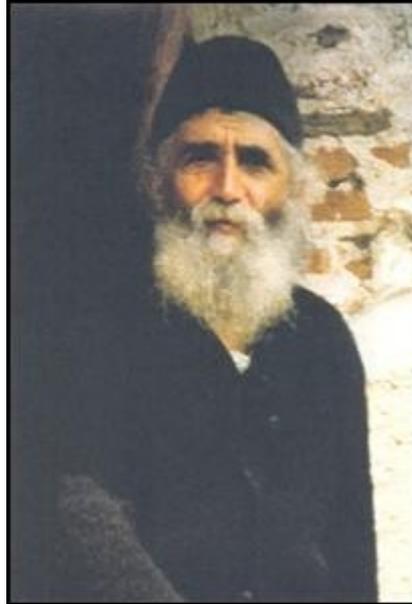


Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain

On Spiritual Life



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1

What does Christ demand from us? Can one reach all virtues? If it is impossible, how can one keep from falling into despair?" To these puzzling questions Elder Paisios gave the following answer: "Purity, divine justice, humility, love, non-possessiveness and all virtues — all these are one and the same thing. One virtue contains all virtues in the same fashion as one passion contains all passions. Our soul has to purify itself and decrease its desires. What do the Americans do when they want to launch a rocket from the Earth into space? They count backwards: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6... 1, 0, and they launch the rocket. The same way we are going to reach zero by cutting off our will, the same way we are going to be exalted."

2

Observing the behavior of some clergy and laity we have found out that they, being lukewarm and easily inclined to sin themselves, are strict and severe towards others. The Elder condemned this and used to say that "the spiritual man is strict towards himself but very lenient towards others and doesn't use the holy canons as a weapon against them (people)."

3

Contemporary Christians do not truly put their hope on the Divine Providence. They plan, calculate and act according to the economic data. From the Christian point of view such tactics are incorrect. A believer has to place his hope in God and not in the material welfare. It is significant what the Elder had to say about the need of placing all our trust in the Divine Providence: "In order

entrust everything to the Divine Providence we have to cleanse ourselves from all worldly cares. Only then the Divine Providence is going to act. For example: he who is trying to save money either for a rainy day or so that he wouldn't need anything is relying on money, not on God. Firstly, he has to stop loving money and relying on it and only then he can rely on God. You cannot have both. I am not saying that he should use money, but that he wouldn't hope that it is going to get him through."

4

In our day and age, people talk a lot about all sorts of insurances. We insure our cars, homes, our children, our life. But nevertheless, we feel unprotected. We feel the emptiness which oppresses and depresses us. Elder would say that "people feel insecure because they carry insurances! They have gotten insured by the world and feel unprotected."

5

Divine grace cannot act where there is no struggle against passions. Elder used to say that "we need to cleanse our soul from passions. The more the person cleanses himself, the more the Divine grace acts in him. One depends on the other. When the person is cleansed from passions, then he can see both: the Divine grace and the fulfillment of what Christ has promised us."

6

Often, when talking with the pilgrims, the Elder spoke justice — human and divine. He would make a distinctive difference between the two and, naturally, he exhorted his visitors to follow the divine justice. To be understood he used one simple example: "Two people sit at the table. They have ten apricots. If one of them, yielding to the demon of gluttony, eats seven and leaves three to the other person, his action is unjust. If they eat five apricots each — this is human justice which doesn't receive a great reward. But if one of them pretends that he doesn't like apricots and will eat only one, leaving the other nine to the other person, he will be acting according to the divine justice. He is going to receive the greatest reward from God."

7

On the 16th of this month, there arrive at our hometown of Konitsa a wolf in sheep's skin - H.K. (follower of Apostolos Makrakis (1831-1905) who among other things preached necessity of frequent communion without proper preparation) - and was distributing books, exuding poison of the disguised prelest (spiritual delusion). He desires to commune daily despite of the fact that he ate shish-kabob the night before.

Of course, I have never met Makrakis, but I can see his awful misconceptions. I also know many of his followers. H.K. is one of them. Father Philoptheos Zervakos is renouncing him, as well. Besides the great temptation - the issue of daily communion, when he desired to commune daily although he ate meat the day before, let me tell you about his another misunderstanding. He was praying in a hotel for some foreigner that God would enlighten him. He began his prayer with "Blessed is Our God always, now and ever..." The foreigner asked him: "You must be a priest?" He answered: "Who are priests? What is Church? I feel I am an angel..." When we, the monks who bear the angelic image, begin the prayer with the words "Through the prayers of the Holy Fathers", he begins with "Blessed is Our God" and feels himself very

exalted.

