

Blessed Memory
Elder Paisios of Mount Athos
Words

Volume II

Spiritual Awakening

Contents:

Translator's Preface

The Blessed Elder, Schemamonk Paisios of Mount Athos, was born in Cappadocia in 1924. He grew up in Greece. From childhood, he led a life of asceticism. In 1950, he became a monk, spending most of his time on Mount Athos, as well as at the Stomion Monastery in Konitsa and on Mount Sinai. He performed extraordinary ascetic feats and was generously endowed by the Lord with manifold gifts of grace. After his divine calling, he provided spiritual guidance to thousands of people and was one of the most grace-filled and discerning Elders of modern times. He fell asleep in the Lord on June 29/July 12, 1994. He was buried at the women's monastery of St. John the Theologian, which he founded, in the village of Suroti, not far from Thessaloniki.

Between 1998 and 2001, the first three volumes of Elder Paisios's "Words" were published in Greek. It was decided to begin the translation of the "Words" into Russian with Volume II, since its subject matter is particularly relevant today. Recent troubling events in Russia and around the world once again confirm the truth, importance, and urgency of Elder Paisios's words. We hope that this book will help the Russian people awaken from their slumber of indifference and despondency and will serve as a powerful weapon in resisting the devil's efforts to plunge them back into this sinful slumber.

In the preface to Volume I, the Most Reverend Abbess Philothea describes in detail how the work on the publication of Elder Paisios's "Words" is being carried out. We will briefly summarize her explanations.

The Elder served as spiritual father to the St. John the Theologian Monastery from 1967 until his blessed repose. His spiritual legacy remained at the monastery: letters to the nuns—both collective and individual; tape recordings and stenographic transcripts of general conversations with him; and notes taken by the sisters, who, with the blessing of the Mother Superior, recorded the content of each personal conversation with the Elder

immediately afterward. This spiritual legacy has been organized and is now being published in the form of separate thematic volumes, compiled into the series “The Words” of Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. When necessary, the material from the collection may be supplemented with excerpts from previously published books written by Elder Paisios during his lifetime (see the list at the end of this volume).

Thus, in the Greek edition, each subsequent volume is not a continuation of the previous one but can be considered a separate book. Therefore, the priority given to publishing Volume II in Russian translation will not cause any difficulty for the reader. If it pleases God, Russian translations of Volume I and then Volume III of Elder Paisios’s *Words* will be published in the near future, after which each volume of the Russian edition will take its proper place.¹

The language of Elder Paisios’s “Words” is remarkably vivid and figurative, abounding in dialectal expressions, idiomatic phrases, proverbs, and the like.

In some cases, a stylistically adequate translation into Russian was impossible. It should also be noted that, in compiling the book, passages from different genres—epistolary, hagiographic, oral conversation, and others—were often included within a single context. This posed an additional challenge during the translation process. The translator expresses deep gratitude to all who contributed to this edition and hopes that the spiritual seed of Elder Paissios will find fertile ground and bear abundant fruit in the receptive hearts of Russian readers, “who hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit...” (Mark 4:20). Amen.

Christ is Risen!

He is truly risen!

Hieromonk Dorimedont. Holy Mount Athos. Easter, 2001.

Preface

Beginning in 1980, Elder Paisios spoke to us about the difficult times that were to come. He often repeated that we, too, might have to experience much of what is described in the Book of Revelation. Through his teachings, he sought to awaken in us a healthy sense of concern, so that we might intensify our spiritual struggle and resist the spirit of indifference, which, as the Elder could see, was gradually seeping even into the very heart of monastic life. Through his conversations, the Elder sought to help us rid ourselves of self-love and overcome our weaknesses, so that our prayer might gain strength. “Because of our weaknesses,” he said, “our prayer becomes weak, and then we cannot help either ourselves or others. The signalmen become useless. And if the signalmen do not work, the enemy captures the rest of the fighters.”

The preface to Volume 1 of the “Words” of the late Elder, titled “With Pain and Love for Modern Man,” explains how the material from which the collection of “Words” by Elder Paisios of Mount Athos began to take shape came into being, was gathered, and was organized. This second volume of “Words,” titled “Spiritual Awakening,” includes the Elder’s words on topics relevant to today’s reality. These words call us to constant vigilance and prepare us for the difficult situations in which we may find ourselves. After all, we have already

¹ Volumes I, III, IV, and V of Elder Paisios’s *Words* have been published to date. Volume VI of *Words* is currently being prepared for publication. — *Ed.*

witnessed what the Elder often spoke of: “We will go through storms—one after another. For several years now, this is how we will proceed: general turmoil everywhere.”

This second volume is divided into five parts. The first part addresses the widespread indifference and irresponsibility of our time, and explains that, given the current situation, the duty of a conscientious Christian is to help others by improving oneself, behaving prudently, professing one’s faith, and praying. “I do not call on you to pick up placards,” says the Elder, “but to lift your hands to God.” In the second part of the book, Father Paisius, without limiting the reader to a call for just one act of devotion, kindles a zeal for spiritual endeavor, after which each person is left with a struggle commensurate with their strength and zeal, aimed at living in an earthly paradise—that is, a life in Christ. The third part discusses the brief dictatorship of the Antichrist, which will give Christians a favorable opportunity—once again, after Holy Baptism—to consciously confess Christ, undertake a feat of faith, and rejoice in advance in Christ’s victory over Satan. As the Elder said, even the saints would envy such an opportunity: “Many of the saints would have asked to live in our era so they could perform a feat of faith. But this has fallen to us... We are unworthy—at least, let us admit it.” In order for us to live through such difficult times as we ought, we must especially cultivate courage and a spirit of self-sacrifice within ourselves. The fourth part of this volume, devoted to Divine Providence, faith, trust in God, and the help He provides, discusses the source from which we should draw strength to overcome any difficulties. Finally, the fifth part of the book emphasizes the necessity and power of heartfelt prayer, “which is a mighty weapon” for defeating the evil that is spreading ever more widely. The Elder calls on the monks to maintain a state of full combat readiness, similar to that of soldiers in wartime. He urges the monks to ceaselessly support the world through prayer and to strive to preserve the true spirit of monasticism from change, safeguarding the haven for future generations. The concluding chapter defines the deepest meaning of life and emphasizes the necessity of repentance.

As always, reason serves as the measure of the Elder’s words and deeds. In the following chapters, we will see that in one instance, Father Paisios does not interrupt his prayer, no matter how impatiently the pilgrims knock with a hammer on the gate of his cell, shouting, “Stop praying, Geronda, God won’t be offended!” — while in another, he goes out into the world because his absence from a public protest demonstration might be misunderstood and cause harm to the Church. In one situation, the Elder, inflamed with godly indignation, stands up against blasphemy; in another, he merely prays silently for the blasphemer. Therefore, the reader should not rush to conclusions until he has carefully read the book from beginning to end. We should be especially careful when using quotations from the Elder’s teachings, for, taken out of context, they can lead our listeners to erroneous conclusions. It should be kept in mind that the reason for what Father Paisios said was always a specific situation or question, and the Elder’s words were addressed to a specific person, whose salvation was the speaker’s ultimate goal.

Those who knew Elder Paisios remember the tenderness that arose in their hearts from his words, no matter how stern they might sometimes be. This was because the Elder’s task was always to heal evil, not to brand it with shame. He did not pillory his interlocutor’s passion, but helped him free his soul from it. Therefore, the Elder’s very same words can have a different—and perhaps not healing—effect if they are stripped of their original connection to heartfelt compassion and love for the person he was speaking to. Instead of divine consolation and a sense of security, they may sow doubt and fear in people’s hearts or lead to extremes. But our Elder was not a man of one-sidedness or extremes; his concern was that goodness be shared in a kind manner—so that it might be of benefit. He, of course, never hesitated to speak the truth, but he spoke it with reason; seeing

the desecration of a holy place, he could be seized by a flame of divine indignation; he foretold the terrible events that were to come, yet his demeanor did not inspire fear or anxiety. On the contrary, his words conveyed to you the hope and joy of Easter; yet this was a joy that followed sacrifice, a joy that unites a person with Christ. If you are united with Christ, if you share in the mystical life of the Church and keep His commandments, then nothing can frighten you: “neither demons nor torments.” As the Elder himself says in his usual bright and cheerful tone: “When you cast out your ‘self,’ Christ rushes into you.” This is precisely the goal of the entire spiritual life; that is why Father Paisius draws special attention to one of the dangers that lie in wait for Christians: without developing a spirit of self-sacrifice within oneself, it is impossible to become a participant in the life of Christ. Without sacrifice, one can become only a nominal Christian—a person lacking an inner life. Some readers may be taken aback by the fact that in his narratives the Elder often refers to his own life, and that he seems to speak easily and naturally about the miraculous events he has experienced. But it should be borne in mind that, in transcribing the Elder’s spoken words onto paper, it is impossible to convey the difficulty he had in speaking about himself, as well as the pressure he was subjected to for doing so. Sometimes it happened that the Elder would speak about a single event in fragments and with varying details to different sisters, and later, when the opportunity arose, we would very timidly try to “draw out” from him information that would fill in the gaps in his account. Thus, over the course of those twenty-eight years during which he provided spiritual guidance to the monastery, Elder Paisios revealed to us (in order to help us) some of the miraculous events of his life. This was a “spiritual gift” to us. Therefore, not seeing the expected spiritual progress, he was deeply distressed, so much so that he would sometimes say, “I am fertilizing the sand.”

We thank all those who, out of respect for the Elder’s words, read the following teachings prior to their publication and offered their comments, as well as those who, by emphasizing that the Elder’s teachings are addressed to the entire Church, inspired us to continue the work we had begun.

We pray that through the intercession of the blessed Elder Paisios, who, according to the testimony of many, watches over us day and night and helps us with his divine love, his words, collected in this volume, may instill in us a healthy concern, so that we may strive with zeal, evil may be driven back, and the peace of God may reign on earth. Amen.

The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God, 1999

Abbess of the Convent of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist

John the Theologian, Sister Philothea, together with the sisters in Christ.

— Geronda, why are you leaving the kaliva and going into the forest?

— Where else can you find silence but in the kaliva! One knocks from there, another from here. I found a good spot on one of the slopes. If I’m healthy, I’ll set up a prayer post there, a radar. It’s a very nice spot—just what you need for the summer, with trees... I’ll even be able to stand on my own two feet. If I can fulfill my monastic duties, that is my joy, my sustenance! Come visit sometime!..

Introduction (from the Elder's words)

“In order to enter God's Council, one must become a ‘representative’ of God, not someone who secures cushy positions for himself.”

— Geronda,² , how do you view what is happening?

— How do you see it?

— What are we supposed to say, Geronda?.. You're the one telling us this.

— I am troubled by the prevailing complacency. Something is brewing. We have not yet properly grasped either the times in which we live or the fact that we will die. I do not know what will come of all this; the situation is very complex. The fate of the world depends on a few people, but God is still holding back. We need to pray fervently and with great sorrow for God to intervene in what is happening. Let's take this on with zeal and begin to live spiritually. These are very difficult times. A lot of ashes, debris, and indifference have accumulated—and for all of this to be blown away, a strong wind is needed. The elders used to say that a time would come when people would start to kick against the pricks. [And now]—they're tearing down fences, taking no regard for anything. It's terrifying! The Tower of Babel chaos has arrived! Read the prayer of the three young men at³ and see with what humility they prayed.

And in Psalm 82: “*O God, who is like You? Do not remain silent...*” This is what is needed; otherwise, expect nothing good. Divine intervention is required.

Certain European ills are emerging and taking on an increasingly advanced form. One head of a family—a Cypriot living in England—told me: “We are in spiritual danger. We must flee England with the whole family.” Look—there a father marries his daughter, there a mother marries her son... Things so shameful I'm embarrassed to even mention them. And we're sleeping like groundhogs. I'm not calling for protests, but to draw our attention to the great danger ahead and lift our hands to God. Let's think about how to defend ourselves against evil. We need to keep the brakes on, because there's a tendency to smooth everything over [level everything out]. Now is the time to pray with the words of the prophet: “*Lay low their princes—Oriva, Ziva, Zebiah, and Salman... who say, 'Let us take possession of God's sanctuary for ourselves.'*”⁴

There is great turmoil. It's such a mess; the people's minds are confused. The people are like bees. If you strike a beehive, the bees fly out, begin to buzz “woo-oo-oo...” and, agitated, circle around the hive. Then they'll head in whichever direction the wind blows. If it's a north wind, they'll return to the hive; if it's a south wind, they'll fly away. So it is with the people, who are buffeted by the “national north wind” one moment and the “national south wind” the next, and their poor minds are all confused. However, despite this turmoil, I feel a certain comfort within me, a certain confidence. The olive tree may have withered, but it will sprout new shoots. There are some Christians in whom God dwells. There are still God's people, people of prayer, and the Good

² Geronda is a respectful title for a spiritual father. — *Translator's note*

³ See Dan. 2:21, the prayer of Azariah, and the song of the three youths. (Here and throughout, all references to Scripture are from the Slavonic Bible.)

⁴ Ps. 82:12–13. See Judges 7 and 8.

Lord bears with us and will set everything right again. These people of prayer give us hope. Do not be afraid. As a people, we have weathered so many storms and have not perished. So why should we be afraid of the storm that is about to break? We will not perish now either! God loves us. There is a strength hidden within a person for times of need. There will be only a few difficult years. [Just] one storm.

I am telling you this not to frighten you, but so that you may know where we stand. For us, this is a very favorable opportunity; trials and martyrdom are a cause for celebration. Be with Christ, live according to His commandments, and pray that you may be able to withstand these difficulties. Set aside your passions so that Divine Grace may come. And if a healthy sense of concern takes hold of us—about where we stand and what lies ahead—it will greatly help us take the necessary steps and prepare ourselves. May our lives be more moderate. Let us live more spiritually, be more friendly, help those who are suffering, and assist the poor with love, compassion, and kindness. Let us pray that good people may appear.

God will show the way out

The Good Lord will arrange everything for the best, but much patience and attention are needed, since often, in their haste to untangle knots, people only entangle them further. God untangles them with patience. What is happening now will not last long. God will take up His broom! In 1830, there were many Turkish troops on the Holy Mountain, and so for a time, not a single monk remained at the Iviron Monastery. The fathers left—some with the holy relics, others to help the uprising. Only one monk would come from afar to light the lamps and sweep. Both inside and outside the monastery, it was teeming with armed Turks, and this poor man, as he swept, would say: “Mother of God! What on earth is going to happen?” One day, as he was praying fervently to the Mother of God, he saw a Woman approaching him, her face glowing and radiant. It was the Mother of God. She took the broom from his hand and said, “You don’t know how to sweep properly; I will sweep it Myself.” And She began to sweep, and then disappeared inside the altar. Three days later, all the Turks were gone! The Mother of God drove them out. Whatever is not true, God will cast out, just as a tear casts out a speck of dust from the eye. The devil is at work, but God is also at work, turning evil to good, so that good may come of it. For example, if a tile is broken, God makes a beautiful mosaic out of the shards. Therefore, do not be discouraged in the least, for God is above all things and all people; He who governs everything will seat everyone in the dock to answer for their deeds, and accordingly, each will receive their reward from Him. Those who contribute to the good in any way will be rewarded, and those who do evil will be punished. God will ultimately set everything in its proper place, but each of us will be held accountable for what we have done during these difficult years through our prayers and acts of kindness.

Today, efforts are being made to destroy faith, and in order to bring down the edifice of faith, stones are being quietly removed one by one. However, we are all responsible for this destruction: not only those who remove the stones and tear it down, but also we who witness its destruction and make no effort to strengthen it. The one who pushes his neighbor toward evil will answer to God for it. But the one who was standing by at that time will also answer: for he, too, saw someone doing evil to his neighbor and did not oppose it. People easily believe a person who knows how to persuade.

— People, Geronda, are like animals...

— I have no complaints about beasts. You see, animals cannot do great evil because they lack reason, whereas a person who has strayed far from God becomes worse than the most ferocious beast! He does great evil. Strong vinegar is made from sour wine. Other, artificial types of vinegar are not as strong... It is even more

terrifying when the devil forms an alliance with a depraved person; then he inflicts double evil upon others, just as carnal thoughts, when they ally themselves with the flesh, inflict greater evil upon the flesh. For the devil to collaborate with such a person, he must be able to rely on him; this person must himself prefer evil and harbor it within himself.

Subsequently—God preserve us—these corrupters will [deliberately] create difficulties for us and harass other people and monasteries. They will become embittered toward the Church and monasticism for thwarting their plans. The current situation can be countered only spiritually, not in a worldly way. The storm will intensify a little more, washing up tin cans, trash, and all manner of useless things onto the shore, and then the situation will become clearer. And you will see how, in this situation, some will receive a pure reward, while others will pay their debts. It will turn out that the sufferings people are enduring will not prove to be unbearable for them, although, of course, they will not say “Glory to You, O God” either.

How God loves us! If what is happening today—⁵—and what they are now planning to do had happened twenty years ago, when people were more spiritually ignorant, it would have been very difficult. Now people know: the Church has grown stronger. God loves man—His creation—and will provide for his needs, as long as man himself believes and keeps His commandments.

“Cursed is he who does the Lord’s work carelessly...”⁶

In the old days, if one of the devout monks spent time worrying about the state of affairs in the world, he had to be locked up in a tower.⁷ Now it’s the opposite: a devout monk must be locked up in a tower if he isn’t interested in or concerned about the state of affairs that has prevailed in the world. Because in the past, those who ruled had God within them, whereas now many of those who rule do not believe in Him. Today there are many who seek to destroy everything: the family, the youth, the Church. In our day, taking an interest in and worrying about the condition of our people is an act of faith, for the state is waging war against God’s law. The laws it enacts are directed against God’s law.

There are also people who are so indifferent that they do not even recognize the Church as a [divine] institution, and they treat their own people with arrogance; yet, just so they can be idle themselves, they say, “The Apostle Paul says we shouldn’t concern ourselves with worldly matters”—and they remain indifferent. But the Apostle Paul meant something else. At that time, power was in the hands of idolatrous peoples. Some broke away from the state and believed in Christ. It was to such people that the Apostle Paul said, “Do not be concerned with the affairs of this world,” so that they might separate themselves from the world, because the whole world was idolatrous.⁸ However, from the time Constantine the Great came to power and Christianity triumphed, a great Christian Tradition gradually took shape, encompassing churches, monasteries, art, liturgical rites, and so on. And so, we are responsible for preserving all of this and not allowing the enemies of the Church to destroy it. I have even heard spiritual fathers say, “Don’t concern yourselves with this!” If they possessed

⁵ Delivered in June 1985. (Hereinafter, notes from the Greek publishers are given without references.)

⁶ Jer. 48:10.

⁷ A high defensive structure of the Holy Mountain monasteries, used to protect against pirates.

⁸ Cf. 2 Tim. 2:4.

great holiness and, through prayer, had reached a state where nothing else interested them, I would kiss their feet. But now they are indifferent because they want to be liked by everyone and live a carefree life.

Indifference is unacceptable even among laypeople, let alone among spiritual people. An honest, spiritual person must not do anything with indifference. “*Cursed is the one who does the work of the Lord carelessly...*”⁹ — says the prophet Jeremiah.

Let us help people spiritually

In the old days, six out of ten people were God-fearing, two were moderate, and two were indifferent—but even the latter had faith within them. Today it is not so. I do not know how far this will go. Let us try now, as much as we can, to help people spiritually. So that—just as back then, during the Flood, in Noah’s Ark, and just as now—some might be saved and not be spiritually crippled. It takes a lot of attention and reflection: to examine what’s happening from different angles and help people. Do you think I like it when people gather, or that I wanted to see so many people? No, but in the situation we find ourselves in, these unfortunate people need a little help. I didn’t become a priest specifically to avoid dealing with people, and in the end, I end up dealing with them even more. But God knows my disposition and gives me more than He would have given me if I had done what I liked. How many times have I asked the Mother of God to find me a quiet, secluded place where I could see and hear nothing and pray for the whole world, but She does not hear me; yet She hears my other, trivial requests. But look, even before the people arrive, God confines me to bed with some illness so that I may rest. He does not grant me the sweetness I used to feel in prayer, because then I would be unable to part with it. At that time, if someone came to the kaliva, I forced myself to emerge from that spiritual state.¹⁰

There, in the kaliva, I live according to other people’s schedule. I’m reading the Psalter inside, and they’re knocking outside. “Wait,” I say, “a quarter of an hour,” but they shout, “Hey, Father, stop praying—God won’t be offended!” You see how far they’ll go? And it would be fine if I had to be interrupted for just a short while, but as soon as I step outside—that’s it. Whatever I’ve managed to do up to that point is all I’ve managed. By half past six or seven in the morning, just to be calm, I have to have already finished Vespers. “O Morning Light of Holy Glory!” By the time you finish Matins, I’m already finishing my rosary for Vespers. It’s good if I manage to eat the antidor in the morning; after that, no more tea—I collapse like a corpse. It used to happen that even at Easter and during Bright Week I would hold the Ninth Hour and the Three-Day Services.¹¹ Whether you can or can’t, you have to manage it. Once—I don’t know what prevented the people from coming—perhaps there was a storm at sea and the ship didn’t sail—but no one came to the kaliva. Ah, I lived through a Sinai-like day, just

⁹ Jer. 48:10.

¹⁰ After a period of intense spiritual struggle experienced by the Elder (he felt himself melting away out of love for God and people, like a candle in the warmth), he received a revelation from above that he must not refuse to help people. From that time on, he devoted his days to those who visited him, and at night he prayed for the world’s many problems. However, when the number of pilgrims increased dramatically, the Elder considered retreating to an unknown place to devote all his time to prayer. Then, for the second time, he was informed that he should remain in his cell, “Panaguda,” and help people.

¹¹ Fasting from food and water until 9:00 a.m. (3:00 p.m. in the Byzantine tradition) or for three days.

like back then in Saint Epistimia's cave!¹² When there's a storm at sea, I have calm. When there's calm at sea—I have a storm.

