find yourself in a foreign land, that's when you realize you love it—that's when the love God instilled in a person begins to torment you, and you suffer because of it. Love is not only joy or blessing; no, love also carries sorrow, deep sorrow, when a person loses someone or something and grieves because of it.

Remember the Gospel, when the disciples of John came to Christ and asked Him: "Why do Your disciples not fast?" The Lord answers, "Why do they need to fast when the Bridegroom is with them?" (Matthew 9:14-15). The meaning of these words is this: I, the Lord, Jesus Christ, am with them. I am their joy, and they are filled with this joy; why should they fast, mourn, lament, or ask for God's love to come to them when it is already with them? And then He says, "When the Bridegroom is taken away, then they will fast" (Matthew 9:15), meaning that both fasting and all our ascetic efforts are there to help satisfy the feeling of sorrow. The soul of a person longs for the One they love. They must embrace Him, contain Him within themselves, intertwine with Him, because this sorrow comes from the heart. One of the Holy Fathers said that we are given time for repentance, that is, for the sorrow of being separated from Christ. A person must be filled with this sorrow, because in this sorrow there is love, and they should not suppress it, turn away from it, or flee from it.

This inner world is what a person must be filled with, and the readings, prayers, icons, sacraments, liturgies, and the beauty of the church should preserve and ignite this feeling. All of this is external, but it is external for the sake of the internal. If there is no internal, everything will be in vain, and the Lord will take it all away. There is a saying: "The Lord gives everything according to need." If there is no need, the Lord will take everything away. People once had a need, and the Lord gave them churches. In some time, people stopped needing them, and the Lord took them away by means of the revolution.

From the first moments of a person's entry into the Church, they must be tuned to love, to seeking this love. Now, the ideals of family are collapsing, a person does not find their other half and suffers

because this is in their nature. The ideas of patriotism are also disappearing, all of this is being broken within the person, and only God remains – He does not change, His love is unchangeable. And if that small seed of Christ Himself, which the Lord gives during baptism, is nurtured within, the soul will be filled with love. However, if this seed is not watered and worked upon, the soul will remain empty. Then, even that external love, on which the person placed all their hopes, may turn out to be without an object of love, and the person will suffer not from love, but from emptiness.

– *That's why I began with the question about the Jesus Prayer because love is the goal. Young people ask me, "How do we reach this goal, how do we do it?" They search for God and come to church, but they are repelled by formalism and this outward life, saying that priests drive Mercedes cars. I thought that maybe in this striving towards God, the Jesus Prayer is a means that helps the Lord touch our souls. What would you advise a simple person who really wants to find God but can't seem to find Him?*

– As for the people who are now coming to the Church and those coming to monasteries, these people must already be prepared. Life itself, the sufferings and temptations that come to a person, should cultivate in them steadfastness, meaning that, despite anything or anyone, they are already heading toward their goal, seeking love, and no one can turn them away. It is incorrect to think that in the Church, people are the best and the holiest. Take priests, for example – they are people who have come from this world, so they also have their weaknesses. If a beginner looks at everything without this understanding, it is clear that they will be harmed. At first, there might be a small evil, but then, gradually or immediately, all the bad will cloud their eyes; the person will lose love, and because of judgment, God will no longer be able to fill this soul with love. We have to understand that not to judge others, not to become embittered, and not to become empty. They must consciously seek love, seek love as God, and prayer should be instilled in the heart in this way, but not as a result of asceticism (immediately renouncing the world, retreating into oneself), but as a result of repentance – feeling that it is bad, that

without love, one is perishing. It is through this feeling that prayer is implanted, takes root in the heart, and without this inner call to prayer, it is better not to begin, as it will only harm.

– *We know that Angels never interfere with the human soul, with the human heart, unless the person asks. In my understanding, this prayer is a request to the Angel, a request to the Lord, to look upon this soul.*

– This prayer contains the mystery of love. I love, but I do not expect reciprocal love; rather, I seek it, but I do not impose a condition, like “Since I love You, You must give me Your love.” The disposition of my heart is more like this: “Lord, I love You, and You see what I am; You know that I am unworthy of You; I am the lowest and the worst, but I love You, and no matter what, even if You do not love me, I will still love You.” This inner state does not arise from the principle of commodity relations, but only from the formula «I love You.» I know that God loves me, but I also know that I am unworthy of this love because I know what I am like.

– *Maybe there is even an impulse, like “Lord, save me, pull me out, hear me!” That is, such a cry for salvation, and not for love – God knows that we love Him*

– Salvation is the union of a person with God, it is much deeper, and the Jesus Prayer, as well as any prayer, leads to salvation. The words of the prayer express that I am a sinner. It is no longer about salvation or union with God, as the person does not consider themselves worthy of that union. Here it is about my love for God, and the sweetest, most precious thing in my heart is the name of Jesus. At first, this prayer feels dry, it first settles in the mind, then in the heart, and after a while, a person begins to weep – first inside, and then the tears flow outward. The weeping comes from grace, from the love that enters the heart, but there is also the feeling that I am unworthy of this love, I am a sinner, yet God loves me just as I am. Yes, the tears come from the sense that I am not good, but I love You, Lord. It is from this that the tears come, not from thinking that everything is fine, that God has saved me, and now I feel great and happy.