You write that the holy canons do not prescribe fasting before the Holy Communion. I do not deny that. But they speak about preparation. How God commanded Moses to prepare himself for the reception of the commandments? Didn't He, among other things, commanded him to fast? Since the canons were written at the time when martyrdom was an everyday reality, the Holy Fathers didn't prescribe fasting (before communion), for every Christian lived in expectation of having to suffer for Christ, they simply didn't know when exactly it would happen. The Holy Fathers didn't establish fasting back then, since it was difficult to fast all the time. At that time the prophetic words of King David were fulfilled: "For Thy sake we were killed all day long, we were counted as sheep for the slaughter" (Ps. 43:23). But later, both Mogila and Kritopoulos spoke about that fast which was established by the Orthodox Church. At any rate, Athonite monks are posed extremely against the Makrakisites and one can often hear: "If you even see a Makrakisite among the saints on a fresco - wipe his image off".

8

One visitor saw the Elder drinking unstrained tea, so he expressed a desire to bring the Elder a strainer on his next visit. But the Elder told him: "My child, don't do that, because next I am going to need a nail to hang the strainer on".

9

Many of Elder's visitors were bringing him all kinds of food as a token of their gratitude and also as an expression of their love and respect for the Elder. He would always give the groceries away, leaving nothing at all for himself. When asked why he wouldn't keep at least something for himself, the Elder answered: "If I start keeping the food there is going to be a supermarket here! I also recollect the Israelites whom God gave manna every day. But if anyone kept it for the following day the manna would spoil. We should have hope in the Divine Providence".

10

The Elder said: "Man has to lose some of his cold reason and become a person of heart, a person of faith and profound reverence and fear of God, then he will see real miracles in his life".

11

Once someone complained to the Elder that to one and the same question he would give different answers to different people. To this the Elder answered: "Well, my beloved, I give everyone that vitamin which he lacks!"

12

Elder said that there are two kinds of people. The first are like flies which come and land on any dirt in sight. If the fly happen to be in a garden full of fragrant flowers, it is not going to sit on them but it is going to find some manure and will sit on it. So do the people who seek and find only the bad and ignore the good which is around them. The other kind are like the bee which sits there where there is the goodness and sweetness. If it finds itself in a large room full of filth with a piece of lokum in a corner, it will immediately head for lokum, and not for the filth. So do the people who have good thoughts: they see only the good. Let every man choose the category which he wants to belong to and let him look for the people with the like mindset. "A for me," said the Elder, "I wish people were like bees".

In 1975, Elder Paisios wrote the following which was the answer to one man's question about prayer:

“I would like to direct you to one simple method of the unceasing prayer which you, if you desire, can use. Probably it is most effective for the simple people who cannot perceive the depth of thought of the Holy Fathers and who are in danger of falling into prelest (spiritual delusion).

Some do not set for themselves a goal of rejecting their 'old man', that is they do not set as their goal humility, repentance and podvig (ascetic struggles), which is what we should do for the sanctification of our souls (the rest is done by God), they do not strive to truly face their sinfulness and that which is the result of this realization – all encompassing hunger for God's mercy and for the frequent prayer 'O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'. This prayer is uttered with pain from the heart (then the person would feel in his heart the sweetness of the Sweetest Jesus' Divine consolation). Unfortunately, often they begin with the 'dry' asceticism and strive for the God-given bliss, the Uncreated Light, they constantly increase the number of prayers and in their own eyes they become saints. They calculate the great number of their prayers and come to the conclusion that they must be holy. They make benches precisely according to the measurements and many other things, they make sure that their heads are lowered at the right angle towards the heart, they slow down their breathing and do everything what Saints Kallistos and Gregory, those who achieve much with silence, write in the Philokalia. Then they delight in the false thought – that they must have reached the measure of those saints. Once they believe this thought, right away a demon comes and turns on for them a TV with fantasies. Then there follow the demonic prophecies and everything else which are associated with prelest.

The only safe thing is repentance. Any spiritual structure must be built on it. We ceaselessly ask God for repentance and for nothing else. We shouldn't ask for light, miracles, prophecies and other gifts, but repentance. Repentance brings humility, and humility will bring grace of God, because it is a law: grace of God always comes to the humble. Therefore, humility is a must for our salvation. When we have acquired it then the grace of God will come and it will teach us what we should be doing for our salvation and for those close to us.