Of course, I have the option of retreating somewhere to find silence. Do you know how many people have offered to pay for my trip so I could go to California or Canada? “Come,” they say, “we have Hesychasteries.”¹³ If I found myself in an unfamiliar place, I'd feel like I was in paradise. No one will know me; I'll have my own routine, a monastic life just as I want it. But, you see, demobilization only happens after the war. And right now there's a war—a spiritual war. I have to be on the front lines. So many Marxists, so many Freemasons, so many Satanists, and all sorts of others! So many possessed people, anarchists, and the deluded come to me so that I might bless their delusion. And how many are sent to me without being made to think for themselves—some just to get rid of them, others so they don't have to pull the snake out of the hole themselves... If only you knew how I'm being crushed, and from how many sides! My mouth is filled with the bitterness of human suffering. But inside, I feel comfort. If I leave, I will consider it as having left the front lines, as having retreated. I will consider it a betrayal. That is how I understand it. Is this what I wanted when I began my work, or perhaps did I want to help the monasteries? I set out for one place, but I ended up in another, and how I'm struggling now! And I don't hear anyone else speaking out [about what's going on around us]. Are they destroying the Church? “It's nothing,” someone will say. Yet he's on friendly terms with both sides, just to secure a warmer spot for himself! And what a cozy spot! In the end, the devil himself will “take care” of him. It's a disgrace! If I wanted to do what gives me pleasure—oh, you know how easy that would be! However, the goal isn't to do what suits me, but to do what helps others. If I were thinking about how to secure a comfortable position for myself, I could find one in many places. But in order to enter God's Council, one must become a “representative” of God, not someone who secures cushy positions for himself.

Part 1.

The Responsibility of Love

“The Church acts through love, not like the legalists. The Church views everything with long-suffering and strives to help everyone, no matter what they have done, no matter how sinful they may be.”

¹² In 1962–64, the Elder lived as a hermit on Mount Sinai in the desert cell of Saint Epistimia.

¹³ A hesychasterion (from the Greek ἡσυχία—silence) is a special type of monastery, often dependent on a mother monastery, as well as a separate cell located near the mother monastery. —*Translator's note.*

Chapter 1.

An Indifferent Generation

Indifference toward God leads to indifference toward everything else

— What’s that sound over there?

— It’s a plane, Geronda.

“Go close the window, lest it fly right in here! With the madness the world has reached, it might just come to that! Everything has fallen apart: family, education, government services... And they don’t even bat an eye! They have nothing in them...”

— Geronda, who is to blame for the fact that we’ve reached this state?

— I’m speaking in general terms: I want to emphasize just how far indifference has gone. Go to any school and you’ll see, for example, that if the windows are open and the panes are rattling in the wind, it’s quite a challenge to find a child willing to close them so the glass doesn’t shatter. They’ll just stand there gawking, watching the windows rattle, walking right past as if nothing is happening. Indifference! One officer, who was in charge of the warehouses, told me: “I’m having a terrible time finding a decent soldier to guard the fuel and lubricants warehouse—¹⁴ —so that others don’t set it on fire or he doesn’t accidentally start a fire himself by carelessly discarding a cigarette butt.”

A spirit of lukewarmness—there’s no courage at all! We’ve gone completely to the dogs! How can God still put up with us? But back then, what dignity there was, what honor!¹⁵ During the war of 1940¹⁶, the Italians at the border would sometimes interact with our border guards and come to visit them at the Greek outposts. And look at the hospitality the Greeks showed: once, when the Italians came to a Greek outpost, the Greeks began to make coffee for them. Then a Greek officer took out a wad of money in front of them—bills of fifty and one hundred drachmas (and back then, money was worth something)—and threw them into the fire to stoke it, to show the Italians that the Greek state was rich. The Italians were speechless with astonishment. Now that was self-sacrifice!

And today, that same spirit that prevailed in communist states has reached us. In Russia, even though there was a harvest this year, you know what kind of famine is coming!¹⁷ They didn’t harvest the wheat when they should have—so they went out to harvest it in the fall. Harvesting in the fall? Well, if the wheat isn’t their own, how are they supposed to care about it and go out to harvest it! Their life is one long series of forced labor. They have no zeal to create anything, because for so many years they haven’t been creating anything. And with this

¹⁴ Fuels and lubricants. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁵ Philotimo (Greek: φιλότιμο). This word appears repeatedly in the writings of Elder Paisios, who emphasizes the importance of philotimo in the spiritual life. There is no direct equivalent for the word φιλότιμο in modern Russian. It can be loosely translated as magnanimity, a disposition toward self-sacrifice, or a disregard for material things in favor of a moral or spiritual ideal. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁶ The war of 1940–41 between Greece and Fascist Italy. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁷ Delivered in 1990.

lax attitude that has taken hold, with this indifference, the entire state has gone to ruin. It's raining, and the threshed wheat is drying on the threshing floor. They couldn't care less. Is it time to leave? They leave, and the rain ruins the wheat.

The next day, they'll come at the appointed time to gather what's left! Whereas if your own wheat is lying on the threshing floor and it starts to rain—would you let it be ruined? You wouldn't sleep a wink to save it. And then, out of exhaustion, you'll feel joy, exultation.

Indifference toward God leads to indifference toward everything else; it leads to collapse. Faith in God is a great thing. A person serves God, and then loves his parents, his home, his relatives, his work, his village, his region, his country, and his homeland. Whoever does not love God or his family loves nothing. And naturally, he doesn't love his homeland either, because the homeland is one big family. What I'm trying to say is that everything starts with this. A person who doesn't believe in God ends up disregarding his parents, his family, his village, and his homeland. This is precisely what they're trying to dismantle right now, which is why they're fostering this state of laxity. A police officer wrote to me: "I can't come because I'm swamped with work. There are only two of us left in the district, when there should be eight." Do you hear what's going on! They could have added two more, but no—they're leaving only two!

But, fortunately, there are exceptions. One day, a father came to me and said, "Pray for Angelos,¹⁸ or they'll kill him." I had known his son since he was a little boy, and now he was serving in the army. "Why?" I asked. "What happened?" He said, "One day he saw some other soldiers playing cards instead of performing their duties. He told them off, but they didn't listen to him. Then he filed a report against them, and one of the players threatened to kill him." "Listen," I said, "he won't actually kill him. But I'll pray that Angelos isn't court-martialed for not playing cards!"

And when I heard about another incident, I said, "Thank God, there are still Greeks who care about their homeland." When Turkish planes violated the border, one pilot tried to get a little ahead of them to take a photograph as proof that they had violated the border. Another pilot shouted at him over the radio: "Leave him alone!"—but he insisted, he kept trying... The Turk's plane was bigger, flew faster, and was flying very low, so the poor Greek crashed into the sea! And then there are those who just go for joyrides in a plane! That's how different people are from one another!

A person needs to grasp the meaning of goodness, to feel it as a necessity; otherwise, there will be nothing but utter laxity. Try sending someone off to war under duress! He'll try to run away from there and slip away from here. However, once he understands the evil the enemy will bring, he'll go and sign up as a volunteer himself.

Today, people revolve around themselves

Back in my homeland, in Faras, they used to say: "If you have work to do, don't put it off until tomorrow. If you have a good meal, save it for tomorrow—a guest might come." Nowadays, people think like this: "We'll put off the work; maybe someone will come tomorrow and help us. But let's go ahead and eat that good meal ourselves tonight!" Most people these days revolve around themselves; they think only of themselves. Suppose

¹⁸ That is, for his son, whose name is Angelos. — *Translator's note.*

it starts pouring rain. You'll see: most of you will wonder if your laundry is hanging out to dry and rush to take it down. There's nothing wrong with that, but they don't go any further than that. Even if the laundry gets wet, it will dry again. But what about those who are threshing on the threshing floor at that very moment? Do you feel sorry for them? Will you pray for them? Or during a thunderstorm, when lightning flashes, it's doubtful whether even five or six people will remember those poor souls working in the fields or those tending the greenhouses. In other words, a person does not think about another person; he does not step outside of his own "self," but constantly revolves around himself. However, as he revolves around himself, he has himself—not Christ—as his center. He is outside the axis that is Christ. If a person wants to reach the point of thinking about his neighbor, then his mind must first be [grounded] in Christ. Then they think of their neighbor, and then they think of animals and all of nature. Their "radio" is turned on, and as soon as a signal comes in—they rush to help. But if their mind is not in Christ, then their heart does not function, and therefore they love neither Christ, nor their neighbor, nor—much less—nature: animals, trees, and plants. If you continue to behave as you do now, how will you ever reach a point of communion with animals, with birds?! If a bird falls off the roof, you'll feed it, but if it doesn't fall, you won't even think about it. I see birds and say, "We must feed those poor things!"—I scatter crumbs and set out some water for them to drink. I see diseased branches on the trees, and right away I want to prune them so they don't infect the other branches. Or if a door or window slams shut, my mind goes there. I'll forget about myself if I need something, but I'll check to see if the door or window is broken or if there's any damage. I think about myself only in passing. If someone cares so deeply about God's creations, how much more must they think about their Creator! But if a person doesn't behave this way, how can they come into harmony with God?

And another thing: when you go out onto the street, take a look around. Perhaps someone—either out of carelessness or malice (I hope no one does anything evil)—threw something away, and a fire started, so take a look. This also applies to the spiritual realm, because love is present even in this glance. When I step out of the kaliva, I look down, glance at the roof, and sniff to see if there's a smell of burning. It's another matter if you have such faith that if a fire breaks out and you start praying, the fire will go out. If you don't have that kind of faith, then you have to act [in a human way]. Or, when I hear a rumble in the distance, I listen to figure out what it is: a cannon, military exercises, or something being blown up? My mind immediately turns to that, and I begin to pray about what is happening. God's great providence rests upon those who are indifferent to themselves out of love for others, and all people care for them.

But today's generation is a generation of indifference! Most are only good for parades. If something happens, don't tell them, "Defend yourselves!" Besides, they don't even want parades anymore! In the past, people went to parades, listened to marches, and something stirred within them. Today, among us Greeks, there is a lack of discipline. Of course, other nations are even worse off, because they have no ideals. You see, the Greeks have a whole host of flaws, but they also have a gift from God—love of life and daring. Everything is a celebration for them! Other nations don't even have such words in their vocabulary.

We are responsible¹⁹

An atheist through and through came to visit me in my hut. He spouted all sorts of nonsense, and then declared, “I’m an iconoclast.” So he started out not believing in anything at all, and ended up going as far as iconoclasm! “Oh, you godless man,” I said, “if you don’t believe in anything, then why are you telling me that you’re an iconoclast? During the era of iconoclasm²⁰, some Christians, out of excessive zeal, fell into delusion, went to the other extreme, and then the Church set everything right. It wasn’t as if they didn’t believe.” And, by the way, this atheist approved of the current state of affairs. We got into an argument with him. “Well, fine,” I said, “what’s going on here? Judges are afraid to pass judgment. People file lawsuits against criminals, but then the plaintiffs are threatened, and they have to withdraw their lawsuits. And who, in the end, is running the show? Do you like this? Do you approve of them? You’re a criminal yourself! Is that why you came here? Now get out of here!” I kicked him out.

— Geronda, aren’t you afraid to say things like that?

— What is there to be afraid of? I’ve already dug my own grave. If I hadn’t, I’d be worried that someone else would have to waste their energy digging it. But now all I’ll have to do is throw a few shovelfuls of dirt on top...

I know of another godless blasphemer who’s allowed to appear on television, even though he’s uttered the most blasphemous words against Christ and the Mother of God. And the Church remains silent and doesn’t excommunicate these blasphemers. The Church ought to excommunicate such people. Is excommunication, perhaps, too much of a pity?

— Geronda, what will they understand if they’re excommunicated, since they don’t acknowledge anything anyway?

— At the very least, it will be clear that the Church is expressing its opinion.

— Geronda, isn’t silence tantamount to condoning such behavior?

— Yes. One person wrote something blasphemous about the Mother of God, and everyone remained silent. I said to one of them, “Don’t you see what so-and-so is writing?” “Oh,” he said, “what can you do about him? You’ll get yourself into trouble if you get involved with them.” They’re afraid to speak up.

— What is he afraid of, Geronda?

— He’s afraid that something will be written about him, that he’ll be exposed in front of everyone, so he puts up with the blasphemy against the Mother of God! Let’s not wait for someone else to pull the snake out of its hole so that we can be left in peace. That’s a lack of love. Then a person starts to be driven by self-interest. That is why this spirit is so widespread today: “Let’s be on [good] terms with so-and-so so that he’ll praise us. And let’s be friends with so-and-so so that he won’t disgrace us, so that we won’t be considered fools, so that we won’t fall victim!” And some remain silent out of indifference. “I’ll keep quiet,” they think, “so they don’t write about me in the newspapers.” In other words, the majority is completely indifferent. Now things have

¹⁹ Delivered in 1992.

²⁰ Iconoclasm—a Christian heresy that shook the Byzantine Empire for over a century (726–843) and temporarily subsided after the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787). The second phase of iconoclasm, initiated by Emperor Leo V the Armenian, was brought to an end under Saint Methodius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in 843. Iconoclasts are Christians who do not venerate holy icons.

started to change a little, but for so long, no one wrote anything. Many years ago, I yelled at one [person] on the Holy Mountain. “You’ve got way too much patriotism,” he told me back then. And recently he came by, found me, and started: “You’ve ruined everything: your family, your upbringing...” That’s when it was my turn to answer him in his own words. “Patriotism,” I said, “you’ve got way too much of it!”

This whole situation led to both something bad and something good. The bad part is that even people who had something inside them began to grow indifferent and say, “How could I possibly change the situation?” And the good part is that many began to reflect and change. Some come to see me and try to find an excuse for some wrong they’ve done in the past. That’s because they’ve started to reflect.

— So, Geronda, should we always profess our faith?

— We need to use our judgment. There are times when we shouldn’t speak out, and there are times when we must boldly profess our faith, because if we remain silent, we will bear the responsibility. In these difficult years, each of us must do what is humanly possible, and leave what is humanly impossible to God’s will. That way, our conscience will be clear, because we did what we could. If we do not stand up to this, our ancestors will rise from their graves. They suffered so much for the Fatherland—and what are we doing for it? The Greeks themselves are waging war against Orthodox Hellas, its traditions, its saints, and its heroes—and we remain silent! This is terrifying! I said to one person: “Why are you silent? How can you stand for what so-and-so is doing?” He replied: “What’s there to say? He’s completely gone to the dogs.” — “If he’s completely gone to the dogs, then why are you silent? Give him a piece of your mind!” Nothing of the sort—they leave him alone! I gave one politician a piece of my mind. “Say,” I told him, “I don’t agree with this!” That would be the honest thing to do! Do you really want things to be convenient for you, while everything else is left to be ruined?”

If Christians don’t become martyrs and don’t stand up to evil, then [the destroyers] will become even more brazen. But if Christians do stand up to them, then those destroyers will think twice. Yet even today’s Christians aren’t fighters. The early Christians were tough nuts to crack: they changed the whole world. And in the Byzantine era—if even a single icon was taken from a church, the people would resist. Christ endured crucifixion so that we might be resurrected, yet we remain indifferent! If the Church remains silent to avoid conflict with the state, if the metropolitans remain silent to maintain good relations with everyone—because they receive assistance from humanitarian organizations and the like—and if even the monks of Mount Athos remain silent so as not to be deprived of economic aid,²¹ then who will speak out? I told one abbot: “If they tell you they’ll stop the payments, then you should reply that, for your part, you’ll stop providing hospitality,²² so that they’ll have to scratch their heads.” The theology professors are also keeping quiet. “We,” they say, “are government employees: if we lose our salaries, how will we live afterward?” Monasteries, by the way, have also been caught up in the pension issue. And why don’t I want to accept even this modest pension from the Regional State Administration?²³ Even if a monk is insured through the Regional State Administration’s insurance program,

²¹ The elder is referring to economic aid (or the so-called “payment for metochions”), that is, a specific sum of money that the Greek state had committed to paying annually to the holy monasteries of Mount Athos since 1924. At that time, the monasteries of Mount Athos gave their metochia—which had been their sources of oil, wheat, wine, and other income—to Greek refugees from Asia Minor.

²² The communal monasteries of Mount Athos provide free overnight lodging to pilgrims and tourists. – *Translator’s note.*

²³ OGA (Όργανισμός Γεωργικών Ασφαλίσεων) – an insurance company for people engaged in agricultural activities. – *Translator’s note.*

it's still unfair. If he's insured with them as a person of limited means—then yes, that does him credit, but why insure him through the Regional State Administration? A monk gave up a large pension, left the world, entered a monastery—and now they're paying him a pension again! We'll end up betraying Christ for the sake of a pension!

— Geronda, what if, for example, a nun worked for a certain number of years as a teacher and is now entitled to a pension?

— That's not so bad. But I'll tell you this: if she gives that pension away to someone, Christ will give her a good pension!

I can see what lies ahead for us, and that is why it pains me

The years go by—and what difficult years they are! The hardships are not over yet. The cauldron is boiling. And if someone isn't steadfast, how will they behave when faced with a difficult situation? God did not create people incapable of succeeding. We need to cultivate fortitude within ourselves. And if, God forbid, turmoil were to begin, how many would remain standing? Before the war of 1940, in Konitsa²⁴, there was a market next to my carpentry shop where people from the villages brought corn, wheat, and the like. When poor peasants brought corn to the market to sell, some of the "rich"—and how rich were they, really? Just enough to earn some interest at the bank—would kick it with their feet and ask, "How much?" When the war came and they themselves had to sell everything, one of them would smile and say: "Good day!"—while another politely asked, "Do you have any corn?" So now, thank God for everything. Try to be courageous. Pull yourselves together a little. I see what lies ahead for us, and that's why it pains me. And do you know what Christians are going through in other countries?²⁵ In Russia—in penal colonies! Such hardships! Forget about spiritual books! We're not even counting Albania! There's nothing to eat. They left neither churches nor monasteries. They even changed people's names because they didn't want Christian names to be heard. Even in America: there are few Orthodox Christians, they're scattered in different places, and do you know how they suffer? If there's no Orthodox community nearby, they take a train for hours to some distant place just to attend a service. To seek counsel on some problem, they come to the Holy Mountain! [That's why] this lax spirit that prevails in Greece is a great ingratitude.

How many saints will God raise up in the former communist countries! Martyrs! They were prepared to die. They held high offices yet refused to comply with laws that contradicted God's law. "I disagree; kill me, put me in prison," they said, so that others would not be led astray. But here, many show such indifference without any coercion. If they knew what hardship, war, or hard times were like, they would see things differently. Because right now, it's as if nothing is happening. It's as if a person, say, flew from Australia to Greece for the summer, and in the fall—when spring arrives in Australia—flew back. From spring to spring, without ever seeing winter. He doesn't even know what winter is like; he knows nothing of inclement weather or anything of the sort.

— Geronda, how can we help an indifferent person?

²⁴ Konitsa—a small town in northwestern Greece where the Elder spent his childhood and youth. – *Translator's note.*

²⁵ Delivered in May 1987.

— You have to gently make them concerned, to puzzle them, so that they themselves will want to help themselves. In order to give someone water, they must be thirsty. Try forcing someone to eat when they have no appetite—it will make them vomit. If another person doesn't want [something], then I cannot deprive them of their freedom, their free will.

There is no excuse for ignorance

— But perhaps, Geronda, some are indifferent out of ignorance?

— What ignorance are you talking about! I'll tell you about ignorance: a philologist from Chalkidiki didn't even know what Mount Athos was!²⁶ A German teacher told him about Mount Athos, and they came together. The German, even though he was a Protestant, knew how many monasteries there were on Mount Athos, and even where certain holy relics were located. Is there any excuse for such ignorance? Another resident of Chalkidiki was advised by an acquaintance from America to come to me for help. From America! I'll tell you more in a moment: a man from Florina came to visit me at my kaliva.²⁷ “Are you from Florina itself?” I asked. “Yes,” he replied, “from Florina itself.” — “You have a good metropolitan there,” I said. — “What team does he play for?” he asked. He thought he was a soccer player! He was so obsessed with soccer that he didn't even know his own bishop. At least everyone knows Kandiotis,²⁸ . There's no excuse for such ignorance.