– *So, the awareness of one's sinfulness is a form of humility?*

– When we talk about the awareness of one’s sinfulness, it seems to me that it’s more about the mind. You see, a person feels with their whole being their fallen nature. They understand this, and this understanding comes from the feeling that they are constantly hurting God’s love: through their sins, they betray it, violate it, and cause it to suffer. From this feeling comes humility and understanding. A person can only recognize or feel themselves as a sinner when they begin to love, and without love, the awareness of sinfulness will not lead to the fruits of humility. Therefore, in the Jesus Prayer, first, the Name of God is called upon, love is kindled in the heart, and only then comes the petition for oneself: “Lord, have mercy on me, such a sinner...”

Although I may be more sinful than all of you put together and unworthy of even touching such high topics, I am not saying anything new, as this has all been said long ago by the holy fathers, and I am merely repeating them. Perhaps someone else sees love differently, as it is multifaceted and has many aspects; it can be seen from various angles. Therefore, if someone says otherwise, that will also be correct.

– *What can you say about prayer in the modern world – is it the same, different in some way, or does it not exist at all?*

– I will repeat what Saint Anthony the Great said. He said that the last Christians will be saved by inner sorrows. Prayer is not just words spoken, prayer is primarily the movement of the heart. And the last Christians will be higher than the first, because the sorrows that will come upon them in life will be greater and stronger. Therefore, I believe that prayer is connected to inner sorrows.

– *That’s so deep.*

– Yes, prayer may begin in the mind, but it lives in the heart.

– *That’s why I put the question in this way, because there is so much suffering, all of humanity is grieving. The entire people of Russia are in this state.*

– No, today there are many means that dull this sorrow, they lead a person into emptiness, and so there is also a very deceptive and broad path. But there are people who do not dull this sorrow. If I feel bad, and I experience emptiness from the lack of love, I grieve over it, I suffer, but I do not try to fill my soul with something empty, bad, or

material to escape from it; I do not seek an escape but live with it and endure this state of soul. But not many live this way – it is painful, so it is wrong to speak of everyone in this way. If people did not run from inner sorrow, the world would live and never have an end. But the essence is that people run away from it, and when a person stops living with the heart, they stop being human.

– *Now deceased Patriarch of Serbia Pavle, may his soul rest in peace, said some very interesting words. I had the grace of meeting him. What strikes me most in his books is the central theme of his spiritual talks: humans and non-humans, and his covenant: “Stay human.” What does it mean: humans and non-humans?*

– Probably, the meaning of these words is precisely about living with the heart. This is what I am talking about now. As soon as a person loses love – that’s it, the meaning of life on earth will cease, and only emptiness will remain.

– *To remain human means to remain a person with a loving heart?*

– Yes, but love is a gift – you earn it through suffering.

– *Apparently, people often misunderstand the very concept of love. Everyone shouts about it, but they fail to grasp its depth. They reduce love to base instincts and animal desires, thereby degrading true, spiritual love.*

– You see, everything is permeated with love. God is present in everything: in stone, in trees, in both the living and the non-living. Everything breathes with His love. The key is not to deviate from true love, so it does not drown in instinctive, base desires. True love can be compared to fire – just as the Lord says in the Gospel: ‘I have come to cast fire upon the earth’ (Luke 12:49). Perhaps, love can only be compared to fire. That’s why it’s said that a human can be consumed by love. One can burn from a man’s love for a woman and a woman’s love for a man, and this is from God. Even the longing for one’s homeland is a love from God. Love is always a burning flame, which contains life and God.

– *Father, you’ve just said that love is fire. What a striking image – after all, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in the form of tongues of fire. Is it correct to say that love is a gift of the Holy Spirit?*

– That’s right, but the most important thing in life, as the Holy Fathers said, is to acquire humility. Whether God grants us this love

here on earth or after death – that is His will and wisdom. If you do not have humility, you will not acquire love because love cannot dwell in a proud heart. This is why Christ said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29). He did not say “learn love”, but rather “learn humility”. God comes only into a humble, gentle heart and remains to dwell there. Yes, no matter how sinful you may be, if you are gentle and humble, God will dwell in you. But even if you are morally pure, yet your heart is proud, God will never be there.

– *Can we say that a person who lives with peace in their soul has a humble heart?*

– I think humility is much deeper. Peace enters into humility, but if we characterize humility only as a state of peace, it would not be entirely accurate. Therefore, I believe the etymology of humility is related to the understanding of the necessity of accepting God’s will. With the fulfilment of God’s will comes peace in the soul of a person. Perhaps a more precise concept for humility is our sonship to God, and it is found in the fulfilment of His will.

– *“Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.” Perhaps, the Spirit of Peace is meekness and humility?*

– Yes, perhaps it is so.

– *About love... A mother sends her son to an institution where he will be taught sciences, hoping that he will stand out and look better than everyone else, buying him expensive clothes. Ten years later, she realizes that this has harmed him, and he has grown into an egoist. But at first, she called it love, and did all of this seemingly out of love for her son.*

– You see, God is Love by His very essence, but we also call Him Wisdom, meaning that love always contains wisdom. We have to understand that when we act out of love, we need to wisely manage that love. It should not merely aim at indulgence, joy, or comfort but serve the benefit of the soul and body. Love should not only be received but also given, to avoid selfishness – and this is something children must be taught. Thus, love has to be filled with wisdom. If love is reckless, it will inevitably cause damage.

March 27, 2009. Holy Sergius Skete

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