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On the Question of the "Toll-Houses" Our War is not Against Flesh and Blood

[Share](#) | by **Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky***"We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ." —I Cor. 4:10*

Introduction. A number of poor scholars and pseudo-scholars alike have, over the past several decades, made a case against the Orthodox Church's teaching on life after death, and especially the "toll house" image used by some Fathers and in many of our worship services. Misrepresenting the Fathers, ignoring liturgical and theological evidence, and overstating their case, some of these critics have made of various *theologoumena*, unfortunately, matters of intense debate. Likewise misusing philosophy, misrepresenting the Patristic use of classical philosophical ideas and images, and attributing, with a naivete that would embarrass a first-year philosophy student in the most mediocre of schools, they pontificate about neo-Gnosticism and neo-Platonic influences on Orthodox thinking, artlessly using the very arguments against the teachings to which they object that the most polemical Westerners have used against the Eastern Fathers.

Admittedly, there are ecclesiastical writers who have too literally presented the complex teachings of the Orthodox Church on life after death and the "toll house" imagery. But they are guilty of poor expression, not heresy and neo-Gnosticism. Fundamentalism and literalism are a danger in any discussion of spiritual things that address another dimension of thought and experience. And we must be critical of any fall to such foibles. But we must never respond to such weaknesses with equally naïve fundamentalism under the guise of "scholarly" expertise which is nothing more than a superficial treatment of very intricate problems by individuals who approach theology, not with the desire to learn, but with definite axes to grind. And those who carry such axes are to the intellectual life what a cave man with a club is to reflective thinkers engaged in formal philosophical debate.

Father Michael Pomazansky, a true scholar and a theologian whose brilliance has been too long neglected, for many years quietly taught at Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY. Unfortunately, he is known to English speakers primarily by way of an instructive, but basic, text on dogmatics. Thus, the wide scope and the great wisdom of his more subtle and nuanced writings have been largely overlooked. His following comments on the toll houses are evidence of his brilliance, balanced thought, and true knowledge of the Fathers and philosophy. This essay is one of the best I have ever read on the "toll houses," and it should serve as a model for our Orthodox, and proper scholarly, approach to the very important question of the afterlife. It is a superb answer to pseudo-experts who are filling the Internet with teachings that entail a virtual theory of soul sleep under the guise of quasi-sophisticated ideas that claim to set aside the primitiveness of the Church's teachings.

—Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna

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Our life is lived among a population which, although it is nominally Christian, in many respects has different conceptions and views than ours in the realm of faith. Sometimes this inspires us to respond to questions of our Faith when they are raised and discussed from a non-Orthodox point of view by persons of other confessions, and sometimes by Orthodox Christians who no longer have a firm Orthodox foundation under their feet.

In the limited conditions of our life we unfortunately are unable fully to react to statements or to reply to the questions that arise. However, we sometimes feel such a need. In particular, we now have occasion to define the Orthodox view of the "toll-houses," which is one of the topics of a book which has appeared in English under the title, *Christian Mythology* by Canon George Every. The "toll-houses" are the experience of the Christian soul immediately after death, as these experiences are described by the Fathers of the Church and Christian ascetics. In recent years a critical approach to a whole series of our Church beliefs has been observed; these beliefs are viewed as being "primitive," the result of a "naive" world view of piety, and they are characterized by such words as "myths," "magic," and the like. It is our duty to respond.






The subject of the toll-houses is not specifically a topic of Orthodox Christian theology: it is not a dogma of the Church in the precise sense, but comprises material of a moral and edifying character, one might say pedagogical. To approach it correctly, it is essential to understand the *foundations* and the spirit of the Orthodox world-view. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so, the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God (I Cor. 2:11-12). We must ourselves come closer to the Church, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God (I Cor. 2:12). In the present question the *foundation* is: We believe in the Church. The Church is the heavenly and earthly Body of Christ, pre-designated for the moral

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Keywords used: tollhouse or toll-house

perfection of the members of its earthly part and for the blessed, joyful, but always active life of its ranks in its heavenly realm. The Church on earth glorifies God, unites believers, and educates them morally so that by this means it might ennoble and exalt earthly life itself—both the personal life of its own children, and the life of mankind. Its chief aim is to help them in the attainment of eternal life in God, the attainment of sanctity, without which *no man shall see the Lord* (Heb. 12:14).