No, there is no excuse for ignorance in the world today. What is lacking is a willing heart and a love for God. Whoever has a willing heart to know Christ will come to know Him and turn [to Him]. And even if there is neither a theologian nor a monk near him, and he does not hear the word of God, if he has a willing heart, then the occasion for his conversion will be either a snake, a wild beast, a bolt of lightning, a flood, or some other event. God will help him. A young anarchist from Greece went to Germany. There, he was sent to a reformatory because he had gotten involved with drugs and the like. Nothing helped him. Someone at the reformatory gave him a Gospel. He read it and was immediately transformed. He decided, “I'll go to Greece—Orthodoxy is there.” He returned to his village, and his relatives pressured him to get married. He got married, and a child was born. The young father read the Gospel, went to church, and didn't work on holidays. Others, seeing how he lived, said: “He's lost his mind from reading the Gospel; he's gone mad.” His wife soon left him, taking their child with her. When his wife left, he left everything he owned behind in the village—his farmland, his tractor—everything he had—and went to live in the caves as a hermit. One spiritual father told him, “You must first find your wife, settle everything with her, and only then decide what to do.” So he went to Thessaloniki to look for his wife. He believed that since the spiritual father had told him so, Christ would reveal her to him. In Thessaloniki, Christ did not reveal his wife to him. Incidentally, he met some Germans, taught them the faith, and one of them was baptized. These Germans bought him a ticket to Athens, but his wife did not turn up there

²⁶ Chalkidiki is a peninsula and administrative unit in northeastern Greece with an area of 2,995 km². One of the three headlands of the Chalkidiki Peninsula is Mount Athos. It takes 2 hours to drive from one end of Chalkidiki to the other; in other words, a Greek philologist's ignorance can be compared to that of a philologist from the Moscow region who does not know what the Trinity-Sergius Lavra is. Unfortunately, such cases do occur. — *Translator's note.*

²⁷ Florina is a city in northwestern Greece. — *Translator's note.*

²⁸ Augustine (Kandiotis) (b. 1907)—Metropolitan of Florina from 1967 to 1999. The name of this zealous archpastor, author of many spiritual books, and passionate preacher is widely known throughout Greece. — *Translator's note.*

either. The Germans bought him another ticket, and he went to Crete. He found some work there and went to see a spiritual father. Upon hearing about his problem, the priest said, “By any chance, do your wife and child look like this? A woman arrived recently and is working somewhere around here.” And he described his wife to the man in exact detail. “It must be her,” the man said. The spiritual father informed his wife. As soon as she saw her husband, she froze. “You found me,” she said, “through witchcraft. You’re a sorcerer.” She left him and ran away before he could say anything, and once again he lost her. He found out about me and came to my kaliva. He knocked once and waited; while I was opening the door, he stepped aside and bowed repeatedly. His clothes were worn out. He told me everything. I had a few dried figs, and I gave them to him. “I have no teeth,” he said. “I,” I said, “don’t have any either.” — “Does it hurt for you?” he asked. “It hurts for me. From pain comes the joy of Christ.” — “Maybe I should give you a T-shirt?” I asked. “I have two,” he said. “When it gets warmer, I’ll give one away.” I said, “Look, take care of your health until you’ve sorted everything out and come to an agreement with your wife, because you’re also responsible for the child.” What self-sacrifice! What faith! And yet he wasn’t even twenty-seven years old. And where would he have learned about monastic life? He was completely ignorant, but he had a good disposition; God helped him, and he succeeded in a deeply Gospel-like way.

That is why I say that ignorance today is no excuse. Only a mentally disabled person or a small child can be excused for their ignorance. But today even small children pick things up on the fly! So, if a person wants to, there are many opportunities to come to know the truth.

Chapter 2.

On the fact that a Christian’s very presence is in itself a profession of faith

— Geronda, is there any benefit to the various protest movements organized by Christians?

— A Christian’s very presence is already a confession of faith. It’s possible that someone might help more through prayer, but others will take advantage of their silence and say, “So-and-so didn’t protest; therefore, they’re on our side, they agree with us.” If no one begins to fight against evil—that is, begins to denounce those who lead believers astray—then evil will grow even greater. But this way, the faithful will be somewhat encouraged. And it will be more difficult for those who wage war against the Church. The Church is not their pleasure boat; it is the Ship of Christ. These people deserve condemnation. Their only interest is in having a high salary, a luxury car, and chasing after entertainment... And then they pass laws on civil marriage,²⁹ and legalize abortion. Of course, God will not allow evil to triumph, but that is not the point here.

And they show these blasphemous films to mock Christ. They do this to say:

²⁹ Until the mid-1980s, only church marriages were officially recognized in Greece. — *Translator’s note.*

“Look, this is what Christ was like! The Messiah is coming now!”—and then to present their own “messiah.” That’s where they’re heading.

— And people, Geronda, believe this and are going astray!

— The corrupt are corrupted. And they believe it because they want to justify what cannot be justified and to soothe their own conscience. With all this blasphemy, they seek to justify moral depravity. They have already crossed every line. Believers filed a lawsuit because the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*³⁰ offends the faith, yet the prosecutors say, “It’s no big deal!” We’ve never even heard of such blasphemy! For us, protesting against this blasphemous film was an act of faith. But, of course, something good comes out of all this blasphemy: the chaff is separated from the wheat, and the world is sifted as through a sieve.

— Geronda, shouldn’t one defend oneself in some cases—whether individually or collectively—and not in others? For example, when you were called a heretic, you responded, but you remained silent in the face of other accusations.

— That is what the Holy Fathers say, not I. Any other accusation helps me in my spiritual life, whereas an accusation of heresy separates me from Christ.³¹

They’re trying to lull the people into complacency

— Geronda, how can people improve themselves given everything that’s happening in the world?

— Whoever wants to improve themselves does so by correcting trivial matters. For example, a lamp sways, or they themselves are shaken up properly during an earthquake, and in this way, that person comes to their senses. But unbelievers, upon hearing that there will be a war or some kind of disaster, become even worse and say, “Let’s have some fun—we’re going to die anyway.” And they throw themselves into complete debauchery. In the old days, even indifferent people, upon learning that there would be a war, would come to their senses and change their lives. Nowadays, there are very few like that. In the past, our people lived spiritually, which is why God blessed them, and the saints miraculously helped us. And we defeated our enemies, who always outnumbered us. We say now that we are Orthodox, but, unfortunately, we often bear only the name “Orthodox” without actually living an Orthodox life.

I asked a spiritual father who is involved in social activities with a whole group of his spiritual children, “Do you know anything about a blasphemous movie?” He replied, “I don’t know anything.” He knew nothing, even though he himself serves in a big city. They lull the people into complacency so they won’t worry and will just be entertained. Look, under no circumstances should you say that there will be a war or that the Second Coming is coming and that we therefore need to prepare; make sure that people do not get upset under any circumstances! It’s just like those old women who, as if death weren’t waiting for them at all, wail, “Don’t talk about death, only about holidays and baptisms”—and thus experience a false joy. But if they were to reflect on the fact that an old man who lived nearby died yesterday, that another is on his deathbed and will also die, and

³⁰ Martin Scorsese’s blasphemous film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, released in 1988, was shown for a short time in Athens movie theaters and sparked a storm of protests from the faithful of the Church of Greece, who demanded that its screening be banned. Despite the pain he was suffering at the time from a hernia, the elder traveled with other monks from Mount Athos to Thessaloniki, where he took part in a protest rally, inspiring the faithful with his presence.

³¹ See *St. Ignatius (Bryanchaninov)*. Works. Vol. V. The Father’s Book. Moscow: Rule of Faith. pp. 42–43.

that the day after tomorrow there will be a memorial service for someone much younger than them, then they would think about death and say: “I must go to confession; I must prepare myself spiritually, for perhaps Christ will soon call me to the next life.” Otherwise, death comes and takes them unawares. And others, out of a misguided sense of kindness, say: “Don’t tell the heretics that they are in error, so as to show our love for them”—and thus they equate everything. Had they lived in the early years of Christianity, we would not have had a single saint! Christians were told back then: “Just throw some incense on the fire, but don’t renounce Christ.” Christians did not accept this. “Just pretend to throw it in.” They did not accept it. “Don’t speak of Christ and go wherever you want, free.” Christians did not accept this either. But today you see that the people are mixed with water. The leaven is not right.

— Geronda, when the Apostle Paul says, “*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy...*” (³²), does he mean that joy is proof of a righteous life?

— Yes, because there is worldly joy and there is divine joy. When something is unspiritual or impure, there can be no true joy or peace in the heart. The joy experienced by a spiritual person is not the kind of joy that many people pursue today. We must not confuse these different things. Did the saints experience joy in the form that we seek? Did the Mother of God have such joy? Christ—did He laugh? Which of the saints lived this life without pain? Which saint possessed the kind of joy that many Christians of our time strive for—those who do not want to hear anything unpleasant, lest they become upset or lose their serenity? If I avoid turmoil in order to be joyful, in order not to disturb my peace, in order to be gentle, then I am indifferent! Spiritual meekness is one thing, but gentleness born of indifference is another. Some say, “I am a Christian and therefore must be joyful and calm.” But these are not Christians. Do you understand? This is indifference; this is worldly joy. One in whom these worldly principles are present is not a spiritual person. A spiritual person is one who is filled with pain—that is, he is pained by what is happening, and he is pained for the sake of people. But for this pain, he is rewarded with divine consolation. He feels pain, yet he also feels within himself and divine consolation, because God pours blessings into his soul from Paradise, and the person rejoices in divine love. This is what joy is—spiritual joy—inexpressible and flooding the heart.

The example speaks for itself

— Geronda, should people living a spiritual life in the world show unbelievers that they are fasting?

— If we’re talking about the fasts established by our Church—Wednesdays, Fridays, and multi-day fasts—then they should, because this is a confession of faith. However, other fasts undertaken as ascetic practices out of love for Christ or so that our prayer for a particular request may be heard should be observed in secret.

The goal is to live in an Orthodox manner, not merely to speak or write in an Orthodox manner. That is why you see that if a preacher lacks personal experience, his sermon does not reach the heart and does not transform people.

— But what if, Geronda, the listener or reader has a good disposition?

³² Gal. 5:22.

— Well, then they already possess Divine Grace and derive benefit precisely because of that. However, those who lack a good disposition will begin to analyze what the preacher says and will derive no benefit whatsoever. It is easy to think in an Orthodox way, but living in an Orthodox way requires effort.

Once, a theologian, in his sermon, called on people to go donate blood because there was a need for it. And indeed, many were moved by his sermon and donated a great deal of blood. He himself, however, did not donate a single drop, even though—to put it bluntly—he had more than enough blood. The people were deceived. “I,” the theologian told them then, “inspired the people to donate blood through my sermon, and that is just as if I had donated more blood than anyone else!” That is how he justified his thoughts to himself. But it would have been better for him not to deliver a sermon at all, but to go and quietly donate a little blood himself!

Dignity lies in one’s way of life. A man who had absolutely no connection to the Church told me, “I’m one of the ‘right-handers.’” “But since you don’t make the sign of the cross, what’s the point of that?” I replied. “What’s the point of a hand being considered the ‘right’ hand if it doesn’t make the sign of the cross? How is it any different from the left hand, which doesn’t make the sign of the cross? After all, no matter how you look at it, it doesn’t make it either. If you’re on the right but don’t make the sign of the cross, how are you any different from those on the left? The point is for you to be a spiritual person, to live close to Christ. Then you’ll help others, too.”

If a person leads a righteous life, his deeds speak for themselves. In one city there lived a Protestant who condemned everyone: both priests and bishops. And in a monastery nearby, a certain monk was living a life of asceticism. Once, an atheist asked the Protestant, “All right, so you condemn all the bishops and all the priests. But what do you say about this monk?”—“As for this monk,” he said, “I respect him, because he’s not like them.” How a believer helps others, wherever he may be, if he himself lives a righteous life! I remember a police officer I knew who served on the border [with Yugoslavia]. [On the other side] were Serbian communists—and not just any communists, but the most godless, the most trusted members of the party. When priests crossed the border, this police officer would kiss their hands. The communists noticed this. “A Greek police officer—and he’s kissing the hands of Serbian priests!” This made a great impression on the communists, and it made them think about faith.

And how much those who hold positions of responsibility—while remaining faithful to Christian principles—help others! That is why, when certain “important” people come to visit, I try to meet with them to help them, because by their example they can have a very beneficial influence on others. Here’s one marshal I know—he’s a model. Whatever he does comes from within, from the heart, not just for show. Others, seeing him, reflect on their own behavior and make amends.

And in days gone by, even the local nobility had good intentions and had faith. Do you know what a certain noblewoman said to a member of parliament in one city? She was at a dinner with her husband. It was the Dormition Fast, but they were serving meat and fish... The noblewoman was fasting and therefore did not eat. The member of parliament noticed this and said, “The infirm and those who are traveling do not observe the fast.”—“Well, of course,” she replied, “and especially those who travel by carriage.” And so she did not touch the non-fast food. At the dinner, among the other guests, there was a cleric who addressed them with a welcoming speech: “It is a great honor for me to be here with you,” and so on; he spoke and spoke, lavishing a whole heap of praise upon them. Then the lady’s husband interrupted him and said: “*Do not put your trust in princes, in the*

sons of men, in whom there is no salvation...”³³ Because this clergyman wanted to curry favor with them. And on another occasion, the same lady said to a university professor of theology: “Don’t nitpick over trifles and don’t fail the priests on their exams. Make sure they pass them, because there’s a shortage of priests in the dioceses!” What I’m trying to say is that in the past, the local nobility supported the Church and served as a model for the people.

Today, it is our own Christian example and our Christian life that will have a positive influence on people. Christians must be distinguished by spiritual courage, nobility, and self-sacrifice. That is why I say to the laity: “Love Christ, be humble, fulfill your duty—and Christ will reveal your virtue to others.” Virtue has a rule: to “reveal” a person, no matter where they may be. Even if they hide or conceal themselves for Christ’s sake through feigned madness, virtue will reveal them, even if only later. And the treasure they have accumulated, which will then be revealed in its fullness, will once again help many souls—and perhaps then it will help them even more.

God bears with us

Right now, God is allowing what is happening to take place. He allows it so that the wicked person cannot justify himself. In some cases, God intervenes Himself and immediately; in other cases, He waits and does not provide a way out right away. He expects people to be patient, to pray, and to struggle. What nobility God possesses! Take another man, for example: how many people did he slaughter in the [civil] war,³⁴ and yet he is still alive! In the next life, God will say to him, “I have allowed you to live longer than the righteous.” Such a man will have no extenuating circumstances.

— Geronda, why is it that sometimes such people, even when they are seriously ill, do not die?

— Apparently, they have grave sins, which is why they do not die. God is waiting—perhaps they will repent.

— But what about the people they torment?

— Those who are innocent and suffer are saving up in a savings account. Those who are guilty are paying off their debts.

— Geronda, what does it mean, “*But the deceitful and the sorcerers will prosper in their wickedness, deceiving and being deceived?*”³⁵

— Look: there are people with a certain degree of selfishness, and God gives them a slap on the back of the head so that they come down a notch. Other people have a little more selfishness, and God gives them a slap on the back of the head so that they come down even further. However, God does not touch those who have satanic pride. It may seem that these people are prospering, but what kind of prosperity is this? It is a dark prosperity. And then they fall not just down, but straight into the abyss. God forbid!...

³³ Ps. 145:3.

³⁴ The Civil War of 1946–1949 between the Greek government army and communist rebels. — *Translator’s note.*

³⁵ 2 Tim. 3:13.

The Protection of the Righteous

— Geronda, one stichera says: “Stirred up by righteous wrath.”³⁶ What kind of wrath or anger is the most righteous?

— To cry out and be angry because of genuine pain when others are being wronged—that is “the most righteous anger.” To be angry when you yourself are being wronged—that is impure anger. If you see that someone is suffering for the sake of the holy, it means that he has zeal for God. And a holy fool for Christ’s sake can be recognized in this way. If, for example, you take an icon and place it upside down in front of him, the holy fool for Christ’s sake will immediately jump up! This is a “test” for holy fools. So, there is righteous indignation, according to God, and only such indignation is justified in a person. When Moses saw the people offering a sacrifice to the golden calf, he became indignant and threw the tablets of the commandments that God had given him to the ground, and they shattered.³⁷ Phinehas, the grandson of the high priest Aaron, committed two murders, yet God commanded that the priests of Israel should come from his line! When Phinehas saw the Israelite Zimri committing an act of immorality with the Midianite woman Cozbi in the presence of Moses and all the Israelites, he could not restrain himself. Rising from the assembly, he killed them, and God’s wrath subsided. But if he had not killed them both, God’s wrath would have fallen upon the entire people of Israel.³⁸ How terrifying! Whenever I read the verse in the Psalter, “*And Phinehas appeased Him, and ceased from slaying,*”³⁹ I kiss his name many times. And Christ, when He saw oxen, sheep, and doves being sold in the Temple courtyard, and saw the money changers exchanging money, took a whip and drove them out.⁴⁰

When a spiritual person, out of indignation, seeks to defend himself in a personal matter, this is completely selfish; it is the work of the devil. Such a person is outwardly succumbing to demonic influences. If someone is being wronged or mocked, others must stand up for that person—and do so for the sake of justice, not for their own personal gain. It is unbecoming to speak out on one’s own behalf. It is another matter entirely to stand up to offenders in order to defend serious spiritual matters—those concerning our faith, Orthodoxy. That is your duty. To think of others and take a stand in order to protect them is pure, because it is done out of love.

When I went to Sinai, I would go down to the monastery once every one or two weeks to receive Communion.⁴¹ Dikeos⁴² was very simple there. Once he said to me, “No, not every week. Monks should receive Communion four times a year.” Back then, it was their custom to receive Communion infrequently. “And don’t wear the kukol either,” he told me. I used to put the kukol over my kamelaukion, but they only wore the kukol on solemn occasions. “As you bless me,” I replied, and wore the kukol draped over my shoulder like a scarf. I

³⁶ Stichera for the Praise Service to the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council.

³⁷ See Ex. 32:1–20.

³⁸ See Numbers 25:1–15.

³⁹ Ps. 105:30.

⁴⁰ See John 2:14–15.

⁴¹ See note 12.

⁴² At the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, the dikios is the presiding member of the Holy Council of Elders, who acts as the archbishop’s representative during his absence.

didn't give the matter another thought. Was I supposed to get into an argument over this? But every time Holy Communion came around, I prepared myself and went to church. When the priest proclaimed, "With the fear of God and faith, approach..."—I bowed my head and said, "You, my Christ, know how greatly I need Your Most Pure Mysteries." And I experienced such a [tangible] change within myself that I cannot say with certainty whether I would have experienced it had I received Communion. A few months passed, and four or five young men came to the monastery; they had made the effort to travel to Sinai because of me. They, too, were told not to receive Communion. That was when I spoke up about it, and the matter was settled.

Confronting Blasphemers

— Geronda, Scripture says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable.⁴³ What kind of blasphemy is this?

— Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, in general, contempt for the Divine (of course, when a person is of sound mind). Then he is guilty. For example, when someone said to me, "Go to hell along with your gods..."—I shoved him and shook him good, because that was blasphemy. Or, for example, two people are walking past a church. One makes the sign of the cross and says to the other, "My friend, make the sign of the cross too..." but the other retorts, "Get lost! Now you're acting like some kind of boss, telling me where to make the sign of the cross!" Such contempt is blasphemy. Consequently, a devout person cannot commit blasphemy. And shamelessness is also blasphemy. In order to justify his fall, the shameless person distorts or tramples upon some truth—for example, a truth from the Gospel. He does not honor the truth, does not honor reality; he consciously crumples it up; he tramples the sacred into the mud. And gradually this becomes his very state of being. Then God's grace withdraws from him, and the person falls under demonic influence. And where will this lead, if he does not repent!... God forbid!... If someone, in a fit of anger, even blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, that blasphemy is not unforgivable, because the person did not believe in the blasphemy he uttered. He said it because, in that moment, in his anger, he lost control of himself. And he repents immediately as well. But the shameless person justifies a lie in order to justify his fall. Whoever justifies his fall justifies the devil.

— And how, Geronda, does he justify his fall?

— He might recall something said ten years ago in a different context and use it as an example to justify himself. At that moment, not even the devil—the greatest advocate—could have come up with something like that.

— And what does such a person feel?

— What does he feel? He never finds peace. Even if a person is right and is trying to justify himself, he has no peace. All the more so if he is wrong and justifies himself in the most shameless way. Therefore, let us, as much as possible, guard against shamelessness and contempt—not only toward the Divine, but also toward our neighbor, because our neighbor is the image of God. Shameless people are in the first stage of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In the second stage are those who despise the Divine. In the third stage is the devil.

— Geronda, what should one do when someone speaks against the Church or against monasticism, etc.?

⁴³ See Matt. 12:31.

— Let's start with this: if someone speaks ill, for example, of you as a person, that's not a big deal. Think about it: Christ, Who was Christ, was reviled, and He did not respond—so what am I, a sinner, worthy of? If they wanted to insult me personally, that wouldn't bother me at all. But when I am insulted as a monk, the entire institution of monasticism is insulted, because as a monk, I am inseparable from it. In that case, I must not remain silent. In such situations, you should let the insulters vent a little, and then say a few words to them. Once on a bus, a woman was berating priests. I let her speak her mind, and when she stopped, I said: "We have many complaints against priests, but God didn't exactly drop them from the sky on parachutes. They are people with human weaknesses. But tell me this: a mother like you, wearing makeup and with nails like a hawk's—what kind of child will she give birth to, and how will she raise him? And what kind of priest or monk will he become, if he becomes one at all?" I remember another time, when I was riding the bus from Athens to Ioannina, a man spent the entire trip condemning the metropolitan, who had done something wrong at the time. I said a word or two to him, and then I prayed. He kept going on and on. When we arrived in Ioannina and got off the bus, I pulled him aside and said, "Do you know who I am?" "No," he replied. "Then why," I said, "are you sitting there saying such things? Maybe I'm many times worse than the one you're slandering, or maybe I'm a saint?! How can you sit in front of me and spout such nonsense—things I can't even imagine laypeople doing? Try to mend your ways, because otherwise you might get a good smack on the head from God! For your own good, of course." I noticed he began to tremble. But it had gotten through to the others as well, as I could tell from the commotion that ensued.

[Sometimes] you see the holy being insulted, yet those around remain silent. Once, while leaving the Holy Mountain, I met a poor soul on the ship who had escaped from a psychiatric hospital on the Holy Mountain. He screamed and cursed everyone nonstop: the powerful of this world, the government, the doctors... "For so many years," he shouted, "they tortured me with electroshock therapy and pills. But you have it good! You have everything you want—you even have cars! But when I was twelve, my mom sent me to some island, and ever since then—for twenty-five years now—it's been from one mental hospital to another!" He cursed all the political parties, and then began to blaspheme against Christ and the Mother of God. I stood up and said, "Stop it! Isn't there a single representative of the authorities here?" I saw that his companion—most likely a police officer—got upset and reined him in a bit. That poor man, shouting and cursing, poured out all his misery. And I felt sorry for him. Then he came over, kissed my hand, and I kissed his as well. He was right. All of us—some more, some less—are responsible for this. And I, too, was the cause of this poor man's blasphemy. If I were a man of the spirit, I would have set him right.