When we begin to feel the great need in God's mercy, then we are going to say the prayer many times from our whole heart and feel in our heart the sweetness of the Divine consolation of the Sweetest Jesus. Then our heart will embrace our mind and our whole being.

If we do all this, then our prayer is not going to make us tired. When we perceive the true essence of prayer then it brings us rest and don't have to force ourselves to pray. But we are compelled by our conscience which imparts to our heart spiritual courage and spiritual wings and then in the hour of prayer our heart, no matter how hardened it is, is torn apart from crying and produces abundant tears. Man feels the need for prayer just like a child who, when he opens his mouth and hastens to his mother's embrace to cling to her breast, feels hunger and, at the same time, safety and maternal love.

There is no doubt that the enemy is going to try, through distraction of your thoughts, to offer a fight. But when the prayer is preceded by the reading from the Holy Fathers (Evergetinos or Paterikon), then both minor and major difficulties and cares of the day subside, you will be surrounded by the spiritual

atmosphere and your prayer will be focused.

If the enemy decides to attack you with lustful thoughts (according to his usual malice and envy) – don't be put off by it, but use the demon for your own benefit, saying: “It is good that you have brought me these thoughts – now I am encouraged to pray, otherwise I keep forgetting to pray unceasingly”. Right away the enemy will retreat for he is used to doing only evil. I told you about it because the enemy usually brings corrupting thoughts to the sensitive people, in order to make them more sensitive, confuse their thoughts and interrupt their prayer. Especially this is true for those who pridefully keep extremely long vigils beyond their strength, for they are exhausted and have no strength to drive away the corrupt thoughts. They think that the corrupt thoughts are their own and therefore they suffer for something which is not their fault but the enemy's.

Therefore it is necessary for the young men to pray with humility and discernment, not to be overcome by the cares of the day, but occupy themselves with spiritual reading, eat a little bit of simple food which also helps (and as far as possible the food should be without salt to prevent abundant intake of water, because retention of water impedes prayer). It helps if the evening meal, no matter how light, is taken at 4 P.M. After that – reading of the Holy Fathers or something else for about three hours. It would help if bows or prostrations were made in-between the activities, after every round of the prayer rope – to warm up oil in the engine. When the young men are tired let them sit and do the prayer, calling to mind their wretchedness and all the good things the good God has done to them. Then the mind will focus in the heart and the person asks, without any effort, for God's mercy with his all his heart, all his soul and all his mind.

Of great benefit are the three hours after the sunset, when they are preceded by reading from the Holy Fathers, as well as, by the way, the hours from the midnight till the sunrise. It is best for the youth to go to bed an hour after the sunset and to get up early in the morning, in order to escape the morning's sensual dreams. Of course, discernment and guidance of the spiritual father (whom one has to have) is necessary”.

14

Elder told a hieromonk: “Our soul must be always in readiness and sobriety and be connected to the Spiritual Headquarters, i.e. to God. Only then she will feel confidence, hope and joy. When I was in the army and fought together with the partisans, I was a signaler. I saw that when we could get in touch with the headquarters in Merarhia every hour, we felt safe. When we could contact the headquarters only every two hours, we felt some insecurity. But when – although this was not often – we could get a signal only in the morning and in the evening, then we felt bad, we felt cut off. The same is true for prayer. The more often you pray, the more spiritually confident you feel”.



Elder Paisios surrounded by visitors

15

People living among the abundance of the material goods easily forget God and never feel a need to thank Him. This is most dangerous for our spiritual life. One can realize this captivity of soul only with difficulty and with even greater difficulty one can free himself from its bonds. The Elder used to stress this for the monastics and laity who visited him. He wanted to show them that the material possessions do not lead to salvation, therefore man has to despise them. For survival, man has to use only what is indispensable and put his trust in the Divine Providence. Elder's following story from his experience is especially useful as well as timely for the contemporary Christians who often fall into the nets of the utterly unjustifiable acquisition of the material goods. As a result, they stop caring for their spiritual state and for the way they live. In other words, they begin to resemble the vessels which have Christian labels on them but are empty inside.

So, the Elder said: "I see that the spiritual catastrophe with the humanity happens when it has material possessions in abundance. Then it is hard for people to feel the presence of God and His care for us. Do you want to distance somebody from God? Continuously provide him with the material goods in abundance and he is going to forget about God.