Thus, it is essential that there be constant communion between those in the Church on earth and the heavenly Church. In the Body of Christ all its members are interactive. In the Lord, the Shepherd of the Church, there are, as it were, two flocks: the heavenly and the earthly (Epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs, 17th century). *Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it* (I Cor. 12:26). The heavenly Church rejoices, but at the same time it sympathizes with its fellow members on earth. St. Gregory the Theologian gave to the earthly Church of his time the name of "suffering Orthodoxy"; and thus it has remained until now. This interaction is valuable and indispensable for the common aim that we *may grow up into Him in all things...from Whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the building of itself in love* (Eph. 4:15-16).

The end of all this is deification in the Lord, that *God may be all in all* (I Cor. 15:28). The earthly life of the Christian should be a place of spiritual growth, progress, the ascent of the soul towards heaven. We deeply grieve that, with the exception of a few of us, although we know our path, stray far away from it because of our attachment to what is exclusively earthly. And, although we are ready to offer repentance, still we continue to live carelessly. However, there is not in our souls that so-called "peace of soul" which is present in Western Christian psychology, which is based upon some kind of "moral minimum" i.e., having fulfilled my obligation that provides a convenient disposition of soul for occupying oneself with worldly interests.

However, it is precisely there, where "peace of soul" ends, that there is opened the field of perfection for the inward work of the Christians. *If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but only a certain fearful expectation of judgement and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries... It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (Heb. 10:26-27, 31). Passivity and carelessness are unnatural to the soul; by being passive and careless we demean ourselves. However, to rise up requires constant vigilance of the soul and, more than this, warfare. With whom is this warfare? With oneself only? *We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against the spirits of wickedness under the heaven* (Eph. 6:12).

Here we approach the subject of the toll-houses.

It is not by chance, that the Lord's Prayer ends with the words: *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One*. Concerning this Evil One, in another of His discourses the Lord said to His disciples: *I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven* (Luke 10:18). Cast down from heaven, he became thus a resident of the lower sphere, *the prince of the power of the air*, the prince of the legion of unclean spirits. *When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man but does not find rest for himself, he returns to the home from which he departed and, finding it unoccupied, cleaned and put in order, he goeth and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there, and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation* (Matt. 12:43, 45).

Was it only a generation? Concerning the bent-over woman who was healed on the Sabbath day, did not the Lord reply: *Ought not this woman being a daughter whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?* (Luke 13:16).

The Apostles in their instructions do not forget about our spiritual enemies. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: *In past times ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience* (Eph. 2:2). Therefore, now *put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil* (Eph. 6:11), *for the devil, as a roaring lion, seeketh whom he may devour* (I Peter 5:8). Being Christians, shall we call these quotations from the Scripture "mythology"? Those warnings to previous generations found in the written word of God also relate to us. Therefore the hindrances to salvation are the same. Some of them are due to our own carelessness, our own self-confidence, our lack of concern, our egoism, to the passions of the body; others are in the temptations and the tempters who surround us: in people, and in the invisible dark powers which surround us. This is why, in our daily personal prayers, we beg God not to allow any "success of the evil one" (from the Morning Prayers), that is, that we be not allowed any success in our deeds that might occur with the help of dark powers. In general, in our private prayers and also in public Divine Worship, we never lose sight of the idea of being translated into a different life after death.