How disappointed the Pharasiots were,⁴⁴ when, during the exchange⁴⁵, they were sailing on a ship to Greece! Two sailors were arguing with each other and blaspheming against Christ and the Mother of God. The Pharasiots did not like this at all. Greeks, Christians—and yet they blaspheme Christ and the Mother of God! They seized the blasphemers and threw them into the sea. Fortunately, the men knew how to swim and were saved. Even if someone insults a person, we are obligated to defend him, and all the more so Christ! Once, a boy came to my hut—he limped, but his face was radiant. "This," I thought, "is no simple matter, since Divine Grace

⁴⁴ The inhabitants of Pharas—a large village in Cappadocia (Asia Minor, now part of Turkey). The birthplace of the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia and the Blessed Elder Paisios. – *Translator's note*.

⁴⁵ This refers to the population exchange of 1924, during which Greeks from Asia Minor resettled in Greece, while Turks living in Greece returned to Turkey. – *Translator's note*.

shines so brightly!” I asked, “How are you?” And he told me what had happened to him. A brute, as tall as the ceiling, was blaspheming against Christ and the Mother of God, and this boy rushed at him to stop him. The brute knocked him to the ground, trampled him, crippled his legs, and after that the poor boy began to limp. A confessor! And what did the confessors and martyrs endure!

— Geronda, in the army, some devout young men have a hard time dealing with those who swear. What should they do?

— They need reason and patience. God will help. One radio operator we served with, a former doctor, was an unbeliever and a blasphemer. Every day he’d come to the Command Center to brainwash me. He’d tell me about Darwin’s theory and similar nonsense—all thoroughly steeped in blasphemy. But after one incident, he came to understand something. We were on a mission together. We had a large mule loaded with a radio and a stretcher. On a very slippery descent, I was holding onto the mule’s tail, while the doctor was pulling it by the bridle. And then, in an instant, the stretcher hit the mule’s ears, and it—wham!—kicked me hard with its hind hooves, and I flew through the air. Soon I came to my senses and realized I was walking! The only thing I remembered was that I managed to shout, “My Lady!” And nothing else. There were hoofprints on me, right here—my whole chest was black, that’s how hard the mule had kicked me. When the doctor saw that I was walking, his eyes widened in astonishment. We continued on our way. A little further on, the doctor tripped over a rock, fell, and couldn’t get up. Then he began to cry out: “My Lady, my Christ!” He was afraid that his enemies would capture him: “Now everyone will abandon me—it’s all over—and what will become of me, and who will help me!”—“Don’t worry,” I said, “I’ll stay with you. If they capture me, they’ll capture you too.” Then the poor fellow began to reflect: “Arseny⁴⁶ was kicked by a mule, and nothing happened to him, but I barely stumbled and already can’t walk!” Soon he got up, but he was limping, and I helped him walk. The rest went on ahead. He learned his lesson and came to his senses after that. Before, he used to blaspheme every day, but in the moment of danger he began to cry out: “My Lady, my Lady!” He immediately remembered the Lady. But there was another man who had been a motorcyclist in the army; he broke his leg twice and continued to blaspheme.

— Didn’t you say anything to him, Geronda?

— What was there to say to him? I didn’t say a word, but he kept blaspheming against Christ and the Mother of God—on purpose, just to hurt me. I realized this later and just prayed. And look—whereas before, both he and others would swear for no reason at all, afterward, when things didn’t go their way and they wanted to curse, they’d bite their tongues! If a shameless person uses foul language or blasphemes, it’s better to pretend you’re busy with something and don’t hear him, while praying to yourself. Because if he realizes you’re watching him, he might keep swearing nonstop. And in this way, you’ll become the cause of his possession by an unclean spirit. However, if the one swearing is not a shameless person but someone with a conscience, and he swears out of bad habit, then you may say something to him. But if he has not only a conscience but also a good dose of selfishness, then be careful. Do not speak to him sternly, but as humbly and sorrowfully as you can. St. Isaac says: “Rebuke those who quarrel with you with the power of your virtues ... and silence their

⁴⁶ The Elder’s secular name.

mouths with the meekness and peace of your own lips. Rebuke the unrestrained with your virtuous conduct, and the sensually shameless with the restraint of your eyes.”⁴⁷

Chapter 3.

“For everything is pure to the pure...”⁴⁸

A spiritual person “is a consuming fire”

— Geronda, how can one live in society today in the right way, as a Christian, without being led astray by people who live far from God?

— Why would one be tempted by those who do not live close to God? If, in a family of six or eight brothers and sisters, Satan were to lead one or two astray, would their sinful lives really tempt the rest?

— No, they would feel sorry for them, because they are brothers and sisters.

— Well, there you go—you see, evil lies within us. We lack love, which is why we don’t see all people as our brothers and sisters and are tempted by their sinful lives. We are all one big family and brothers to one another, because all people are children of God. If we truly realize that we are brothers with all people, then we will feel pain for those who live in sin. And then their sinful lives will not tempt us, but we will pray for them.

So, if we are led astray, the evil lies not outside but within us. Let us say to ourselves when someone leads us astray: “And how many do you lead astray? And in the name of God, do you not tolerate your brother? And how does God tolerate you, with all that you do?” Think of God, of the Most Holy Mother of God, of the Angels who see all people on earth. It is as if they were standing on a balcony, looking down at the square and seeing all the people gathered there. They see that some are stealing, others are cursing, still others are committing carnal sins, and so on. How can they bear with them? They bear with all the evil and sin of the world, yet we do not bear with our brother! This is terrible!..

— Geronda, what do the words of the Apostle Paul mean: “*For our God is a consuming fire*”?⁴⁹

— If you throw paper or trash into a furnace, won’t they burn up? So it is with a spiritual person: whatever the devil throws at him, it burns up. “*A consuming fire*”! When the divine flame is kindled within a person—everything burns up. Evil thoughts no longer cling to him. That is, the devil does not stop hurling evil thoughts at him, but the spiritual person “is fire” and burns them up. And then the devil grows weary and ceases [his attack]. That is why the Apostle Paul says: “*To the pure, all things are pure.*” For the pure, everything is pure;

⁴⁷ “With meekness and calmness of speech, shut the mouths of the shameless and rebellious, and silence them. Confront the licentious with the nobility of your life, and those whose feelings are shameless—with the self-restraint of your eyes.” Cf.: *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. Word 56. p. 281.

⁴⁸ Titus 1:15.

⁴⁹ Heb. 12:29.

there is nothing impure. Even if the pure were thrown into a swamp, they would remain pure, like rays of sunlight, which, no matter what they fall upon, remain bright and pure.

A spiritual person is transformed by contact with a saint—in the positive sense of the word—but is not inflamed by contact with a carnal person. He sees him, suffers for him, but is not harmed himself. A person in an intermediate spiritual state is transformed for the better by a spiritual person, and is also transformed by a carnal person—but for the worse. A carnal person does not understand a saint and is inflamed by a carnal person. And while a demon-possessed person sees a saint and flees, a carnal person goes to the saint to tempt and seduce him. One who has reached the state of the Sodomites is tempted even by angels.⁵⁰ A humble person, even if spiritually inexperienced, can distinguish an angel of God from a demon, possessing spiritual purity and being akin to an angel. But a selfish and carnal person is not only easily deceived by the crafty devil, but also spreads that craftiness himself, stirring it up in others through his own carnality and infecting weak souls with his spiritual germs.

— Geronda, how does one attain that state in which everything is seen as pure?

— The heart must be purified so that the Grace of God may dwell within it. “*Create in me a clean heart, O God...*”⁵¹ — is that not what the psalm says? When the heart—whether male or female—is purified, Christ dwells within it. And then people neither tempt others nor are tempted themselves, but pass on grace and reverence to others. A person who is attentive and guards their spiritual purity also preserves Divine Grace; not only do they see everything as pure, but they also use what is impure for good. Even what is impure is transformed into something useful in their noble spiritual endeavor. He recycles unwanted paper into clean napkins, glue, and notebooks; bronze scraps into candlesticks, and so on. Conversely, a person who embraces deceit and thinks deceitfully turns even good into evil, like a factory that manufactures ammunition—it will make bullets and shell casings even out of gold, because that is how the machines in that factory are designed.

If someone begins to give in to sin, they grow dark from within; the eyes of their soul grow cloudy, and their vision becomes blurred. Then they are [already] defiled by sin, and sin entangles them. They may even see what is pure as impure. There are people who, for example, cannot believe that there are young men and women who live chaste, pure lives. “Today,” they say, “that’s impossible.” These unfortunate souls have become so immersed in sin that they see everything as sinful. Those who associate with horned creatures,⁵² cannot even imagine that there are others who are friends with the Angels of God. But one should not demand that pigs show reverence for lilies. After all, Christ Himself said: “...do not cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot...”⁵³ Therefore, one who lives a spiritual, pure life must be very careful—not only to never allow oneself to be too casual in dealing with worldly people, but also to not allow them to interfere in spiritual matters,

⁵⁰ See Gen. 19:1–5.

⁵¹ Ps. 50:12.

⁵² Tangalashka (Greek: ταγκαλάκι)—this is the nickname the Elder gave to the devil. —*Translator’s note.*

⁵³ See Matt. 7:6.

so as not to harm oneself or them, because worldly people have a different code of conduct, a different “canonarch”⁵⁴, and they cannot distinguish the holy world from perfume.

— Geronda, can external temptations hinder someone who wants to live close to Christ?

— No. Only our unspiritual life can separate us from Christ. That’s what the horned one does—he creates temptations and sows malice, waging war against people, sometimes cruelly, sometimes cunningly.

Christ loves us, and when we live according to His will, He is near us. Therefore, when you see temptations arising, do not be afraid and do not give in to panic. If a person does not approach what is happening with a spiritual attitude, he will not have a single day of joy, because the devil will strike at his weak spot and constantly create temptations to upset him—one today, another tomorrow, and a third the day after tomorrow.

Let’s not create temptations ourselves

Let us be as attentive as possible and not give cause for situations that are tempting to others to arise. Let us not open any cracks to the evil one, because souls with corrupted thoughts become even more corrupted and then seek an excuse to justify themselves. And in this case, on the one hand, we will be building, and on the other—destroying.

Once, several young men—modern-day youths—came to my kaliva. We had a conversation with them. That same day, I had to leave the Holy Mountain. Upon learning this, they also prepared to leave. On the ship, they approached me and sat down next to me. With great interest, they asked me various spiritual questions. However, some of our fellow passengers misinterpreted what was happening and looked at us with great suspicion. If I could have foreseen that our conversation would be misunderstood, I would have made sure to take the necessary precautions.

The world is deceitful. We must try not to create temptations. We are not responsible for things over which we cannot take appropriate measures, or for things in which we lack experience. But let’s not expect a reward from God if we create problems through carelessness. We will receive a reward when we are careful, and the enemy is the one creating the problems. For example, someone says that I am under a spell. First, I’ll examine whether I am under a spell or not. “Since he says so, it means he saw something. He couldn’t have said that out of the blue; he must have misunderstood something,”—that’s how I reason, and I try to find what about me might have been misunderstood so that I can correct it. If people say I’m under a spell or that I’m a sorcerer—that works in my favor, because crowds won’t gather, and my life will become as quiet as a monk’s. But that unfortunate soul who spread the rumors will end up in hell, because he’s doing harm to the Church. Isn’t it a pity [for him]? And I’ll be to blame, because I wasn’t paying attention. For example, some laypeople come up to kiss my hand, and I give them a light tap on the head. Someone will see this and say, “He’s just a monk, yet he’s giving blessings—is he a priest?” And he won’t be at fault; I just need to stop doing that.

— Geronda, when a person, out of carelessness, causes some kind of temptation, some people say, “Leave him alone; he’s not of sound mind.” How should one view this?

⁵⁴ A canonarch is a cantor who announces what the choir is about to sing. Here, the Elder means that the devil is the “canonarch” of sinful deeds, dictating to a person what to do.

— Insane is the one who cannot think, not the one who is inattentive. An inattentive person lights a fire and doesn't think that where he lit it, there will be a blaze. When such people light fires and scorch the souls of others, we must pray and pour at least a bucket of water on the fire. And then there are others who are like a whirlwind: they have reverence, but their heads aren't quite right, and if they hear something they disagree with, without considering whether it's right or wrong, they tear everything to shreds. Then we need to gently slow them down, and when they stop, again gently place a stone under their wheel, because they might roll backward and sweep others along with them.

How some people love to create temptations

Don't be too quick to believe what you hear, because some people speak only to the extent of their own understanding. Once, a man came to Hajj Fendi⁵⁵ and said to him, "Bless me, Hajj Fendi. A hundred snakes have gathered up there!"—"A hundred snakes!? Where from?"—Saint Arsenius asked in surprise. "Well, maybe not a hundred, but fifty for sure!" — "Fifty snakes?" — "Well, there were at least twenty-five!" — "Have you ever heard of twenty-five snakes slithering together?" — the saint asked. The man then told him that there were definitely ten. "Come on," the saint says to him, "did they have some kind of meeting there that ten snakes slithered over at once? Come on, that can't be!" — "There were five," the man insists. "Five?" — "All right, there were two." Then the saint asks him, "Did you see them?" — "No," he says, "but I heard them hissing in the branches: sh-sh-sh!.." I mean, maybe it was just some kind of lizard! I never draw conclusions from what I hear without looking into it first. One person might say something to condemn, another might say it just like that, and a third might have some specific purpose.

How some people love to create temptations! In Konitsa there were two friends who were very close. On holidays and Sundays, they didn't loiter around town, but came to the monastery, to Stomion,⁵⁶ and even sang in the choir, and then climbed the mountain, "The Camel."⁵⁷ Once, a corrupt fellow set a trap for them. He approached one of the friends and said, "You know what your buddy said about you? Such-and-such." Then he went to the second friend and said to him, "Do you know what the one you're friends with said about you? So-and-so." They both immediately flew into a rage and started a scandal right there in the monastery. Meanwhile, the one who lit the fuse slipped away, and they were still arguing! The younger one, who was also a bit nervous, began to insult the older one.

I thought to myself, "What should I do? Just look at what this feud is causing!" So I went over and said to the older one, "Listen, he's young, and a little on edge to boot, so don't hold a grudge against him—ask him for forgiveness."—"Father," he says, "what's there to ask for forgiveness? Can't you see how he's insulting me? And I'm hearing for the first time what he's accusing me of." So I went over to the young man and said to him, "Listen, he's older than you, and things aren't the way you think they are. Go on, ask him for forgiveness." He flew into a rage and started shouting, "We'll have a fight with you too, Father!" — "All right then," I said, "let's do it, Pantelis, let's have a go at it—just let me get ready a little." I said that and left. About four hundred meters

⁵⁵ Hajjefendi—this is what the residents of Faras called St. Arsenius of Cappadocia.

⁵⁶ In 1958–60, the Blessed Elder Paisios lived as a monk at the Stomion Monastery, located not far from Konitsa. — *Translator's note.*

⁵⁷ The summit of Mount Papingo—Timfi—resembles the silhouette of a female camel.

behind the monastery, I had some hefty poles stored away for the garden fence. I went there, picked up a pole about five meters long, and dragged it back to the monastery. I was barely managing to drag it, just to make him laugh. He heard me dragging something, but can you guess what I was up to? I dragged it into the courtyard and stopped right in front of the church entrance. “Hey,” I said, “Pantelis, cut it out, or we’re going to have a go at each other.” They both burst out laughing when they realized why I needed that pole. That was it! The ice broke. The devil was defeated. “Do you have any sense left?” I said. “What on earth are you doing?” And they became friends again.

— Did the curse happen that very same day?

— Yes, and they had a really nasty fight! Do you see what the devil does? That third one was probably jealous of them because they were as close as brothers. He turned one against the other and ran away. Sowing discord is very nasty. That’s why the enemy is called the devil.⁵⁸ He stirs things up: he tells one thing to one person, another thing to another. And he creates temptations. And those poor souls believed him and turned on each other.

— Did he do that on purpose?

— Yes, to drive them apart. He, of course, did it “out of love”—that is to say, out of envy.

Making Sins Public

When we see something bad, we should cover it up and not spread the word about it. It is wrong when moral failings become known [to everyone]. Suppose there is filth lying on the road. A prudent person, passing by, will pick something up and cover it so that it does not cause disgust in others. A foolish person, on the other hand, instead of covering it up, will dig it up and only intensify the stench. Likewise, by thoughtlessly exposing the sins of others, we cause even greater harm.

The Gospel saying, “*Tell it to the Church*” (⁵⁹), does not mean that everything must become known, because today the Church is not everything. The Church consists of believers who live as Christ desires, not those who wage war against the Church. In the early years of Christianity, when confession was made before all members of the Church, the Lord’s words, “*Tell the Church*,” had a literal meaning. In our time, however, when it has become rare for an entire family to confess to a single spiritual father, let us not allow the enemy to confuse us with this “*Tell the Church*.” For by making public, for example, some moral transgression, we are announcing it to those who are hostile to the Church and giving them a pretext to wage war against it. And in this way, faith wavers in weak souls.

If a mother has a daughter who is a prostitute, she does not revile or humiliate her in front of others, but does everything possible to restore her reputation. She will sell everything she owns, down to the last possession; she will take her daughter and move to another city, try to marry her off, and in this way set her on the right path. The Church acts in exactly the same way. The good God patiently endures us with love and does not expose anyone to ridicule, even though He, the Knower of Hearts, is aware of our wretchedness. And the saints never insulted a sinful person before the whole world, but with love, spiritual sensitivity, and in a mysterious way,

⁵⁸ Διάβολος (Greek) – slanderer; διαβάλλω (Greek) – to slander, to speak ill of, to tattle. – *Translator’s note*

⁵⁹ Matt. 18:17.

helped to correct evil. But we ourselves, being sinners, do the opposite—we act like hypocrites. We must be careful not to become easy victims of misunderstandings and not to regard what others do as evil.

— Geronda, you touched on the subject of exposing moral transgressions. But is it necessary to inform others about sins or unhealthy states of a different nature?

— Look: I do this with some of my acquaintances. For example, I see someone acting recklessly and leading others astray. I advise him to mend his ways—once, five times, ten, twenty, thirty—but he does not change. However, after repeated reminders, he has no right to continue misbehaving, because others are getting carried away and imitating him. You see, people are quick to imitate evil, but not goodness. And so there comes a time when I am forced to speak out about this to others who witness this misconduct, in order to protect them.

In other words, when I say: “I don’t like what so-and-so is doing,” I say this not to condemn him—because I’ve already told him this myself five hundred times—but because others, seeing his weakness, are influenced by it, imitate him, and on top of that say: “Since Elder Paisios doesn’t say anything to him, then there’s nothing wrong with his behavior.” And if I do not voice my thought that I do not like this, it will create the impression that I approve of it, that I like it too. And in this way, the whole is destroyed, because someone might decide that the misbehaving person’s tactics are correct and begin to apply them themselves. And what will come of this? And people think, by the way, that I didn’t say anything to him because they don’t know how much he’s tormented me all this time. And the devil is right there, saying, “There’s nothing wrong with what you’re doing. See, someone else is doing the same thing, and Elder Paisios isn’t saying anything to him.” Therefore, when I see that someone continues to live according to his own “typikon,”⁶⁰ to act recklessly, even though I advised him to correct his ways, then in conversation with someone who knows this person, I say, “I don’t like what so-and-so is doing,” in order to protect him from harm. This is not condemnation; don’t confuse different things.

And then some people come along and start reproaching me: “Why did you tell someone else about this? It was a secret, after all.”—“What secret?” I say. “I’ve told you a thousand times, and you haven’t changed. You have no right to mislead others into thinking that I approve of what you’re doing!” As if I weren’t already keeping quiet enough—and he’s going to mislead others! Especially when a child from a family I know comes to me, and I see that his behavior is destroying his family, I tell him: “Listen, if you don’t change your ways, I’ll tell your mother about this. No one gave you the right to come to me, tell me all this, and then just keep doing whatever you want. I’ll tell your mother in order to preserve your family.” If he shows repentance, that’s a different matter. But if he continues with his tactics, then I have to tell his mother about it, because I bear responsibility for this.

⁶⁰ Typikon (Greek) – a statute, a model; here: a way of life, customs. – *Translator’s note.*

Chapter 4.

On Acting

with prudence and love

Working on Ourselves

If you want to help the Church, try to improve yourself rather than others. If you improve yourself, a part of the Church will immediately be set right. And it's clear that if everyone acted this way, the Church would be brought into complete order. But people today concern themselves with everything except themselves, because it is easy to concern oneself with others, whereas working on oneself requires effort.

If we engage in self-improvement and, relying primarily on Divine help, turn more toward inner activity than outward activity, we will help others more and more effectively. Furthermore, we will be able to attain inner peace, which will quietly help the souls we encounter, because our inner spiritual state reveals our moral virtue and transforms the souls of others. When someone devotes themselves to external activity without having yet attained a purified inner spiritual state, they may engage in some kind of spiritual struggle, but at the same time experience distress and anguish; they will lack trust in God, and they will often lose their peace. If they do not make themselves good, they cannot even claim that their concern for the common good is pure. Having freed themselves from their old self and from all worldly things, they will already possess Divine Grace. Thus, he himself will have peace in his soul, and he will be able to help people of any disposition. But if he lacks God's grace, he can neither master himself nor help others in a way that pleases God. First, he himself must immerse himself in grace, and only then can his powers, now sanctified, be used for the salvation of others.

Good must be done with kindness

— Geronda, what do you think about when you encounter a problem?

— I think about what can and cannot be done from a human perspective. I examine the issue from all angles: "If I do it this way, how will it affect that situation and that other one?.. What bad could come of it, and what good?.." I always try to look at the problem from different perspectives so that the decision I make is, as far as possible, the most correct one. Because carelessness can lead to many mistakes. And when you realize in hindsight what you should have done, it's no use—it's too late, as they say, the bird has flown!... Let's say someone accidentally burned down a house. Well, what can you do? You can't execute him. But—the damage has already been done...

[Once] a certain problem arose at an organization. The boss there came to me and said, "Well, everything's settled. I went over there, found so-and-so and so-and-so, told them such-and-such, and the problem was resolved."—"The problem," I said, "has only just begun. What happened before wasn't a problem. At first, there were just a couple of embers; they would have gone out on their own, but now a blaze has flared up." He thought he'd settled everything with his actions and even wanted us to praise him. But in reality, his actions caused quite a stir, and the problem became more complicated.