I came to this realization when I was younger. When was on Sinai, in the place where I lived there was no water. I had to walk for about two hours to reach the rock from which the water was trickling. I would put my jug down and sit for an hour, waiting for the water to fill up the jug, and then I would go back. Because of this water, trickling from the rock, my soul was experiencing the following: everyday I worried if there would be water from the rock that day? I prayed that God would continue giving me water from the rock. On my way there, I was worried and I would pray. Spotting the rock from afar, and seeing the water glistening in the sun, I would joyfully glorify God and return to my cell giving thanks and glory to God for the water He gave me. The limited amount of water coming from the rock made me, first, to constantly pray to God so that He would continue giving me water and, second, to give thanks and glorify God

- the sole Provider of all good things.

When I left Sinai and came to the Iveron Skete on Mt Athos, they had no problem with water there. Water was there in abundance. It was measured in cubic meters which was uselessly wasted. But one day I noticed that a change was slowly occurring in me. I realized that during all the time I was living in the Skete I had not said even once: "Glory to Thee, O God". At the time when on Sinai the lack of water was a cause of prayer and glorification of God, the abundance of water in the Skete drove me to forget that water is a gift of God for which we have to thank Him. This can happen with anything".

16

The Elder said: "In all circumstances in our life prayer provides us with the most real help".

17

People easily forget about their responsibility to pray, because they are daily occupied with diverse activities and fill their minds with all sorts of rubbish. It comes to the point when should they want to pray - they can't. They squander their time on inferior things and live without the mystical union with God. The Elder worried about this state of the contemporary Christians in the world, and at times even of monastics. Therefore, he would often denounce them in order to awaken them spiritually so that their prayer would be more regular and purer. He used to say: "We waste our time on worthless things instead of being in constant union with God. Take, for example, women. If they prayed with the prayer rope, they would acquire the Divine Grace and work miracles in this world. But what do they do? Let's say they have a carafe. One says that she doesn't like the green leaves painted on the carafe and that she would like to have red flowers instead. Another woman says that if one went to such and such a store one could get a much better carafe. What is that? This one is a carafe and that one is a carafe. Isn't that the same thing? Leave alone those carafes and bend your knees in prayer. A similar thing one can see here, on the Holy Mountain. Once I came to one cell and saw a monk shaking out some bed covers. I asked him what he was doing and he said he was shaking out his lace. Then I said: "Have you come to Athos to shake out your lace? Leave it alone. Get down on your knees, pray and weep - for this is what we are supposed to be doing here: praying and only praying.

18

Here is what Elder Paisios said about the results of prayer: "When I lived in the Stomiou Monastery in Konitsa, a field keeper from a neighboring village used to come every Saturday for the evening service at the monastery. The man, who had many children, always asked me to let him light the lampadas in the temple. I allowed him overlooking the fact that he would always spill oil. When he would leave the monastery, he, having walked awhile, would fire his shotgun. This always puzzled me, and once I secretly followed him. Having lit the lampadas, he oiled his gun with the oil from the lampada hanging in front of the icon of the Mother of God and, kneeling before it, he asked Her for a little bit of meat for his children. When he left the monastery, a wild nanny-goat was waiting for him with her head bowed. He made one shot, killed the goat and that way he got meat for his children. This was how the Mother of God, listening to his simple prayer, would give him the best meat for his very large family".

19

The Elder said about our times: "Time of Noah is here. God is calling us to enter His Ark, the Church. Let us be very careful. Chaff is starting to separate from the wheat. Our time is a furnace purifying gold. The longer the gold is in the furnace, the smaller it gets".

20

The Elder said: "Life is no picnic - it has both joys and sorrows. We have no right to forget God".

21

To prove existence of soul the Elder used the following example: "When we rejoice or suffer then it is our soul, not our body, that rejoices or suffers. When we cut ourselves or bump into something then we feel it right away. But when we are dead, no matter how long they may beat us, our body doesn't feel it because our soul is not there anymore".

22

The Elder said to one of his visitors: "If you start thinking that everything around you is worthless - you will benefit and receive spiritual help".

23

The Elder often stressed the following: "Let us not praise the modern times. If we returned to the old times with its horse-drawn wagons, we would be better off".

24

When both husband and wife work, then there problems appear. The Elder said that only one spouse should work and that they should be content with few material possessions.

25

To the question, what he thought about the external threats which Greece was facing, the Elder answered: "If God left the fate of Greece and Orthodoxy in our hands, then the former and the latter would perish. God allows for the dangers to come so that we would wake up from our slumber. Now we are passing our exams".