In the times of the Apostles and the first Christians, when Christians were more inspired, when the difference between the pagan world and the world of Christians was much more distinct, when the suffering of the martyrs

was the light of Christianity, there was less concern to support the spirit of Christians by preaching alone. But the Gospel is all encompassing! The demands of the Sermon on the Mount were meant not only for the Apostles! And therefore, in the writings of the Apostles we already read not simple instructions, but also warnings about the future, when we shall have to give an account.

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand (Eph. 6: 11, 13). For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:26-27, 31). On some have compassion, and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh (Jude, the brother of James, 22-23). It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame (Heb. 6:4-6).

Thus it was in the Apostolic age. But when the Church, having received freedom, began to be filled with masses of people, when the general inspiration of faith began to weaken, there was a more critical need for powerful words, for denunciations, for calls to spiritual vigilance, to fear of God and fear for one's own fate. In the collection of pastoral instructions of the most zealous archpastors we read stern homilies giving pictures of the future judgement which awaits us after death. These homilies were intended to bring sinners to their senses, and evidently they were given during periods of general Christian repentance before Great Lent. In them was the truth of God's righteousness, the truth that nothing unclean would enter into the kingdom of sanctity; this truth was clothed in vivid, partly figurative, close to earthly images which were known to everyone in daily life. The hierarchs of this period themselves called these images of the judgement which follows immediately after death the "toll-houses." The tables of the publicans, the collectors of taxes and duties, were evidently points for letting one go on the road further into the central part of the city. Of course, the word "toll-house" in itself does not indicate to us any particular religious significance. In patristic language it signifies that short period after death when the Christian soul must account for its moral state.

St. Basil writes, "Let no one deceive himself with empty words, for sudden destruction cometh upon them (I Thess. 5:3) and causes an overturning like a storm. A strict angel will come, he will forcibly lead out your soul, bound by sins. Occupy yourself therefore with reflection on the last day... Imagine to yourself the confusion, the shortness of breath, and the hour of death, the sentence of God drawing near, the angels hastening towards you, the dreadful confusion of the soul tormented by its conscience, with its pitiful gaze upon what is happening, and finally, the unavoidable translation into a distant place" (St. Basil the Great, quoted in "Essay in an Historical Exposition of Orthodox Theology," by Bishop Sylvester, Vol. 5, p.89).

St. Gregory the Theologian, who guided a large flock only for short periods, limits himself to general words, saying that "each one is a sincere judge of himself, because of the judgement-seat awaiting him." There is a more striking picture found in St. John Chrysostom: "If, in setting out for any foreign country or city we are in need of guides, then how much shall we need helpers and guides in order to pass unhindered past the elders, the powers, the governors of the air, the persecutors, the chief collectors! For this reason, the soul, flying away from the body, often ascends and descends, fears and trembles. The awareness of sins always torments us, all the more at that hour when we shall have to be conducted to those trials and that frightful judgement place." Continuing, Chrysostom gives moral instructions for a Christian way of life. As for children who have died, he places in their mouths the following words: "The holy angels peacefully separated us from our bodies, and having good guides, we went without harm past the powers of the air. The evil spirits did not find in us what they were seeking; they did not notice what they wished to put to shame; seeing an immaculate soul, they were ashamed; seeing an undefiled tongue, they were silent. We passed by and put them to shame. The net was rent, and we were delivered. Blessed is God Who did not give us as a prey to them" (St. John Chrysostom, Homily 2, "On Remembering the Dead").

The Orthodox Church depicts the Christian martyrs, male and female, as attaining the heavenly bridal chamber just as freely as children and without harm. In the fifth century the depiction of the immediate judgement upon the soul after its departure from the body, called the Particular judgement, was even more closely joined to the depiction of the toll-houses, as we see in St. Cyril of Alexandria's "Homily on the Departure of the Soul," which sums up the images of this kind in the Fathers of the Church which preceded him.