It takes a great deal of attention, prudence, and sound judgment to ensure that good deeds are done in a kind manner and bring benefit; otherwise, instead of helping, they will only infuriate others. And here's another

thing: it's better to let your plans mature before acting on them. Because if you "rush" into something before it's ready—that is, make a hasty decision—you may later face difficulties and suffer as a result. When serious matters are delayed just a little, they are then carried out quickly and correctly. You may be a genius, but if vanity and selfishness drive your actions—and you fail to notice this—it can lead to trouble. For example, on a hunt, even if a dog is a mutt but searches attentively, it will find a hare's tracks. But another dog, the purest of purebreds with all the best canine traits, when it rushes, runs aimlessly back and forth. Acting before thinking is pride. Therefore, one must not rush into action, but first think everything through and pray. When prayer comes first, it is not the froth of reason or frivolity that works, but a sanctified mind.

We, as spiritual people, often behave as if God did not exist—we do not let Him act. But God knows His own business. What I mean is that we want to act in a worldly manner even when we have the spiritual means to resolve difficulties in a spiritual way. When I was on Mount Sinai, a certain hodja⁶¹ would come to the monastery every Friday, go inside, climb the minaret of the mosque that was there, and start shouting! And what a voice he had! It carried all the way up to Saint Epistimia's cave. Then the monastery found a solution: on Fridays, when the hodja came, they began closing the monastery door so he couldn't get in. I didn't know about this. One day I went downstairs and saw the hodja in a rage. "Just you wait," he says, "I'll show them how to close the door right in my face!.." I say, "They closed it— —so the camels wouldn't come in. I don't think they closed it to keep you from coming in." Then I told the monastery fathers about it. One of the secretaries says, "I'll show him, that hodja! I'll give him a piece of my mind! I'll write to the government that the hodja is harassing us!" — "Listen," I told him, "Orthodoxy isn't some kind of pill. Let's hold a vigil for the Venerable Fathers of Sinai and Saint Catherine and leave the final word to God. I'll go upstairs too and pray." I also told some of the brethren to pray, and the hodja got what was coming to him! He packed up, left, and vanished! And if they had continued to keep the door locked, the government would have found out anyway that it wasn't true that the hodja was oppressing us, and scandals would have broken out. The hodja would have claimed that the door was locked because he came every Friday, and he would have caused harm to the monastery. And even earlier, a certain [wealthy man] saw [Mount Sinai] and wanted to build himself a summer house on the summit of St. Catherine's. He fell ill with something and died. And not long ago, someone else also wanted to build something there—and he, too, died. Therefore, it is better not to rely solely on our own human efforts, but to pray and let God act.

Behavior and Reasoning

— Geronda, when we see someone behaving badly, should we say something to them?

— It depends on what kind of person they are. In our time, a great deal of discernment and divine enlightenment is necessary. It's not so simple to answer your question. I've noticed that in every single case, there are about five hundred "sub-cases." Some people are capable of correcting themselves, while others do not and may react negatively to our remarks. Those who are selfish react particularly badly when their ego is touched. Even when they often realize they are in the wrong, such people do not yield to their selfishness. And when our motives are not flawless—in other words, when, in addition to concern for the other person, there is also pride within us, when our love is not pure—then they resist very strongly.

⁶¹ Hodja – a Muslim religious judge and teacher. – *Translator's note.*

If we rebuke someone out of love, with pain, then regardless of whether they understand our love or not, a change takes place in their heart, because we are moved by pure love. But rebuke without love, motivated by prejudice, turns the person being rebuked into a beast, because our malice, striking at his selfishness, strikes sparks, just as steel in a lighter strikes sparks from flint. If we bear with our brother out of love, he understands this. And he also understands our malice, even if it is internal and not expressed outwardly in any way, because our malice causes him anxiety. So too does the devil, even when appearing in the form of an angel of light, bring anxiety, whereas a true Angel brings tender, inexpressible joy.

— So, Geronda, when we say something and it elicits a negative reaction, does that mean that selfishness is the starting point of our actions?

— There are also many misunderstandings. One person understands [the matter] one way, another differently. But we must always examine ourselves: “Why do I want to say this? What is my motive? Am I concerned for my neighbor, or do I want to say this to make myself look good, to show off?” If a person has purified himself, then even if he gets angry, yells, or reprimands someone, his motives will be pure. And then everything goes right, because he acts with discernment. Reason is purity; it is Divine enlightenment, spiritual clarity—and so, how can selfishness coexist with it inside? And when the motives are pure, a person’s heart remains at peace. In this way, you can understand whether each of your actions is good.

You often fail to realize that you’re speaking to another person in a bossy tone: “This needs to be done this way and that way.” Egoism kicks in, and you turn your neighbor against you. If the motives are pure and there is humility, then the remark helps the other person. Otherwise, selfishness comes into play and leads to the opposite result. The motives behind your actions will be pure in every respect if you purify them of your “self,” of your selfishness. Unwise behavior often causes greater harm than the behavior of madmen, who are of unsound mind and smash [their own and others’] heads. For reckless people wound sensitive souls with their sharp words and often drive them to despair, inflicting fatal wounds.

And some people treat everyone the same. But you can’t pour the same amount into a thimble as into a barrel, or load as much cargo onto an ox as onto a horse. An ox is meant for plowing; it’s not right to saddle it or load it down with cargo. Likewise, a horse shouldn’t be harnessed to a plow, because it’s meant to carry loads. One is for one kind of work, the other for another. There’s no need to try to make the whole world fit your own mold. Everyone has their own way of doing things. And if no harm is done, one can turn a blind eye to certain things. If all people could attain their rightful place in this very life, all lawlessness would cease, and there would be Paradise on earth as well. So, let us not make excessive demands on others.

Spiritual sincerity is characterized by love

The state of the world today is poor because everyone speaks “great” truths that do not correspond to reality. Sweet words and great truths have value only when they come from truthful lips. They take root only in people who have a good will and a pure mind.

— Geronda, is there such a thing as worldly and spiritual sincerity?

— Yes, of course. Worldly sincerity involves a lack of discernment.

— Is that when a person speaks both appropriately and inappropriately?

— Not only that. The truth is the truth, but if you speak the truth without discernment, it is no longer the truth. For example, the fact that a certain person is not quite right in the head is the truth. But if you seek to voice

this truth, it serves no good purpose. Another person says, “To be sincere, I’ll go to the town square and sin there in front of everyone.” That is not sincerity. The person who is thoughtful possesses generous love, self-sacrifice, and humility. Even a bitter truth, such a person speaks with great simplicity and sweetens it with their kindness. As a result, with sweet words, it brings greater benefit, just as bitter medicines are more effective when taken with sweet syrups.

Truth, used without discernment, can lead to wrongdoing. Some commit wrongdoing while acting in the name of truth. One who possesses sincerity without discernment can cause a twofold evil: first to oneself, and then to others. For in such sincerity there is no compassion. Let anyone who wishes to be truly sincere begin by being sincere first and foremost with oneself, for spiritual sincerity begins there. If someone is insincere with himself, he only shortchanges himself and mocks only himself. But by behaving insincerely toward others, he commits a mortal sin, because he mocks others.

— Geronda, is it possible to be like that simply out of simplicity?

— What simplicity are you talking about! Where have you ever seen simplicity in such a person! If it’s a child, then they have simplicity. If it’s a saint, they have simplicity. But if an adult who isn’t mentally disabled behaves this way, then it’s the devil!

— And what does he feel?

— Pure hell. One temptation follows another. Temptations without end.

— However, Geronda, tell me, shouldn’t one behave with straightforwardness?

— Frankness, as many [understand and] use it, has a legalistic spirit to it. They say, “I am a frank person; I preach *‘from the rooftops’*”⁶² — and they make a mockery of others. But in the end, they themselves become the laughingstock.

“The letter of the law kills”⁶³

Once I asked a man, “Who are you? A soldier of Christ or a soldier of the evil one? Do you know that the evil one also has soldiers?” A Christian must not be a fanatic; he must have love for all people. Whoever hurls words without reason—even if they are correct—is doing evil. I knew a certain writer. He was a very pious man, yet he spoke to worldly people in a harsh tone that cut to the depths of their souls and shook them to the core. Once he told me, “At a gathering, I said such-and-such to a certain lady.” However, he said it in such a way that he crushed her. He insulted her in front of everyone. “Listen,” I said to him, “you’re throwing golden crowns set with diamonds at people, but by hurling them like that, you’re cracking their heads open—not just the weak ones, but the strong ones too.” Let’s not stone people “in a Christian way” [in quotes]. Whoever denounces a sinner in front of others or speaks with bias about a certain person is moved not by the Spirit of God, but by another spirit. The Church acts through love, not like the legalists. The Church views everything with long-suffering and strives to help everyone, no matter what they’ve done, no matter how great a sinner they may be.

I see that some people have a strange kind of logic. Their piety is good, and their inclination toward goodness is also good, but spiritual discernment and broad-mindedness are also necessary, so that piety is not

⁶² See Luke 12:3.

⁶³ Compare 2 Cor. 3:6.

accompanied by narrow-mindedness, and so that their minds do not become so rigid and stubborn that you could sharpen a stake on them. The whole foundation lies in having a spiritual state of mind, so that a person may possess spiritual discernment. Otherwise, he clings to the “letter of the law,” and “the letter of the law kills.” One who possesses humility never sets himself up as a teacher; he listens to others, and when asked for his opinion, he speaks humbly. He will never say “I,” but rather “this thought tells me” and “the fathers said.” That is, he speaks as a disciple. Anyone who thinks he is capable of correcting others has a great deal of selfishness.

— Geronda, when someone starts out with good intentions but [then] veers into extremes, does that mean they lack sound judgment?

— There is selfishness in that action. And such a person, not knowing himself, does not understand this, which is why he rushes into extremes. Often, some begin with reverence, and look where they end up! Take, for example, the iconodules and the iconoclasts. One is an extreme, and the other is an extreme. Some went so far as to scrape the icon of Christ and, in order to “improve” the Divine Communion, pour this dust into the Holy Chalice! Others burned icons and trampled them underfoot... That is why the Church was forced to place the icons high up, and when the strife subsided, she brought them down so that we might worship them and honor those depicted on them.

Whatever a person does, he must do it for God’s sake

— Geronda, I’m usually driven by the fear of upsetting others or losing their respect; I don’t think about not upsetting God. How does the fear of God grow?

— Vigilance is essential. Whatever a person does, he must do it for God’s sake. We forget God, and then the thought creeps in that we are doing something important. The desire to please people also kicks in, and we try not to lose face in the eyes of others. If someone acts with the thought that God sees him and is watching him, then whatever he does is secure. Otherwise, by doing something just to appear good to people, he loses everything; he wastes it all in vain. A person must ask themselves about every action: “All right, let me like what I’m doing, but does God like it?” And consider whether it pleases God. If they forget to do this, they will later forget God as well. That is why people used to say, “For God’s sake” or “Oh, he’s a godless person; he doesn’t fear God.” Or they would say, “If God wills,” “if God grants it.” Older people sensed God’s presence everywhere; they always kept God before them and were mindful. They experienced the state described in *the psalm*: “*I have set the Lord always before me... so that I may not be shaken.*”⁶⁴ That is why they [did not lose their composure] but remained steadfast. But now you see how the European “typikon” is quietly coming into fashion, and many behave well only out of worldly propriety. Whatever a person does, he must do it purely for Christ, realizing that Christ sees him and is watching over him. There must be no human element within. Christ must be at the heart of every human action. If we do something with the aim of pleasing people, it does us no good. Great care is required. We must constantly examine what motives drive us to act. As soon as I realize that I am being driven by a desire to please people, I must immediately fight it, because if I want to do something good and a desire to please people creeps in—well, then I am drawing water from a well with a bucket full of holes.

⁶⁴ Ps. 15:8.

Most temptations are often created by our “self” when, in interacting with others, we harbor a sense of self-importance within us—that is, when we are driven by self-interest, when we want to exalt ourselves and seek our own personal satisfaction. One ascends to heaven not through worldly ascent, but through spiritual descent. The one who walks humbly always walks with confidence and never falls. Therefore, let us, as much as possible, weed out from ourselves worldly self-aggrandizement and worldly success—which is, in fact, spiritual failure. Let us abhor both hidden and overt selfishness and the desire to please others, so that we may sincerely love Christ. Our age is characterized not by silence, but by sensationalism and empty clamor. But the spiritual life is quiet. It will be good if we begin to do what is within our power, as we ought: quietly, without pursuing goals that exceed the limits of our abilities, for otherwise the endeavor will be to the detriment of our soul and body, and often to the detriment of the Church as well.

True service to one’s neighbor also entails service to Christ. This is what we must pay attention to: how to make service to one’s neighbor pure—that is, how to remove from it the desire to please people—so that this human offering (that is, service to one’s neighbor) may be directed toward Christ. If someone attempts to “resolve” church problems in a supposedly Orthodox manner, but his true goal is to “get his own house in order”—that is, he has his own personal gain in mind—then how can such a person be blessed by God? We must, as far as possible, live our lives in a way that brings us closer to God. We must always examine ourselves and strive to fulfill God’s will. By fulfilling God’s will, a person remains in communion with God, and then, without even asking God, he receives—he continually draws water from the spring.

We need to develop the faculty of spiritual perception

The Holy Spirit is not one way in one place and another way in another; He is One and possesses many gifts. He is not a spirit of confusion, but the Spirit of love and peace. When spiritual people attack one another, it means they are under the influence of many other spirits that have no connection to the Holy Spirit. In the past, the Holy Spirit enlightened and guided. What a great thing! Today, He finds no grounds for descending. The Old Testament Tower of Babel was an innocent game. For example, you asked for clay, but they brought you straw. Now we have a Tower of Babel of passions. You ask for clay, but they throw a brick at your head. But if a person removes his own “self” from every action and sets aside his own will, then he is acting correctly. Such a person will inevitably receive Divine enlightenment, and he will also possess a spirit of mutual understanding with his neighbor. For when a person removes his own ideas from himself, Divine ideas come to him.

In order to attain Divine enlightenment, one must develop the faculty of spiritual perception. This is the fundamental step that must be taken for people to understand anything, especially in our era. Circumstances simply compel us to do this. Consider this: in Asia Minor back then, during those difficult years, circumstances forced the Greeks to use their minds. Two Greeks could understand one another while surrounded by Armenians and Turks, whereas the latter understood nothing. And here’s another point: today, seeing how far our lives have come, spiritual people must find mutual understanding among themselves. Difficult years are coming. We must use our heads. If a person does not use their head and lacks divine enlightenment as well, then in every single case they must ask for guidance on how to act. Do not expect to be told everything. There are things you must understand on your own, without waiting for someone to tell you about them. I remember: once in Konitsa,

before I was due to join the army, we learned that rebels were on their way.⁶⁵ There were four of us: me and three Muslims. We ran into a Turkish house on the outskirts of town. A five-year-old Turkish boy figured it all out and started chattering: “Come, come here—this way, run through my kitchen!” We went through the kitchen, came out the back of the house, and managed to hide in some storage rooms downstairs. When the rioters arrived, the little boy came out of the house, told them there was no one inside, and ran away. A five-year-old child—just a tiny little thing who couldn’t even speak properly yet—and look how sensibly he acted. Wow, he understood everything on the spot! Look: he understood everything; he loved, while another, a grown man, might have done evil out of rashness. So let us not, as baptized people, anointed with holy chrism, educated, and well-read, remain in a state of underdevelopment, like infants! Be winged! Do you know who the winged ones are? The six-winged Seraphim! They have six wings and flap them, singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy!” So fly, then—have six wings!

Divine enlightenment is everything

I often tell people, “Do as God enlightens you.” When I say, “as God enlightens you,” I want the person to see things through divine enlightenment, not human logic. You shouldn’t think that whatever you like is enlightenment from God.

— Geronda, tell me, how does divine illumination come?

— If you clean the rust off the wires, the old man becomes a good conductor. Then he conducts God’s Grace through himself and receives the Divine, grace-filled light. Otherwise, short circuits occur, and Grace does not work. The whole point is this: a person must take care that God’s Grace does not leave him, and then he will have Divine enlightenment. Because if there is no Divine enlightenment, then the whole endeavor is for naught.

Before Grace descended upon the disciples, how Christ struggled with them, for they were frail! Before Pentecost, the disciples were given authority from God to help the world. However, they did not yet possess the divine enlightenment that they received at Pentecost. At the time when Christ told them that He would go to Jerusalem, that the Son of Man would be crucified, and things like that, they thought that when He went to Jerusalem, He would be made king. They were thinking in a human way. That is why they were concerned about who would sit on Christ’s right and who on His left. The mother of the sons of Zebedee went to ask Him that in His Kingdom He would seat one of her sons at His right hand and the other at His left! However, from the day of Pentecost, when Christ sent them the Comforter—the Holy Spirit—the apostles possessed Divine Grace constantly. Previously, they had received divine enlightenment only intermittently, as if their battery were charging and then running out of power again. They had to recharge it from the outlet. Once it ran out again—back to the outlet! When He sent them the Comforter, the “outlet” was no longer needed. I am not saying that we are better off now than they were. But we live in the Age of Grace and therefore have no extenuating circumstances. We are baptized; we have the Comforter; we have everything. Back then, Christ had not yet been crucified, and the devil, in a sense, held power and easily led people astray. After the Crucifixion, Christ gave all people the opportunity to receive divine enlightenment. Christ sacrificed Himself and set us free. We were

⁶⁵ That is, communist rebels. — *Translator’s note.*

baptized in His name. He has permanently connected us to the “outlet.” Now we ourselves become the reason why the current of divine grace cannot flow, because we let our wires rust.

— Geronda, what prerequisites are necessary for the Holy Spirit to dwell within a person?

— A spirit of asceticism, humility, love, generosity, and self-sacrifice are necessary. Without the Grace of the Holy Spirit, a person is good for nothing. The Holy Spirit is Light—Divine Light. That is the whole foundation. If a person cannot see, he may bump into a window, fall off a cliff, fall into a pit, into filth, or even into an abyss. He does not see where he is going, for he is deprived of light. However, if he can see even a little, he takes care. If he sees more, he avoids all these dangers and walks safely along his path. For the Light to come, one must want to emerge from the darkness. If people can see—even if only dimly—they will no longer fall, and God will not be grieved. If an earthly father is grieved when his children fall into the mud, into thorns, or off a cliff, how much more grieved is God!

All evil in the world stems from the absence of Divine enlightenment. When there is no Divine enlightenment, a person is in darkness. Then one says, “Let’s go this way,” another says, “No, I know better; let’s go this way,” a third says, “That way,” and a fourth says, “This way.” Everyone thinks it’s right to go where they believe they should. In other words, everyone wants what’s best, but they are in a state of confusion and cannot reach a mutual understanding. If there were no confusion, they wouldn’t argue: they would clearly see which path is better and would walk toward it together. What I mean is that everyone can act with good intentions, but because of this confusion, many problems arise both in society and in the Church. At least in the Church, most people have no evil intentions, but they lack divine enlightenment. They struggle for what is good, but what do they end up with in the end?.. Therefore, let us ask God to grant us at least a little divine enlightenment, for otherwise we will stumble like the blind. During the Divine Liturgy, when the priest proclaims, “Yours from Yours,” I pray to God to enlighten the world so that it may see. May He enlighten us even a little, so that the darkness may be dispelled, so that people may not be spiritually maimed! And, reading the second psalm, which St. Arsenius of Cappadocia recited, “that God may enlighten those who go to the gatherings,” I say: “May God enlighten all rulers; then may He enlighten the clergy and all the fathers of the Church, that they may receive the Holy Spirit to help the world.” If God enlightens one person just a little and makes others receptive, do you know how much good can come of this? A ruler need only speak a word, and everything changes. People are in need of divine enlightenment.

The good God grants His divine enlightenment to those who have a good will. A judge once told me about an incident he himself had encountered. A monastery sent a monk with five hundred gold lyres to purchase a plot of land. The monk approached a certain merchant, who said to him: “Leave them with me—why carry them around with you?” The monk left the money with him and, thinking kindly of the man, said to himself, “What a good person—he’s lightened my load!” When he returned, not only did the merchant refuse to give him back the five hundred lira, but he also claimed that the monk owed him eight million! The unfortunate monk was at a loss: how was he supposed to return to the monastery?! He’d given away five hundred gold coins, bought nothing, and on top of that, they were demanding another eight million from him! The matter went to court. The judge, inspired by God, asked a series of questions, and it was proven that the merchant had not only not lent

the monk anything but had also taken money from him. I recognized in this judge the same state of mind that the prophet Daniel possessed.⁶⁶

He had the fear of God, and therefore God enlightened him, and his actions were correct.

The foundation of everything is divine enlightenment. If it comes, a person comforts those around him and develops spiritually himself. That is why I say that lamps and chandeliers—inventions of the [human] mind—are a good thing, but the divine light of God’s grace, which enlightens a person, is [incomparably] superior to them. A person who possesses Divine enlightenment sees things very clearly, is guided without doubt, and not only does he himself never grow weary, but he also helps others very successfully.

Part 2.

On Asceticism and Piety

“Whoever earnestly and fervently sets out to save his soul strives, prospers, bears fruit, is nourished spiritually, and rejoices like an angel”

Chapter 1.

“A Good Deed”

The Struggle for the Sanctification of the Soul

It brings me great joy to see, in a world filled with frivolity, souls that are attentive and striving. God, being good and just, has given each of us appropriate gifts—for example, courage to men and love to women. He has given them to us so that we may strive, with the help of Divine Grace, to ascend the spiritual ladder and draw ever closer to Him Who is our Creator. We must never forget that, in addition to people who can help us spiritually, we have close at hand Christ Himself, who helps us, the Most Holy Theotokos, the Cherubim, Seraphim, and all the saints. So, take courage! Christ is very strong; Christ is almighty; He will grant us His divine strength so that we may “break the horns” of the evil one. He constantly watches over us invisibly; He will strengthen us if we have a good will and perform small acts of devotion, according to our abilities.