26

The Elder told one of his visitors the following concerning the power of fervent prayer: "There was a youth whose father was an unbeliever and that was causing a constant sorrow for the young man. But he prayed and prayed for God to grant his father repentance. Then the father got sick and his son took him to Athens to Evangelismos (Annunciation, in Greek) hospital. Once there, he again tried to convince his father to confess, but all in vain. Then he continued to pray. During a medical exam, his father died. The hospital staff - nurses and doctors - confirmed his death and ordered him taken to a morgue. But the youth continued to pray, as if nothing had happened. "My God, grant my father repentance", he kept saying over and over again. While the father was being transferred to the morgue, he came back to life. Do you understand what happened? That man lived three more years and departed this life fully repentant. This is what faith and prayer

do”.

27

To the question of how can one bring to faith a person who doesn't listen to anything one tells him, the Elder replied: “Words alone are not enough. Before, to whitewash a wall they used not only the whitewash itself, but they first applied straw and then added goat hair to the whitewash for a better binding effect. So, besides the words, good example is needed. And everything should be encompassed with prayer which binds our efforts”. Another time, the Elder said: “Help a sinner to tune to another frequency”.

28

To a visitor, whose child was chronically ill, the Elder said: “Patience. You are going to need fewer points to get to Heaven”. To another person, who had a different problem, he said: “Be patient. You have a right for everything to be well”.

29

To someone who worried a lot, the Elder said: “Don't dwell constantly on the winter cold, otherwise you are going to be freezing even in August”.

The Elder said: “He who labors for the benefit of his neighbor out of pure love, to him this labor brings enjoyment and rest. Whereas he who loves himself and is lazy – grows tired from sitting”.

30

The Elder said: “Instead of being tortured all your lives by your unclean conscience, it is better to be killed once”.

31

The devil tries hard to recruit his followers from every walk of life. The Elder often said to his visitors: “The devil has three tentacles: for the poor it is communism, for the believers it is ecumenism, and for the rich it is freemasonry”.

32

To the visitors, who don't go regularly to church and justify themselves that once in church they are tired and doze off during the service anyway, or that they on account of the multitude of people cannot concentrate on prayer, the Elder said: “Church is like a ship. You board the ship and then you can daydream, doze off and fall asleep, but the ship still will cross to the other side with you on board. You just have to get aboard.”

33

The Elder said: “May say: 'First, I am going to get settled, solve my problems and then I will start going to church'. This is an excuse. In the church you receive a blessing. Do not postpone the reception of the blessing till you solve all your problems. First, receive the blessing and only then go and organize your affairs.”

34

Another time the Elder said: “Some say they do not go to church because

there are too many people there. So they think it is just as well to stop at a chapel and light a candle there. They forget that in the Kingdom of Heaven there will be many people. As well. Does it mean that we shouldn't go there, too?"

35

The Elder said: "Do not worry for the people with soft hearts - Christ will reward them. Grieve over the hardhearted people".

36

The Elder said about the people who sin and have no fear of God: "God doesn't kill evil. Evil kills itself. God doesn't kill an evil person, but his evil acts lead him to death".

37

The Elder said: "Good shines. The good person is seen from afar and everyone agrees with that. There comes a moment when even those who used to laugh at him or despise him are look for him. The drunks and those who play cards when they need a person who would solve their problems - for example, would measure out their farm land or do some other work for them - look for a good person. The same is done by those who want to marry their children: they do not go visiting bars looking for the future husband or wife for their child. They look for good people".

38

Addressing parents, the Elder said: "Do not pressure your children unreasonably. Growing tomatoes, I tie the vines to the stakes with cloth strips. If I tied them with pieces of wire the vines would get cut. Discernment is necessary here". "Nowadays, children have powerful engines but square wheels. Therefore, to get moving they need help".

Prayer of Manasseh

O Lord, Almighty God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of their righteous seed; who hast made heaven and earth, with all the ornament thereof; who hast bound the sea by the word of thy commandment; who hast shut up the deep, and sealed it by thy terrible and glorious name; whom all men fear, and tremble before thy power; for the majesty of thy glory cannot be borne, and thine angry threatening toward sinners is importable: but thy merciful promise is unmeasurable and unsearchable; for thou art the most high Lord, of great compassion, longsuffering, very merciful, and repentest of the evils of men. Thou, O Lord, according to thy great goodness hast promised repentance and forgiveness to them that have sinned against thee: and of thine infinite mercies hast appointed repentance unto sinners, that they may be saved. Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, as to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but