It is perfectly clear to anyone that purely earthly images are applied to a spiritual subject so that the image, being impressed in the memory, might awaken a man's soul. "Behold the Bridegroom cometh at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching." At the same time, in these pictures the sinfulness that is present in fallen man is revealed in its various types and forms, and this inspires man to analyze his own state of soul. In the

instructions of Orthodox ascetics the types and forms of sinfulness have a special stamp of their own;[1] in the Lives of Saints there is also a characteristic stamp.

Due to the availability of the Lives of Saints, the account of the tollhouses by the righteous Theodora, depicted by her in detail by Saint Basil the New in his dream, has become especially well known. Dreams in general express the state of soul of a given man, and in special cases are also authentic visions of the souls of the departed in their earthly form. The account of Theodora has characteristics both of one and the other. The idea that good spirits, our guardian angels, as well as the spirits of evil under heaven participate in the fate of man (after death) finds confirmation in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus immediately after death was brought by angels to the bosom of Abraham. In another parable the unrighteous man heard these words: *Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee* (Luke 12:20); evidently, the ones who "require" are none else than the same "spirits of wickedness under the heavens."

In accordance with simple logic and as also confirmed by the Word of God the soul immediately after its separation from the body enters into a sphere where its further fate is defined. *It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*, we read in the Apostle Paul (Heb. 9:27). This is the Particular Judgement, which is independent of the universal Last Judgement.

The teaching concerning the Particular Judgement of God enters into the sphere of Orthodox dogmatic theology. As for the toll-houses, Russian writers of general systems of theology limit themselves to a rather stereotyped note: "Concerning all the sensual, earthly images by which the Particular Judgement is presented in the form of the toll-houses, although in their fundamental idea they are completely true, still they should be accepted in the way that the angel instructed Saint Macarius of Alexandria, being only the weakest means of depicting heavenly things." (See Macarius, Metropolitan of Moscow, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Saint Petersburg, 1883, vol. 11, p.538; also the book of Bishop Sylvester, Rector of the Kiev Theological Academy. Archbishop Philaret of Chernigov, in his two volume work on dogmatic theology, does not comment on this subject.) [2] If one is to complain of the frightening character of the pictures of the toll-houses—are there not many such pictures in the New Testament scriptures and in the words of the Lord Himself? Are we not frightened by the very simplest question: *How camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?* (Mat. 22:12).

We respond to the discussion on the toll-houses, a topic which is secondary in the realm of our Orthodox thought, because it gives an occasion to illuminate the essence of our Church life. Our Christian Church life of prayer is uninterrupted mutual communion with the heavenly world. It is not simply an "invocation of the saints," as it is often called; it is an interaction in love. Through it the whole body of the Church, being united and strengthened in its members and bonds, *increaseth with the increase of God* (Col. 2:19). Through the Church *we are come unto the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the solemn assembly and the church of the first-born, which are written in heaven, and the God the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect* (Heb. 12:22-23). Our prayerful interaction extends in all directions. It has been commanded us: *Pray for one another*. We live according to the principle of Faith: *Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's* (Rom. 14:8). *Love never faileth* (I Cor. 13:8). *Love shall cover a multitude of sins* (I Peter 4:8).

For the soul there is no death. Life in Christ is a world of prayer. It penetrates the whole body of the Church, unites every member of the Church with the Heavenly Father, the members of the earthly Church with themselves, and the members of the earthly Church with the Heavenly Church. Prayers are the threads of the living fabric of the Church body, *for the prayer of the righteous man availeth much* (James 5:16). The twenty-four elders in heaven at the throne of God fell down before the Lamb, each having harps and vials filled with incense, *which are the prayers of saints* (Apoc. 5:8); that is, they offered up prayer on earth to the heavenly throne.

Threats are necessary; they can and should warn us, restrain us from evil actions. The same Church instills in us that the Lord is compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and plenteous in mercy, and is grieved over the evil doings of men, taking upon Himself our infirmities. In the Heavenly Church are also our intercessors, our helpers, those who pray for us. The Most Pure Mother of God is our protection. Our very prayers are the prayers of saints, written down by them, which came from their contrite hearts during the days of their earthly life. Those who pray can feel this, and thus the saints themselves become closer to us. Such are our daily prayers; such also is the whole cycle of the Church's Divine services of every day, of every week, and of the Feasts.