Let us, as much as possible, avoid occasions of sin. Let us be mindful of our feelings, for everything begins with them. And if at times this is difficult for us, then let us at least avoid curiosity, so that our eyes do not gaze upon sinful images and the demons do not later put on a show for us. If you take a burning coal and clench it in

⁶⁶ See Dan. 13:45–62.

your hand, it will naturally burn you. But if you roll it between your fingers—not for too long, of course—it will cause no harm. So it is with wicked images: when they flash by quickly, the eyes do not hold onto them but merely touch them lightly, and these images do not subsequently burn the soul.

Those who were inattentive and acquired bad habits in their worldly life should, after their conversion, meekly endure the enemy's attacks without, however, giving in to evil desires. If they strive in this way, they will be purified and attain the state of chaste people, who have not committed grave sins, have not acquired bad habits, and yet do not endure severe persecution. Those who use their past failures as lessons will succeed greatly. Walking through a minefield without knowing the terrain, a person is forced to move forward very slowly and cautiously, lest they be blown up. But if one knows the terrain, then with the experience gained, one can move forward confidently and quickly, even while wounded. Whoever sets out to cultivate the uncultivated field of their soul will uproot all the thorns of passion from it and plant virtues in their place. However, this is a very arduous task, requiring great willpower and patience.

— Geronda, could you tell us about the practical side of this endeavor?

— We must strive every day to instill within ourselves something spiritual that counteracts worldly and sinful things, and thus, little by little, shed the old self and eventually move freely in the spiritual realm. Replace sinful images in your memory with holy images; secular songs with church hymns; and worldly magazines with spiritual books. If a person does not break away from all that is worldly and sinful, does not have a connection with Christ, with the Mother of God, with the saints, with the triumphant Church, and does not surrender himself entirely into God's hands—he will not be able to attain spiritual health.

— Geronda, what is spiritual health?

— Spiritual health is equivalent to pure thoughts, an enlightened mind, and a purified heart that constantly harbors Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos. Close attention, self-examination, and prayer are of great help in attaining the health of the soul. Prayer is necessary for the purification of the soul, and prudence is necessary for maintaining a good spiritual state.

Of course, life is not a vacation: it has its joys, but it also has its sorrows. The Resurrection is preceded by the Crucifixion. The blows of trials are necessary for the salvation of our soul, for they purify it. It is like clothing: the more we rub it when we wash it, the cleaner it becomes. The same applies to an octopus: the more we beat it, the cleaner and softer it becomes. And a fish seems beautiful when it swims alive in the sea and even when it lies at the market—still in its scales and unguessed. But it is fit for consumption only when it is cleaned—becoming unsightly in appearance—and then baked. So it is with a person: when he sheds all that is worldly, then—despite the apparent outward loss of life and worldly vitality—the scales—he scrapes away everything unnecessary, “bakes through,” and only then becomes fit for consumption.

What Helps One Succeed Spiritually

Those people whom God has allowed (either to slow them down or out of the devil's envy) to be battered by the cold northern winds—trials—need plenty of sunny warmth and spiritual freshness afterward so that they may blossom and bear fruit. Just as trees that trustingly opened their buds to the deceptive warmth of a winter thaw and were then mercilessly battered by the icy north wind need plenty of spring sunshine and rain afterward so that their sap may begin to circulate and these trees may bear flowers and fruit.

— Geronda, what is necessary for spiritual conversion?

— A labor of love, accompanied by hope and trust in God. Simplicity combined with a labor of love brings inner peace and confidence, and then the soul is filled with hope and joy. For the one who struggles to be crowned with victory, patience, love, and spiritual courage are necessary. Courage flows from a loving heart, and if one does something for Christ from the heart, it is neither tiring nor painful, for suffering for Christ is a spiritual feast. With a little loving perseverance and self-examination, one can grow spiritually in a very short time. Then the soul will receive help from Christ, the Most Holy Theotokos, the Angels, and the saints. Reading, prayer, and turning inward are also very helpful. And a little silence helps as well.

Our Christ gives strength to those who strive in “*the good fight*,”⁶⁷ which all the saints have waged in order to subdue the flesh to the spirit. Even if we are wounded, we must not lose our composure, but ask for God’s help and courageously continue the struggle. The Good Shepherd will hear us and immediately rush to our aid, just as a shepherd runs to help when he hears a lamb bleating pitifully from a wound or from the bites of a wolf or a dog. For those who [once] lived a life worthy of lamentation and [now] strive in the faith, I have greater love; I constantly keep them in my thoughts and feel more *pain* for them than for those who are not tormented by passions. Just so, a shepherd feels more pain for a wounded or sickly lamb than for the others, and he cares for it especially until it is well again.

And sometimes the reason we, while striving correctly, see no progress is this: the demon, since we have declared war on him, has asked Satan for reinforcements. And if a year ago we were fighting one demon, now we are fighting fifty, and in another year there will be even more, and so on. God does not allow us to see this so that we do not become proud. We do not understand this, but God, seeing our good disposition, works on our soul.

— Geronda, what is the reason if someone strives but does not succeed?

— Perhaps they are striving with pride. But shall I tell you why some fail and do not succeed? Having the prerequisites [for spiritual growth], they squander them on trivialities, and then they lack the strength required for spiritual struggle. Suppose we launch an offensive against the enemy and, having gathered everything necessary, prepare for battle. However, the enemy, fearing defeat, tries to divide us and distract our attention through sabotage and attacks elsewhere along the front. We turn our attention there, sending troops to the right and to the left. Time passes, ammunition and provisions dwindle, and we issue old uniforms to the troops. Murmuring begins among the soldiers. As a result, all our strength is depleted, and we will be unable to fight the enemy. And in the spiritual battle, some behave in the same way.

— Geronda, doesn’t the surrounding environment also contribute to spiritual progress?

— Yes, it helps, but sometimes you can live among saints and still not prosper. Were there any circumstances more favorable than those of Judas, who was constantly with Christ? Judas lacked humility and a good disposition. After his betrayal, he still did not humble himself; with anger and selfishness, he threw down the pieces of silver and, with cunning, went to hang himself. And the Pharisees acted in a devilish manner. After their deed was done, they said to Judas, “*You will see.*”⁶⁸ God acts in accordance with a person’s state. Nothing hinders the Holy Spirit. And this is what I have come to understand: no matter where a person finds himself, if he strives earnestly, he can achieve what he desires—that is, the salvation of his soul. Lot lived in Sodom and

⁶⁷ See 1 Tim. 6:12.

⁶⁸ Matt. 27:4.

Gomorrhah, yet what a spiritual state he was in!⁶⁹ Now, whether we want it or not, we must strive to become better so that Divine Grace may work within us. Current events compel us—and will continue to compel us—to draw even closer to God, so that we may possess Divine strength and act correctly in any situation. And, of course, the Good God will not abandon us; He will grant us His protection.

We must also know that by improving our spiritual condition, we ourselves feel better and bring joy to Christ. Who can imagine the great joy Christ feels when His children prosper? I wish for all people to prosper spiritually and be united with Christ, Who is the Alpha and the Omega. When our entire life depends on the Alpha and the Omega, then everything is sanctified.

Spiritual Reading

— Geronda, what books can help people who are beginning to feel a healthy concern?

— Let them read the Gospel first, so they can understand what Christ means. [Once they've] become a little contrite, let them read the Old Testament. Do you know how difficult it is when people who haven't read anything ask for your help? It's like an elementary school student going to a university professor and saying, "Help me." And what is the professor supposed to say then? That one plus one equals two?

It also happens that people come who lack any genuine concern and say, "Father, I have no problems; everything is fine—I just stopped by to see you." But a person can never say that he has no problems at all. There is always something. The struggle for the spiritual life never ends. Or as some people say to me, "Tell us something spiritual." It's like going to a grocer and saying, "Give us some goods." Even the grocer would be at a loss. They don't ask for anything specific—a certain amount of rice, a certain amount of sugar, and so on—but instead say, "Give us some goods." Or it's like going to a pharmacist and saying, "Give us medicine," without explaining what's wrong with them, whether they've seen a doctor, or what the doctor told them. Try figuring that out! But someone with spiritual concerns understands what they're missing, seeks it out, and benefits from it. When I was a beginner and read a book, I would copy it out so I wouldn't forget it, and I tried to put what I'd read into practice. I didn't read just to pass the time pleasantly. I had a sincere concern within me, and when I didn't understand something, I would ask questions to find out [the correct meaning]. I read little but tested myself extensively with what I had read: "Where am I? What am I doing?" I put myself in the dock; I did not grant what I read a free pass [to go in one ear and out the other].

Today, people read so much that they end up becoming [like] tape recorders, filling their "tapes" with unnecessary things. However, according to St. Isaac, "learning without action is a pledge of shame."⁷⁰ In the same way, many sports enthusiasts, sitting on the couch, idly read sports magazines and newspapers—while they themselves may be as weak as calves, yet they admire the athletes. "Wow," they say, "what an amazing athlete, well done," yet they themselves don't break a sweat and don't lose a single kilogram of their own weight. They read and read about sports while lounging on the couch, and derive not benefit, but only the pleasure of reading. Among ordinary people, some read newspapers, others read adventure novels, and still others watch

⁶⁹ See Gen. 19:1–38.

⁷⁰ "But a word accompanied by action is a treasure trove of hope; and wisdom not justified by action is a pledge of shame." Cf. *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. p. 7

games at stadiums—and that’s how all these people spend their time. Some of those who read spiritual books do the same thing. They may stay up all night, devouring these books and enjoying themselves. They pick up a spiritual book, settle in comfortably, and read. “I benefited,” one of them might say. You’d be better off saying that you enjoyed yourself, that you had a pleasant time. Because that’s not real benefit. You derive benefit only when you understand what the book is about, examine yourself, and force yourself to apply what you’ve read to yourself. What does what I’m reading mean? Where am I spiritually? What should I do? And then, the more someone learns, the greater their responsibility becomes. I’m not saying you shouldn’t read so that you don’t know much and aren’t held accountable [for it]. That attitude toward reading would be disingenuous. What I mean is that you shouldn’t read just for the sake of enjoyment. It’s a problem if a reader has a strong memory and remembers a lot.

They may also talk a lot and deceive themselves, thinking they are applying what they have read to their own lives. In this way, they create false impressions both in themselves and in others. Therefore, do not lull your mind into complacency with excessive reading. Set about applying [what you have read]. Does reading a lot provide an encyclopedic education—is that what they say?

— Yes, Geronda.

— But the goal is to educate yourself in a God-centered way. I don’t intend to become a university professor, and I’m not obligated to know a great deal. Once I’ve acquired a God-centered education, however, I’ll be able to easily learn something from another field if necessary. Is that clear?

— Is it helpful to focus on reading when I’m distracted?

— Yes, you should read a little something very powerful to warm your soul. Your worries and concerns will be overshadowed by what you’ve read, and your mind will be transported to the realm of God. Otherwise, your mind wanders back to the things it’s been occupied with most of the time.

— Geronda, what if someone is tired or upset and wants to read something light—a short story, a novella, or something similar?

— Is there really no spiritual book suitable for such an occasion? The goal is not for a person to forget their distress, but to be freed from it. Fiction offers no deliverance. Neither novels, nor newspapers, nor television help in the spiritual life. Even spiritual magazines often harm Christians by stirring up foolish jealousy and causing confusion. Be careful: don’t read unnecessary things in your free time. Reading certain kinds of books is like filling your stomach with watery pumpkin soup; it’s like rummaging through a haystack in search of a single grain of wheat. “Yes,” some say, “but reading this kind of thing helps me relax.” But how can you relax, my dear fellow, when this “reading material” confuses your mind and strains your eyes? You’d be better off taking a nap to truly rest. A person’s spiritual state can be discerned by what they read. A very worldly person will read immoral magazines. Someone who is not quite so worldly will read magazines that aren’t quite as filthy, or newspapers. Someone who goes to church will read spiritual publications, contemporary spiritual books, or the works of the Holy Fathers, and so on.

— Geronda, which spiritual books are most helpful?

— The various books by the Holy Fathers, which—thank God—are being published by the thousands these days, are of great benefit. In these books, you can find what you are seeking and what you need. They are true spiritual nourishment; they safely guide you along the spiritual path. However, for them to be helpful, they must

be read with humility and prayer. The works of the Church Fathers are like a CT scan:⁷¹ just as a CT scan captures a person's physical condition, so spiritual books capture their spiritual condition. Every sentence in the texts of the Church Fathers contains not just one, but many meanings, which each person understands according to their own spiritual state. It is best to read the texts themselves,⁷² rather than translations, because a translator interprets the original in accordance with his or her own spirituality. But in any case, in order to comprehend the Holy Fathers, one must discipline oneself, concentrate the mind, and live spiritually, for the spirit of the Holy Fathers is perceived only by the spirit. The ascetic writings of Abba Isaac the Syrian are especially helpful, but they must be read little by little so that the nourishment is properly absorbed. "Evergetinos"⁷³ is a great blessing, since [through it] one can come to know the entire spirit of the Holy Fathers. This book is helpful because it describes the Holy Fathers' struggle against all the passions in order; the soul comes to understand how the Fathers labored and derives benefit from it. The same is true of the lives of the saints: they are sanctified history, and therefore they are very helpful, especially to children. But they should not be read as fairy tales.

To acquire reverence, there is no need for extensive knowledge. If we reflect on the little we do know, our hearts will be stirred. For some, a single troparion turns their whole being upside down, while others know everything by heart yet feel nothing, because they operate outside of spiritual reality. So, read the Fathers—even just one or two lines a day. They are like vitamins that greatly strengthen you.

"True worshippers..."⁷⁴

"In this small and charming little church," some say, "I experience the Divine Liturgy, but not in a large church. If the church is plastered and whitewashed, I feel nothing; but in one that is painted, with a beautiful iconostasis and so on, I experience the Divine Liturgy." This is [the same] as adding salt and pepper to the food of a person who doesn't want to eat, in order to stimulate their appetite.

— So, Geronda, does what you mentioned have no significance at all? Does it not help?

— I'm not saying that. It helps, but one shouldn't get hung up on it. Otherwise, a person will strive to experience Christ in a magical way, will seek out a dark cell, a dim lamp, a church that inspires reverence, and won't be able to pray without these things. But one should feel the same way anywhere: whether on a train, in a cave, or on the road. God made every person a little church, and one can carry it with oneself everywhere.

Everyone seeks peace, but peace comes to us from within. And these poor souls, who make pilgrimages from one holy site to another, want to find Christ, while Christ is right beside them. Having the opportunity to find Him without difficulty, they wear themselves out and ultimately fail to find Him. A truly spiritual person

⁷¹ Tomography—a layer-by-layer X-ray examination consisting of obtaining a shadow image of individual layers of an object lying at different depths (see Medical Encyclopedia).—*Translator's note*

⁷² In this case, the Elder is referring to patristic texts in Ancient Greek and their translations into Modern Greek. In Russian spiritual literature, a similar relationship exists between patristic texts in Old Church Slavonic and their translations into modern Russian. — *Translator's note.*

⁷³ "Evergetinos" is a systematic four-volume collection of patristic teachings, compiled during the Byzantine era by the monk Paul Evergetis of the Constantinople monastery and first published in the late 18th century by the Venerable Nicodemus of Mount Athos.

⁷⁴ See John 4:23.

does not find peace in wandering about and admiring various sights. These are for those who are suffering, because they help them forget their distress for a little while. A spiritual person who possesses divine consolation has no need for such things. If, however, he lacks divine consolation, he is no different from worldly people. His aspirations and interests, too, will be worldly rather than spiritual. Such a person will seek to find peace through something worldly.

Many come to the Holy Mountain, visit various elders, are inspired by what they hear from each one, interpret what is said in their own way and confuse its meaning, and on top of that say, “We had a wonderful time!” But if they were to visit just one elder, consult with him, and strive to carry out what he told them, they would receive real help. What they are doing now is called “spiritual tourism.” They are wasting time, tormenting themselves aimlessly, and gaining no benefit. And how easy it would be if they stuck with one spiritual father and put into practice what they heard! Because then they would feel their inner weariness lifting, whereas now they wander from one place to another and, like the people of this world, relax while admiring the greenery of the Holy Mountain’s landscapes.

There are also those who say, “I’ll go to one Mother of God, then to another Mother of God!” There is only one Mother of God. Yet they do this not out of reverence, but out of a desire to go for a ride and have some fun. This shows that their souls are restless. One who lacks reverence and humility—even if seated inside the very Koukoulia of the Holy Sepulcher—will see nothing. But if one has reverence, one can see the Holy Fire even at Golgotha. Once, a novice from the Lavra of St. Sava came to the Holy Sepulcher on Great Saturday to receive the Holy Fire for his monastery. Usually, the surrounding monasteries send monks to receive the Holy Fire. The novice resorted to a trick: dressed in a cassock, he pushed the laypeople aside and moved to the front. But later, when the clergy arrived, he himself was pushed back, because it had been determined in advance who was to stand where. Then the novice began to berate himself: “Oh, you wretched sinner, oh, you lost soul, you even pushed your way to the front with all your wickedness! Now get out of here, get lost! You’re not even worthy to be in the church!” And he believed what he was telling himself. He left the church and began to plead with Christ: “My Christ, I beg You, do not be disgusted with me and let me go to some other holy place.” Then he climbed up to Golgotha and there again cursed himself: “Just think what a deceitful act you’ve committed! You, a nobody, wear a cassock, and because of that you’ve pushed others—those better than yourself—aside...” And in a single moment, as he was thus reproaching himself, a powerful Light emanated from Holy Golgotha, piercing his very being. “The Holy Fire has descended!” the wretch exclaimed; he went over, took some of the Holy Fire from Golgotha into his lantern, and departed.

— So, Geronda, are pilgrimages—for example, to the Holy Land—not beneficial?

— Look: these days, when you travel in order to gain a small benefit, you’re [more likely] to suffer great harm on trains, planes, and in hotels. Everything has become secularized. What benefit can you gain by going to a spiritual place and seeing great worldly debauchery there? For all this to be of any benefit, one must be a very strong person. And that tour guide who narrates and explains when traveling in groups—it would be better if he just kept quiet sometimes! Because he speaks irreverently, for example: “Here is Gethsemane, here is the Holy Sepulcher,” and then starts rattling off: “This is this, that is that; now we’re heading to Bethlehem, where the Magi from Persia came”—and little by little “carries off” the pilgrims... [almost] to Kuwait! For someone who has read the Holy Scriptures and knows that this is the Holy Sepulcher and that is Gethsemane, such a tour guide prevents them from focusing and praying. These stories are only necessary for those who haven’t read the Holy Scriptures, but those who go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land have read them. And instead of benefiting

from the experience, people are left with their minds in a whirl. What's more, they rush straight from one holy site to another—they can't retain what they've heard. It's a different matter when the fellow pilgrims and leaders on the pilgrimage are spiritual people, and when proper preparation has been done in advance.

One refugee from Faras who had settled in Yanitsa said: "Is this what you call a hajj?"⁷⁵ It takes half an hour to fly to Jerusalem and half an hour to come back. Is that really a hajj?" In the old days, poor female pilgrims would stay at the holy sites and keep vigil there in order to gain spiritual benefit, and also so as not to spend money on a hotel and to give alms. If, upon returning from a pilgrimage, someone hadn't changed spiritually in any way, people would say to him, "You left as garlic and came back as an onion." Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem every ten years and walked five days to Mersin to board a ship there. You don't see that very often these days. I remember when a Russian man from Vladivostok came to my hermitage. That's right across from Japan. He had vowed to walk to the Holy Land. When he went to the bishop for a blessing, the bishop told him, "You're crazy—where on earth are you going to walk all the way?" So first he went to Zagorsk, near Moscow, to a monastery, and received a blessing from an elder there. At Easter, he set out on foot from Zagorsk and arrived in Jerusalem in October. He covered seventy kilometers a day. Then, from Jerusalem, he walked to the Holy Mountain and prepared to walk back to Jerusalem again. He truly possessed a divine calling;⁷⁶ he lived in another world. He knew a little Greek, and we understood each other. "I thought," he told me, "that I would meet the Antichrist there and become a martyr, that he would cut off my head! But he wasn't there! Now I'm going back to Jerusalem, and I'll bow down before the Holy Sepulcher on your behalf, and you must remember my name." He jumped up and bowed down to the ground to show me how he would do it, and how he would strike his head against the stone! You could see a flame burning within him. As for the way others travel to the Holy Land—for tourism and without reverence—it's better not to go there.

How tangibly one feels the presence of Christ in the Holy Land! For example, on the way to Golgotha, you sense that something is changing. Even without knowing where this path leads, as you walk along it, you feel deeply moved. There is also a sign there that reads "Via Dolorosa" in Latin.⁷⁷ And at the Holy Sepulcher—there is a great diversity of people. Clergy and laypeople—some dressed modestly, others immodestly; some in long dresses, some in short ones, and some wearing almost nothing; some with shaved heads, others with long hair... Different peoples, different individuals, different tribes. And of various faiths: one is Roman Catholic, another is Armenian... But everyone comes there and worships the holy site. This made an impression on me. It is moving. But all of this must be viewed with a benevolent mindset so that it may touch the heart and uplift the spirit.

— Geronda, if one has no desire to go on a pilgrimage, does that mean there is a lack of reverence?

— No. I haven't been to all the monasteries on Mount Athos, nor have I visited many holy sites. For example, I haven't traveled to see Saint John the Russian, but that doesn't mean I don't venerate this saint. It's good to have reverence for a particular saint [whose relics are located] in a certain holy place, but there's no need to rush to go there. We'll go when a favorable opportunity arises or there's some reason to do so. What's

⁷⁵ Haji (literally, "pilgrim")—in the East, an honorific title placed before the name of a person who has made a pilgrimage to holy sites—*Translator's note.*

⁷⁶ Θεῖος ἄρως (Greek)—*Translator's note.*

⁷⁷ The Way of Sorrow (Latin).

important is what Christ said to the Samaritan woman: “... *‘True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.’*”

The Salvation of Our Soul

— Geronda, some people feel confident that they will be saved, while others doubt it. Which attitude is more correct?

— The goal is for a person to keep God’s commandments. A spiritual person must reach a state where, even if God did not admit him into Paradise, it would not trouble him. We must clearly understand that we are alive today but may depart tomorrow, and strive to come to Christ. Those who, by God’s grace, have come to realize the vanity of this life have received the greatest gift. They have no need to attain the gift of clairvoyance or to foresee the future, for it is enough to foresee, to care for the salvation of their own souls, and to take the greatest possible spiritual measures to be saved. Christ Himself said: “The whole world is not worth a single soul.”⁷⁸ What, then, is the dignity of the soul! Therefore, the salvation of the soul is a great matter.

— So, Geronda, should one not have hope for salvation or fear of torment?

— If there is hope for salvation, then there is no fear of torment. Since a person has hope for salvation, he is more or less all right. God will not abandon a person who strives, as best he can, with love, who is not inclined toward debauchery, and who is sometimes defeated and sometimes victorious in his struggle. Anyone who is even slightly inclined not to grieve God will enter Paradise “in his galoshes.” God, who is good by nature, will “push” him into Paradise; He will give him far more than he deserves; He will arrange everything so as to take his soul at the very moment he is in a state of repentance. He may struggle his entire life, but God will not abandon him; He will take him at the most opportune time.

God is good; He wants us all to be saved. If salvation were only for a few, then why did Christ have to be crucified? The gates of Heaven are not narrow—⁷⁹ —they are open to all people who humbly bow down and are not puffed up with pride. As long as they repent—that is, lay the burden of their sins upon Christ—they will freely pass through that gate. Furthermore, we have a mitigating factor: we are human; we are not merely spirits, like the angels. However, we have no excuse if we do not repent and approach our Savior with humility. The thief on the cross said only “forgive me” and was saved.⁸⁰ A person’s salvation depends not on a minute, but on a second. A person is saved by a humble thought; but by adopting a proud thought, he loses everything.

We must save ourselves from self-love and nothing else. For God, there is no greater pain than seeing a person in torment. I believe that simply giving thanks to God for His many blessings and treating His images—

⁷⁸ See Matt. 16:26.

⁷⁹ With these words, the Elder is certainly not attempting to dispute the well-known Gospel statement about the narrowness of the gates of heaven (see Matt. 7:13–14 and Luke 13:24), but is emphasizing that the possibility of salvation is broad and open to every person. — *Translator’s note.*

⁸⁰ See Luke 23:40–43.

our neighbors—with humility and love, combined with a small act of self-denial, is enough for our soul to find peace in this life and the next.⁸¹

Chapter 2. On How the Devil Operates

The devil tries to knock the ascetic off course

— Geronda, sometimes temptations come one after another, and I don't have the strength...

— I'll teach you how to avoid temptations. Will you accept what I tell you?

— Yes.

— The only way to avoid temptation is to become... an ally of the devil! Why are you laughing? Don't you like this method? Well, then listen.

As long as a person struggles, he will face temptations and difficulties. And the more he tries to avoid temptations, the more fiercely the devil attacks him. Sometimes our life is at odds with the Gospel life, and so through temptations—if we use them wisely—we are given the opportunity to bring our life into harmony with the Gospel.

— But I, Geronda, get bogged down in trivialities, and afterward I have no inclination to strive for something higher.

— It's just like the mines the enemy plants to put an army out of action. The tangalashka tries to put the ascetic out of action with trivial matters when he sees that he cannot harm him otherwise. But know that there are also small tangalashkas that, nevertheless, cause no small harm. Once, someone asked a little tangalashka, "Well, what can you do?" "What can I do?" he asked in return. "I go to seamstresses and shoemakers—I tangle their threads and drive them crazy!" The greatest temptations arise from trifles, not only among us but sometimes even between nations. Spiritual people have no serious grounds for temptation, so the devil uses trivialities as pretexts. He breaks a person's spirit over foolishness and childishness; the devil shapes the human heart as he pleases, and afterward the person becomes numb and stands still like a stump.

— Geronda, why is it that, after establishing a routine and order for my spiritual life—and having the initial willingness to strive—do I quickly lose control of myself and revert to my old ways?

— Don't you know yourself? The Tangalashka, upon learning that we are working spiritually, "switches" our "program" to something else. Having established a certain order for ourselves and begun to follow one path, we find ourselves on another. And if we're not paying attention, we only realize this days later. That is why the ascetic must go against the devil in everything (with discernment, of course) and [in addition] must be watched over by an experienced spiritual father.

⁸¹ Of course, the Elder's words are addressed to Orthodox believers who are striving in the faith and participating in the sacraments of the Church.

— Does Satan wage war against a person who does not engage in subtle work on himself?

— Satan does not go to mediocre people; he goes to the ascetic: to tempt him and put him out of commission. The enemy will not waste time engaging in subtle work with someone who does not himself engage in subtle work on himself. To one who sews with a gypsy needle, he will send a demon with a gypsy needle. To one who engages in delicate needlework, he will send a demon who engages in delicate needlework. To the most delicate embroiderer—a demon [specialist] in very delicate work; to those who work on themselves crudely—a crude demon. To beginners, he sends a beginner's demon.

People with a sensitive soul, who are very affectionate and emotional, must be careful, because the devil wags his tail and makes them even more sensitive, so that they may sink into despondency or even, God forbid, commit suicide. Although the devil incites us humans to go against our neighbor and quarrel, he himself never goes against anyone. He makes the negligent person even more negligent; he reassures him with such a thought: "You have a headache; you're not feeling well; it's no big deal if you don't get up for prayer." The devil makes the devout person even more devout in order to plunge them into pride, or goads them into a feat beyond their strength, so that the once-zealous ascetic will exhaust themselves, subsequently lay down all their spiritual weapons, and give up. The devil makes the hard-hearted even harder-hearted, and the impressionable person excessively sensitive.

How many people—some because of their impressionability, others because of their frayed nerves—are tormented by insomnia, swallow pills, or suffer in vain in hospitals! Today, it is rare to see a well-balanced person. People have become like batteries; most seem electrified. And those who do not go to confession are also subject to demonic influences; they possess a certain demonic magnetism, since the devil rules over them. Few have a peaceful demeanor, whether they are young men, young women, or the elderly. Demonic possession! Do you know what demonic possession is? It is when it is impossible to reach a mutual understanding with people.

The devil gives us a painkiller shot

I once told some doctors who were discussing anesthesia for surgical procedures: "The devil's anesthesia has serious consequences for a person, whereas the kind you administer actually helps people." The devil's anesthesia is like the poison a snake uses to paralyze birds or hares so it can devour them without resistance. When the devil wants to overcome a person, he sends a little demon—an "anesthesiologist"—ahead of him to first render the person insensate. Then the devil himself comes and tears the person apart, doing whatever he wants with them. It begins, however, with the "anesthesiologist," who gives us a painkiller injection, and we lose our senses. For example, as monks, we promise to "endure annoyances and reproaches" and make other sacred vows, but then the devil confuses us, and we end up doing the opposite of what we promised. We start with one thing and end up with another; we set out for one place but arrive at another. We are inattentive. Haven't I given you such examples before?

There used to be no bank in Konica. When people wanted to take out a loan, they would go to Yanina. Several people from the surrounding villages would get together and walk seventy-two kilometers to borrow money to buy, say, a horse. Back then, owning a horse meant you could support your family: you'd harness your horse to another's and plow the fields. So, one day, a farmer set off for Yanina to borrow money to buy a horse, so he could plow the land with it and spare himself the drudgery of using a hoe. He got a loan from the bank, and then went to browse around the Jewish shops. One Jew saw him and pulled him inside. "Come on in, uncle,

take a look at this gem!” The peasant went into the store, and the Jew began pulling rolls of fabric off the shelves, picking one up and tossing another aside. “Take it,” he said, “it’s good material, and for your kids I’ll even give it to you cheaper!” The simpleton bolted from one shop and went to another. “Come on in, uncle,” said another Jew to him, “come on in—I’ll sell it to you for less!” He took rolls off the shelves in front of him, opened them, unfolded them... By the end, our poor fellow’s head was spinning. On top of that, he was a bit of a softie. “Well, what can you do,” he said, “since he’d already taken the rolls off the shelf and unrolled them... and supposedly was giving me a discount for the kids...” He gave the Jew the money he’d taken from the bank and bought a roll of fabric, but it turned out to be rotten, too! And why on earth would he buy a whole roll of fabric? Not even the rich bought fabric by the roll; they took only as much as they needed. In the end, he returned home with a roll of rotten fabric. “Where’s the horse?” they asked him. “I,” he says, “brought back fabric for the boys!” But what were they supposed to do with that much fabric? He ended up in debt to the bank, didn’t buy a horse—nothing but a roll of rotten fabric! So off he went back to his old routine: hoeing the ground, toiling, working off his debt! If only he’d bought the horse, he’d have ridden back, picked up a few things for the house, and wouldn’t have had to kill himself in the field with a hoe anymore. But look where his big mouth got him in those Jewish shops! The devil acts the same way. Like a cunning huckster, he pulls you this way and that, he trips you up, ultimately ensuring that you end up exactly where he wants you to be. And if you’re not careful, you set out for one place but end up somewhere else entirely. The devil deceives you, and you waste your best years.

The devil does everything he can to prevent a person from benefiting

The devil is a master of deception. For example, if a spiritual person is presented with an evil thought during the Divine Liturgy, he will recognize it, snap out of it, and drive it away. That is why the devil presents him with a spiritual thought. “In such-and-such a book,” he says, “it is written this and that about the Divine Liturgy.” Then he diverts their attention—for example, to the chandelier—and the person begins to wonder who made it. Or the devil might remind them that they need to visit a certain sick person. “Wow!” the person will say. “I had an epiphany during the Divine Liturgy!”—while in reality, the devil is already meddling within them. The person begins to engage with their own thoughts, and only upon hearing the priest proclaim, “Approach with the fear of God and faith!” do they realize that the Divine Liturgy has ended, and that they themselves did not participate in it at all. But even here, in the church, when a nun goes to light the candles on the chandelier, I notice that the tempter diverts even the attention of older people toward it, and they stare as the sister lights the candles. This is sheer childishness! Such things are only a source of joy for little children. “She lit them!” — they say. Young children have an excuse for this, but what about adults? Or, while movements should be avoided during the Divine Liturgy, the tempter might prompt one of the sisters to flip through a book on the lectern at a sacred moment, creating noise and distracting other worshippers, who hear the rustling and ask: “What is that?” Their minds wander away from God, and the devil rejoices. Therefore, we must be careful not to distract others during the service. We harm people without even realizing it. Or pay attention to a reading in church: as soon as the reader reaches the most sacred moment—the one from which people will benefit—something will immediately happen: either the wind will slam the door shut, or someone will start coughing... People’s attention will be diverted, and they will not benefit from the sacred words being read. This is how the tangalashka works.

Oh, if only you could see how the devil operates! You haven’t seen him, which is why you don’t understand certain things. He does everything he can to prevent a person from deriving benefit. I notice this in my own kaliva when I talk to people. Just as I reach the point I need to get to in order to help my listeners—the climax

of the conversation—either some noise happens right away, or someone comes in, and I’m interrupted. The devil either prompts them in advance to chatter idly while looking at the skete across the way,⁸² , or helps them spot something interesting and times it so they arrive at the very most crucial moment of the conversation—by which time I’ve changed the subject, and my listeners have gained no benefit. Because the devil, knowing at the beginning of the conversation how it will end and seeing that he will suffer a loss, sends someone at the most crucial moment to interrupt me. “Hey,” shouts the newcomer, “Father, where’s the entrance here?” —“Here,” I reply, “take some Turkish delight and some water, and come in that way,” but at that very moment others come in and interrupt me, because I have to stand up and greet them. Shortly afterward, a third group arrives; again I have to stand up, and they start a conversation: “Where are you from?”—and so on, so that I’m forced once again to start all over from the beginning , for example, repeating the comparison I’d already made. No sooner had I gotten into my stride than someone else shouts from below: “Hey, Father Paisius! Where do you live? Is the door here?” So off I go again.

Damn you, temptation! In a single day, the devil pulled this on me six or seven times, and I was even forced to... post guards! “You sit over there and make sure no one comes from that direction. And you sit here until I finish what I’m doing.” So six or seven times you might start telling a whole story, bringing the narrative to the point where people can benefit from it, only for those troublemakers to start putting on a show for you again.

Oh, the temptation—what the enemy does! He constantly switches our focus to a different frequency. Just as a spiritual seeker is about to be moved by something, “click!”—he switches their focus to something else that might distract them. Thinking about something spiritual again? “Click!”—he brings something else to mind. [That’s how] the enemy constantly confuses the Christian. If a person understands how the devil works, he will be freed from many things.

— Geronda, how can one understand this?

— Observe. By observing, you learn. Who are the best meteorologists? Shepherds. [Why?] Because they watch the clouds and keep an eye on the wind.

The Wing of [Human] Will

People are easily influenced by both good and bad forces. It’s easier to fall under a bad influence because the devil is at work there. For example, tell someone to quit smoking because it’s harmful. As soon as they decide to quit, the devil will immediately approach them and say, “These cigarettes have less nicotine, and these have a purifying filter, so smoke these—they won’t do you any harm.” In other words, the devil will find an excuse for that person not to quit smoking; he’ll find a “way out” for them! After all, the devil can come up with a whole bunch of excuses for us. And those cigarettes he offers might actually be even more harmful. That’s why we must have willpower. And if you don’t overcome your weaknesses while you’re still young, it will be difficult to overcome them later, for the older a person gets, the weaker their will becomes.

⁸² This refers to the Kutlumush Hermitage of St. Panteleimon the Great Martyr, opposite which the “Panaguda” cell is located. — *Translator’s note.*

If a person lacks willpower, they cannot do anything. St. John Chrysostom says: “Everything hinges on ‘wanting’ and ‘not wanting.’”⁸³ That is, everything depends on whether a person wants to or not. What a great thing! God is good by nature and always wants what is best for us. However, we must want it too. This is because a person soars spiritually with the help of two wings: God’s will and their own will. God has permanently attached one wing—His will—to one of our shoulders. But in order to soar spiritually, we too must attach our own wing—human will—to the other shoulder. If a person has a strong will, then he has a human wing that balances the Divine wing, and he flies. But if a person’s will is underdeveloped, then he wants to take off, but [instead] he tumbles head over heels. He tries again—and the same thing happens all over again!

— Geronda, is it possible to develop willpower?

— Haven’t we already said that everything can be developed? All people have willpower—some have less, others more. When a person is inclined toward asceticism, when he prays and asks God to increase his willpower, God helps him. A person must realize that if he is not succeeding, it means that he is either not applying his will at all, or he is applying it insufficiently, and, moreover, it is weakened, so there is still no benefit in it. Suppose a bird has one strong wing but neglects the other. Feathers begin to fall out of that wing, and eventually the bird cannot fly properly. One of its wings works well, but the other is like a broken comb. The bird flaps this wing, but the wind blows right through it, and it cannot take off. It barely gets off the ground and flies head over heels. In order to take off, the second wing must also be intact.

What I mean is that the same applies to a person: if they want to always fly correctly, spiritually, they must be attentive and not neglect their human will. What does the Tangalashka do? It creeps up quietly and plucks first a tiny little feather from the human wing, then a slightly larger one, and then, if the person isn’t paying attention, it pulls out a large feather, so that the person wants to take flight but cannot. And if the enemy has plucked out several feathers, then the person, trying to take flight, flies headfirst into the air, because the wind blows freely through the plucked wing of his will. The Divine wing is always full of feathers; it is “complete”—the devil cannot pluck this Divine wing. A person’s attention must be focused on not growing complacent and not allowing the devil to pluck a feather from their [human] wing. When a person gradually begins to be lazy in some way or indifferent in another, their will loses its strength. And if the person [themselves] does not want to [work spiritually], what will God do? God does not wish to intervene, because He respects human freedom. In this way, a person also renders God’s wing useless. However, when a person has willpower—that is, when his own wing is not damaged—then what God wills, the person also wills. And then the person flies.

— Geronda, what exactly is this “flight”? Do you mean the desire for spiritual progress, the desire to be saved?

— Of course, my brother! When I say “flight,” I mean spiritual ascent; I don’t mean flying up into some cypress tree!

— Geronda, you said earlier that one can plow and sow the land, do everything that’s required, and in the end not reap a single grain.

⁸³ “So... God is faithful, and having promised to save you, He will undoubtedly save you; but—as He promised. And how did He promise? If we ourselves desire it, if we obey Him—and not merely, not when we remain inactive, like stones and trees.” Cf. *St. John Chrysostom. Works. Vol. 11, Book 2. St. Petersburg, 1905. p. 607.*

— Yes, that's true. The devil plunders the labors of the inattentive. But the one who is attentive and fervently strives for the salvation of his soul—he strives, prospers, bears fruit, is nourished spiritually, and rejoices like an angel.

Chapter 3.

On the Benefits Derived from Good Fellowship

Brotherly Relationships

— Geronda, I am troubled when you say that difficult years lie ahead for us.

— Be friendly and harmonious with one another; be spiritually prepared and courageous; be one body, and fear nothing. God will help as well. Cultivate spiritual love; let it be like the love a mother has for her child. Let your relationships be fraternal; let self-sacrifice live among you. And we will quietly get through the difficult days.

We monks, of course, leave the world behind and part with friends and family in order to enter the great family of Adam and God. But laypeople must maintain relationships with their spiritually kindred friends and acquaintances so that they may help one another. If a Christian living in the world maintains contact with spiritually minded people, then he has someone to lean on. No matter how spiritually you live, a good circle of friends (especially in our time) is essential. Connection with spiritually minded people helps a Christian greatly (even more so than spiritual reading), because the joy of this spiritual union awakens in him a strong zeal for spiritual endeavors. It is also good if, at work or in the workplace, spiritually-minded people know one another so that they can help one another. For example, a problem may arise among coworkers, and mutual support will be needed. If spiritually-minded people do not know one another, they may not feel comfortable speaking to one another.

— Geronda, let's say someone [once] refused to help us with something, and now we're hesitant to ask him for help again. Is that right?

— No, no. Perhaps he wasn't able to help before. It's just like when you ask me for a cross, and I give it to you. Another time you ask, but I don't have one, and [obviously] I don't give it to you. Then I buy crosses so I'll have some to give out, but you come by and don't ask, even though I'm waiting for an opportunity to hand them out.

Today, people live in the same high-rise building and don't know each other. But in the past, there was a sense of community that helped people get to know one another, and they supported one another in times of need. For example, if someone was traveling somewhere in a cart and met an acquaintance on the road, they'd ask, "Where are you coming from, and where are you headed? I'm going there too. Hop on; we'll ride together." Or if someone wanted to go somewhere on horseback, they'd go to a neighbor and ask, "Where are you headed? If you can wait, I'm riding out in three hours and can take you with me." Or they'd say, "I'm going to such-and-such a place tomorrow. Come over and spend the night with us so we can set out together in the morning." People cared about their neighbors, and when they could help in any way, they didn't shy away from it. They

had a genuine concern for others, and they would ask just in case they could be of assistance. They even had good friends in other villages.

— Geronda, what good comes from people being spiritually connected to one another?

— These days, even if spiritual people do not wish to be bound to one another, the devil will force them into this bond. Today, through much of his malice, the devil brings people the greatest good. If, for example, a believing father wants to find a tutor for his children, he will be forced to find a good and faithful tutor, because he is going to bring that person into his home. On the other hand, a believing tutor who has not yet found a position and wishes to give private lessons to children will look for a good family so that he can feel safe. Or a craftsman who lives a spiritual life—whether a painter or an electrician—will seek work in a good family so that he can feel at ease, because in a worldly household he would bring trouble upon himself. A Christian homeowner will also seek out a good tradesman and a person of faith to work in his home. Both will look for a spiritual person with whom they can collaborate. And so, little by little, spiritual people from all trades and all fields of study will get to know one another.

Ultimately, the devil, without intending to, does good through his malice: he separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be separated from the goats and will live as one flock with the One Shepherd.⁸⁴ In the past, in the villages, peasants would give sheep and goats to a shepherd—some five, some ten—and the sheep would graze together with the goats, because at that time the goats were gentle and did not butt the sheep with their horns. Now the goats have become fierce and are goring Christ's sheep painfully. The sheep are waiting for a good shepherd and want a flock consisting solely of sheep. For what the world has become is fit only for those living in sin. Therefore, people will be divided. Both the sheep and the goats will be on their own. Those who wish to live a spiritual life will gradually find it impossible to live in this world; they will strive to find fellow believers like themselves, find a spiritual father, and distance themselves even further from sin. This is precisely the good that the devil is doing right now, without even wanting to. And now, not only in cities but also in villages, you see that some rush to entertainment centers and live indifferently, while others rush to all-night vigils, prayer services, and spiritual gatherings, and these people are deeply bonded with one another.

Very strong brotherly bonds are forged during difficult times. During the war, we—soldiers of the same half-battalion—lived together for two years and were more closely bonded than brothers, because we endured hardships and dangers together. We were so close that we called each other “brother.” We were worldly people, with a worldly mindset; we read neither the Gospel nor spiritual books, and yet we did not want to part from one another. People had a typical worldly education—in the best sense of the word—but they possessed something far greater: love and brotherhood. One of our comrades-in-arms recently passed away, and the rest of our comrades came to his funeral from all corners of the country. And a few days ago, one of my comrades-in-arms came here to see me. How tightly he held me in his embrace! I couldn't break free!