All this liturgical literature was not conceived as an academic exercise.

The enemies of the air are powerless against such help. But we must have faith, and our prayers must be fervent and sincere. There is more joy in heaven over one who repents, than over others who need no repentance. How insistently the Church teaches us (in its litanies) to spend "the rest of our life in peace and repentance," and to die thus! It teaches us to call to remembrance our Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed Lady Theotokos and all the

saints, and then to commit ourselves and one another unto Christ our God.

At the same time, with all this cloud of heavenly protectors, we are made glad by the special closeness to us of our Guardian Angels. They are meek, they rejoice over us, and they also grieve over our falls. We are filled with hope in them, in the state we will be in when our soul is separated from the body, when we must enter into a new life: will it be light or in darkness, in joy or in sorrow? Therefore, every day we pray to our angels for the present day: "Deliver us from every cunning of the opposing enemy." In special canons of repentance we entreat them not to depart from us now nor after our death: "I see thee with my spiritual gaze, thou who remainest with me, my fellow converser, Holy Angel, watching over, accompanying and remaining with me and ever offering to me what is for salvation." "When my humble soul shall be loosed from my body, may thou cover it, O my instructor, with thy bright and most sacred wings." "When the frightful sound of the trumpet will resurrect me unto judgement, stand near to me then, quiet and joyful, and with the hope of salvation take away my fear." "For thou art beauteous in virtue, and sweet and joyous, a mind bright as the sun; brightly intercede for me with joyful countenance and radiant gaze when I am to be taken from the earth." "May I then behold thee standing at the right hand of my wretched soul, bright and quiet, thou who intercedest and prayest for me, when my spirit shall be taken by force; may I behold thee banishing those who seek me, my bitter enemies." (From the Canon to the Guardian Angel of John the Monk, in the *Prayer Book for Priests*.)

Thus, the Holy Church through the ranks of its builders: the Apostles, the great hierarchs, the holy ascetics, having as its Chief Shepherd our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, has created and gives us all means for our spiritual perfection and the attainment of the eternal blessed life in God, overcoming our carelessness and light-mindedness by fear and by stern warnings, at the same time instilling in us a spirit of vigilance and bright hope, surrounding us with holy, heavenly guides and helpers. In the Typicon of the Church's Divine service, we are given a direct path to the attainment of the Kingdom of Glory.

Among the images of the Gospel the Church very often reminds us of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and one week in the yearly cycle of Church services is entirely devoted to this remembrance, so that we might know the limitless love of God and the fact that the sincere, contrite, tearful repentance of a believing man overcomes all the obstacles and all the tollhouses on the path to the Heavenly Father.

Translator's Notes

1. In ascetic literature sometimes the passions and evil demons are almost identified: the spirits who settle in the bodies of living men are the arousers of the passions; while the passions become infirmities not only of the body, but also of the soul, and therefore they remain in the soul as enticers of earthly passions even after death. Therefore one may also depict the toll-houses as an inward personal battle in the soul which has been separated from the body.
2. However, Metropolitan Macarius does speak quite in detail on the subject of the tollhouses, devoting ten pages of his second volume to it (pp.528-538), and giving extensive quotes from Saints Cyril of Alexandria, Ephraim the Syrian, Athanasius the Great, Macarius, the Great, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, and a number of other sources, including many texts from the Divine service books, and concluding that "such an uninterrupted, constant, and universal usage in the Church on the teaching of the toll-houses, especially among the teachers of the fourth century, indisputably testifies that it was handed down to them from the teachers of the preceding centuries and is founded on apostolic tradition" (p.535).

From *Selected Essays* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996), pp. 232-241. The Introduction did not appear in the original.