Right now we are at war with the devil. Therefore, try even harder to grow closer to one another, to become even more like brothers to one another. Then, all together, we will walk the path we have chosen, climbing together the steep trail to sweet Golgotha.

⁸⁴ See John 10:16.

On Spiritual Kinship

— Geronda, yesterday you told us that you felt all the people you met in recent days were your brothers. What is spiritual kinship?

— We are brothers in the flesh with all people. We are all brothers, and we are all servants of God. We believers, moreover, are also, by Grace, children of God, redeemed by the Divine Blood of our Christ. In the spiritual life, we are physically related through Adam and spiritually related through Christ. People who live spiritually feel this spiritual kinship among themselves. They think of the same things, they strive for the same things, and they pursue a single goal. But if, for example, you had a sister by blood who lived as she pleased, in a worldly manner, you would feel no spiritual kinship with her.

— Can a spiritual kinship be broken?

— When one person ceases to live spiritually, their kinship with another who lives spiritually also ceases. It is not the other person, who lives spiritually, who withdraws, but the one who has ceased to live spiritually who separates himself from the other; just as the more a person lives according to God, the closer he draws to God, so the more he departs from a life according to God, the farther he drifts from Him. And just as Divine Grace is a power that acts at a distance and is transmitted to people, so too is the devil's evil energy a power that acts at a distance and is transmitted. If, for example, two souls are in a spiritual state and one of them thinks of the other, then there is a spiritual connection between them, and one soul transmits divine power to the other. Likewise, two souls who live sinfully and have some kind of connection between them: one of them receives a demonic influence from the other at a distance; a "telegram" is sent from one to the other.

— Geronda, when one of two people who had such a demonic connection changes for the better, does that help the other?

— Yes. He receives no response, because the one who has changed for the better, as it were, does not pick up the receiver of his [spiritual] telephone. The line is cut off, and the connection is gone. Thus, there is a possibility that the person left without a response will reflect on this, and, if he so desires, it may help him.

— When we interact with a person who has passions, and these passions do not have a harmful effect on us, does that mean we influence their character?

— If we possess a spiritual state, holiness, then we have a great influence on them, since [then] God's Grace influences them, and in this way our neighbor benefits. When we bear with our brother out of love, he understands this. The same is true of malice: if it is within us, he perceives it as well, even if it is not outwardly manifested. Whatever the soul possesses, it transmits [to another soul]. A passion transmits a passion; irritation transmits irritation; anger transmits anger. But the grace-filled gift of a graced soul will transmit a grace-filled gift to the neighbor.

— So does associating with virtuous people help?

— Of course it does. If you go into a cell where incense is constantly being burned, then when you leave it, you yourself will smell of incense. If you go into a barn, you'll take on the smell of the barn. After visiting a worldly home, you'll smell of worldly scents. [I remember] during the occupation, we planted five hectares of melons of various varieties: an American variety from the agricultural school—white melons this big, healthy, and very sweet—as well as "Arg" melons, a local variety, and others. If zucchini happened to be growing next to the American melons, the sweetness from the melon would transfer to the zucchini. The zucchini would become sweeter, and the melon would lose its flavor. This happens because of pollination—the bees flying from flower to flower. If you see a melon with a large "belly button," know that it grew next to zucchini.

If an “Arg” melon grows next to a good melon, it will take the sweetness away from the good one. The good melon will lose its sweetness, but at least in this case, it will also turn into a melon. But if a zucchini ends up next to a good melon, it will become sweeter, and then you’ll need a whole handful of salt when cooking it. The melon loses out, and it doesn’t do the zucchini any good either. If, however, a melon is next to another melon, the good one loses out, but the other one becomes sweeter. What I mean is that if a Christian who is not very spiritually advanced is near a spiritually advanced person, the latter may grow weary, may be somewhat harmed, but the former will benefit. If, however, a worldly, unbelieving person is near a spiritual person, then the former’s labor and time will be wasted. If something said by another touches a worldly person, that will be the most that can possibly happen. But if he interprets what is said in terms of [his own] worldly philosophy—that is, if he perceives it with a worldly spirit—he will derive no benefit. In other words, he will remain a squash, even if he becomes a little sweeter to the taste.

Prudence in Communication

In the army, in the signal corps, we had an identification chart listing certain specific characteristics that made it clear which radio stations were ours and which were enemy; we knew our own stations. For a while, during special training sessions on radio reception techniques, we would set up an intermediate radio station and try to identify the affiliation of an enemy station. We would ask, “What is this?”—or say, “One!”—and listen for the response to catch them out. In other words, if we couldn’t identify a radio station with certainty, we didn’t trust it and tried to identify it. The same applies to the spiritual life: when we see that a certain “radio station” isn’t ours, we must say to ourselves, “Why should I work with this station? No way!” When a radio operator, realizing that a radio station belongs to someone else, wants to work with it—that’s a serious offense. But how much more serious is his guilt when he knows that the radio station is not only someone else’s but also hostile—and he wants to work with the enemy! What I’m trying to say is that when it comes to our relationships with others, we need to use reason and exercise caution. And the most reliable course of action is for each person to consult with their spiritual father.

We should also be careful in our conversations, because they often begin with a spiritual topic but end in gossip. Not only does a person waste time, but he also destroys his own soul through judgment, since we have no right to judge anyone. We have no right to judge even what is happening in the world. If we can, then, after speaking about something with a heavy heart, we should try to help rectify the bad state of affairs. Nor should we judge the dead, for, fortunately, the souls of all people are in God’s hands.

I see that many people’s thoughts are often corrupted by a single careless word. Do you know how careful we would be if a tax were levied on the words we speak? If we were told, “You’ll say this many words, you’ll pay this much,” then we would count our words. On the phone, we think about what to say and how much to say because we pay for the calls. A lot of time is wasted on words these days.

— Geronda, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* says that judgment is born of hatred. Can simple gossip contain love?

— Yes. When you love a certain soul deeply and see that others envy her, you might say something about her so that others won’t envy her. Everything must be tested. However, a flawed or damaged person who believes they are being treated unjustly—and who, for this reason, is distressed or irritated and expresses their indignation over some matter—can inflict such harm on other souls that even the devil is incapable of causing. Judas was indignant at the waste of the myrrh poured out by the woman and said that the myrrh could have been sold, and

the money distributed to the poor. The other apostles, who possessed Grace, also fell under Judas's influence.⁸⁵ They saw the outward correctness of what Judas said and fell under his influence, for they did not know his money-loving heart. And Christ even entrusted the money box to Judas to satisfy his passion, and he "*took on a heavy burden.*"⁸⁶

— Geronda, when two people disagree with each other and ask a third person for an opinion, what position should that person take?

— If he is dealing with people whose disagreement concerns something personal, it is better for him to state his opinion in the presence of both. Otherwise, each will use his words to their own advantage. But if the words of the person whose opinion is sought carry weight, then the opponents will use what he has said as heavy artillery and begin to mercilessly bombard one another. And these shells will hit the speaker himself, though he will not expect it. Therefore, he should, as much as possible, avoid such people in order to preserve inner peace and be able to pray for peace between these people—and, in general, for peace in the [entire] world. If he cannot completely avoid such people who love to create temptations, then let him at least avoid speaking too much, so that there will be fewer temptations. The fact that some people lack malice but are simply superficial is irrelevant, for they, too, create temptations through their superficiality.

A Mother's Love

— Geronda, if a person is distinguished by both love and considerate manners, does that mean he possesses purity of heart?

— It varies. Often, it's just worldly politeness. Yes, many people are kind and polite, but that doesn't mean they possess spiritual nobility or a spirit of self-sacrifice. They have good inclinations, but that's not what we're talking about here. Someone who possesses worldly politeness and is hypocritical can cause a great deal of harm. Because another person is deceived, opens their heart to them, and ultimately squanders their reverence on a worldly person who doesn't know what reverence means. It is like giving gold lyres to those who know only bronze coins. Nor should one waste one's time in vain by offering spiritual counsel to people who find pleasure in worldly conversations and in selfishly expressing their own opinions.

— Geronda, what if someone has a problem, comes to you, and talks about it endlessly—even though by that time the problem has already been resolved to some extent? How should one act in such a case?

— When they come for the first time, they have an excuse: they need to get it off their chest and have the right to take up a lot of your time. In that case, you should listen to them. If you don't listen, the person will start to think that you're tired of them or that you don't understand them. However, if after that they keep repeating the same thing over and over, tell them: "It's not that I can't listen to you, but that it's not doing you any good. You're turning summer into winter. But things are already looking up now—it's spring. Summer will be here soon. Yet in the summer, you'll be thinking about the winter cold and shivering [from your own thoughts]." However, sometimes even in relationships between spiritual people, the following happens: one person comes to share their pain with another, but the other doesn't want to listen, so as not to lose their own joy. They might

⁸⁵ See Matt. 26:6 ff.; Mark 14:3 ff.; John 12:3 ff.

⁸⁶ John 12:6.

pretend to be in a hurry or change the subject in order to remain at peace. This is utterly satanic. It's as if someone were dying right next to me, and I were to walk a little way off and start singing songs. But what about "*weeping with those who weep*"?⁸⁷ This is all the more true when it comes to serious matters of the Church. If a Christian [even then] does not sympathize with another's distress, then he is not a part of [the] Body of the Church.

— And if I can't find an excuse for other people's transgressions, does that mean I'm hard-hearted?

— You don't find an excuse for others, but you find one for yourself? Then it won't be long before Christ finds no excuse for you. If a person is inattentive, their heart can become as hard as a stone in an instant. And in an instant, it can [once again] become tender. Acquire a mother's heart. You know how a mother feels: she forgives everything and sometimes pretends not to notice certain mischief. Be patient and forgiving; be lenient toward others, so that Christ may be lenient toward you.

— Geronda, how does the heart expand?

— It expands when you constantly excuse the misdeeds, imperfections, and omissions of others and look at them as if in a mirror. Of course, the evil one may sometimes plant thoughts about others in our minds, especially when there is a valid reason. However, whether we accept or reject these thoughts is up to us. By putting ourselves in another person's shoes, we will treat them with compassion and excuse them. Furthermore, if something is done not out of malice but out of thoughtlessness, it is understandable and does not provoke a negative reaction [in us]. The fact that human weaknesses exist is natural and common to all people. What is evil is the presence of a malicious disposition in people.

— If someone is in a bad state and I am in a good one, can I influence them?

— What if the tempter presents the matter to you in this way? What makes you think you're in a better state? From the moment I begin to believe that I'm better than another and to pity him, I should no longer be pitying him, but myself. Even when [a Christian] sees that his neighbor is truly in a bad state, he excuses him and finds extenuating circumstances for him. He does not seek extenuating circumstances only for himself; he finds himself worse than others, and his own wickedness pains him. He acknowledges that he has given nothing in return for all that God has given him, and says, "My God, do not take me into account; cast me aside. I have done nothing. Help someone else." Those who truly succeed do not feel that they have made great progress, but only experience great contrition, humility, and divine love with inexpressible joy.

Chapter 4.

On How God Is Moved to Compassion Through Reverence

What Is Reverence?

— Geronda, what is reverence?

⁸⁷ Romans 12:15.

— Reverence is the fear of God, inner humility, and spiritual sensitivity. A reverent person may feel shy, but this shyness pours honey into his heart; it brings not torment but joy into his life. The movements of a reverent person are subtle and precise. He clearly senses the presence of God, the angels, and the saints; he feels the presence of his Guardian Angel watching over him. He constantly keeps in mind that his body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ And he lives a simple, pure, and sanctified life. A devout person behaves with attentiveness and modesty everywhere; he keenly senses every sacred object. For example, he is careful not to turn his back on icons; he will not place the Gospel, a spiritual book, or any sacred object where people sit, such as on a sofa or chair; if he sees an icon, his heart is filled with joy, and his eyes fill with tears. Even upon simply seeing the name of Christ written somewhere, he reverently kisses it, and his soul is inwardly delighted. Even if he notices a scrap of newspaper tossed on the ground where, for example, the name of Christ or the words “Holy Temple of the Holy Trinity” are printed, he bends down, picks up that scrap, reverently kisses it, and is saddened that it was thrown on the ground.

— So, Geronda, is piety one thing and reverence another?

— Piety⁸⁹ is like cologne, while reverence is like incense. For me, reverence is the greatest virtue, because a reverent person draws God’s Grace to himself; he becomes a vessel for Grace, and it naturally abides with him. Then, when God’s grace “shines through” him, everyone reveres him and is drawn to him, whereas a shameless person inspires disgust in both adults and children.

You women must have greater reverence than men. A woman, by her very nature, must possess reverence. If men lack reverence, they are simply indifferent. But if women lose their reverence, they end up committing serious transgressions. One man told me: “My wife and I were on a pilgrimage to the Holy Places and went to the Jordan River. While I entered its waters and washed myself in them, she sat on the bank and dangled her feet in the waters of the Jordan! ‘Hey,’ I said, ‘ , you! What on earth are you doing here? Did you come all the way to the Jordan River just to wash your feet?’” I lost my temper and scolded her.” Apparently, his wife was a completely indifferent person who didn’t understand [the basics], while this poor fellow himself was quite devout.

On the fact that piety is passed on

— Geronda, how does one acquire piety?

— The Fathers say that to acquire piety, one must live among or associate with people who possess it and observe how they conduct themselves. When Paisios the Great was asked by someone how one might acquire the fear of God, he replied: “Associate with people who love God and have the fear of God, so that you too may acquire the fear of God.” This, of course, does not mean that one should merely watch what they do and outwardly imitate it without inwardly understanding the meaning of their actions, for in that case it would not be piety, but false piety. What is false repels. Reverence is the grace of God within a person. A reverent person does what he does because that is how he feels it within himself. There is, of course, a natural reverence within

⁸⁸ See 1 Cor. 3:16 and 6:19.

⁸⁹ By the word “piety,” the Elder refers to the observance of outward forms of devotion that lack a corresponding inner state.

us, but if we do not cultivate it, then tangalashka, by instilling forgetfulness, plunges us into insensitivity and irreverence. However, reverence is reawakened by observing how a reverent person behaves.

— But why, Geronda, do the Holy Fathers speak only of reverence, saying that if you wish to acquire it, you should associate with someone who possesses it? Why don't they say the same thing about other virtues?

— Because reverence is contagious. The movements and behavior of a reverent person, like a fragrance, are passed on to others—provided, of course, that the other person has a good disposition and humility. I'll tell you this: if a person lacks reverence, he has nothing. But a reverent person, even if uneducated, sees every sacred thing clearly, seeing it as it truly is. He makes no mistake in anything related to divine meanings. A reverent person is like a child who harbors no evil thoughts toward his father and mother, because he loves and respects his parents and sees everything they do as good and pure. How much more, then, should we revere God, Who is incomparable and perfect in every way! Those who lack reverence commit errors and stray into error regarding dogmas. I see the errors committed by those who lack reverence and write interpretations or commentaries on Holy Scripture and the works of the Holy Fathers.

In all spiritual matters, reverence and the heart are essential. Everything that springs from reverence is sanctified. Especially when composing a service for a particular saint, one must love that saint and revere him; only then will the service be composed from the heart and exude the fragrance of reverence. And if one attains a state of divine inspiration, of divine madness, then the verses will flow forth of their own accord from within.

— Geronda, what else helps a person in acquiring reverence?

— It helps to study all things sacred with the mind and delve deeply into them, as well as to make use of the favorable opportunities that are given to us. All of this gradually awakens reverence within a person. For example, if I am given a favorable opportunity to briefly enter a church and pray, and I do not take advantage of it, then I deprive myself of Grace. But when I want to go in and am prevented from doing so by some obstacle, I do not lose Grace, because God sees my good intention. In cultivating reverence, it is also very helpful to become acquainted with the saints of our region, of our homeland, to love them, and to unite ourselves with them. God rejoices when we revere the saints and love them. And when we have reverence for the saints, how much greater will our reverence be for God!

— Geronda, how does reverent behavior in church help us?

— When you go to church, say to yourself: "Where am I going? I am now entering the house of God. What am I doing? I am worshiping the icons, God." You go to church from your cell or out of obedience. So go from the church to heaven and even further—to God.

— And how does that happen?

— The church is the house of God. And our true home is in Paradise. Here the sisters sing. There are the angels, the saints... If, when entering any earthly home, we knock on the door, wipe our feet, and sit down modestly, how should we conduct ourselves in the house of God, where Christ is offered as a sacrifice? With a single drop of His Divine Blood, He redeemed us from sin, and after that He pours out rivers of [His Precious] Blood for our healing and nourishes us with His Most Holy Body. Thus, all these awe-inspiring and divine events, when we recall them, help us to behave with reverence in the church. But during the Divine Liturgy, I notice that even at the very moment when the priest proclaims, "Let us lift up our hearts"—and we respond, "To the Lord"—there are so few people whose minds are truly turned toward the Lord! Therefore, it is better for us to say in our minds, "Let our hearts be turned toward the Lord," for our minds and hearts are constantly crawling

downward. We are also lying when we say “we have,” yet our minds are not there [“on high”]. It is clear that if we keep our hearts turned “upward,” then everything [else] will also be turned “upward.”

— Geronda, if someone sings beautifully in church, what good does that do?

— [The singer] should keep his mind focused on the divine meanings and maintain a sense of reverence. Furthermore, one should not treat the troparia and stichera as literary works, but rather perceive their divine meaning with the heart. Reverence is one thing, and the art and science of church singing are another. Art without reverence is merely [the outer layer] of paint. When a singer performs his duty with reverence, the psalm-singing flows from his heart, and he sings movingly. Everything goes well when a person is in a good spiritual state inwardly. Therefore, in order to sing movingly, one must be inwardly orderly and sing from the heart, with reverence. If a singer has impure thoughts, what will his psalm singing be like? He will not then be able to sing from the heart. For Scripture says: “*If anyone is of good cheer, let him sing.*”⁹⁰ Once, when Saint John Kukuzelis was tending goats and began to sing, the goats rose and stood on their feet. From this, [those watching him] realized that it was Kukuzelis, the singer of the imperial court. So do everything you do with all your heart, for Christ. And put reverence into your embroidery, for it will be used to cover holy objects—even the covers you embroider for the cassocks.⁹¹ When a person has reverence, the beauty of their soul is evident in everything they do: in reading, in singing, and even in their mistakes.

— Even in their mistakes?

— Yes. You see, reverence and modesty are present even in his mistakes.

On outward piety

Those who possess great faith and true reverence are nourished by the highest, the spiritual, and the indescribable. However, there are also those who possess only a dry, outward form of reverence. Such people say to themselves dryly: “Okay, now I’m entering the church, so I need to sit properly, I shouldn’t move, I need to bow my head, and I need to make the sign of the cross like this!” There are also those who may waver in their faith, yet stand on their feet throughout the entire vigil.

— Are they, Geronda, troubled by something, or are they searching for something? Why do they behave this way?

— There’s something within them... [All] of this is good, but one must feel it from within. These actions should not be performed merely outwardly. Removing one’s skufia upon entering the church out of reverence is one thing, and removing it to cool one’s head is another. Reverence is evident in how we receive Communion, how we take the antidoron, and so on.

— Geronda, can one person be tempted by the way another person shows reverence?

⁹⁰ James 5:13.

⁹¹ A kathia is a large censer with a handle, which the acolyte (a monk serving in the church) uses to burn incense at specific moments during the service; the acolyte wears an embroidered cloak draped over his right shoulder. Above the handle of the kathia are compartments for charcoal powder and frankincense, and bells are suspended from its end, producing a rhythmic chime during the incensation.

— Here’s what I’ll tell you: if you make a broad sign of the cross, but do so simply and humbly, it won’t bother others. But if a person is constantly thinking about whether others are watching him and keeps crossing himself endlessly, people will laugh at him. Or if he walks past a church and looks to see if there are people [nearby], or perhaps even “waits” a little so that more people will gather, and only then begins to cross himself and bow so that others will see him, then others are right to mock him. You see that a worldly spirit is not accepted. When there is true reverence, it is evident. But without true reverence, “⁹²” (*doing things properly*) turns into “bezoobrazno” (doing things improperly).

“Do not give what is holy to the dogs”⁹³

When people give you the clothing of the sick to be blessed by the holy relics, make sure carefully that these are only undershirts and not other undergarments. Anything else is unacceptable—it is irreverent. It is clear that you cannot defile the sun, nor can you defile God. The fact is that through such irreverence, an unclean spirit takes hold of us.

In the past, when people fell ill, they would take oil from their oil lamp, anoint themselves with it, and recover. Nowadays, the lamp burns merely as a formality, just for light, and when the lamp is cleaned, the oil is poured down the sink. Once I was at someone’s house and saw the hostess washing the oil lamp in the sink. “Where does the water go?” I asked her. “Down the drain,” she replied. “I see,” I said, “so on the one hand, you take oil from the lamp and anoint your child in the shape of a cross when he or she is sick, but on the other hand, you pour all the oil from the little cup down the drain? What excuse do you have for this? And how will God’s blessing come upon your home?”

In today’s homes, there’s nowhere to dispose of a consecrated item, such as the piece of paper in which the antidor was wrapped. But I remember that in our house, not even the water we used to wash dishes went down the drain. It was drained elsewhere, because even crumbs are consecrated, since we pray before and after meals. All of that is gone today, and so has Divine Grace, and people are running amok.

Let us be as careful as possible about everything. It would be good, after Holy Communion, the antidor, or the anointing, to wipe your hands with a cotton ball moistened with alcohol, and then burn it. When we clean the altar, everything collected after cleaning must be thrown into the sea or burned in a clean place, because a particle of the antidoron or the Holy Body might have fallen on the floor. Of course, if a small particle of the Holy Body falls on the floor, Christ is not left to be trampled underfoot, but Divine Grace departs from us.

Abroad, churches don’t even have special drains. The water from the Proskomedie is drained along with the rainwater. “We,” [foreign priests] say, “are forbidden to install special drains so that germs don’t multiply.” People are overrun with germs—both physical and spiritual—and yet, if a drop of the Holy Gifts falls on their heads, they say, “Germs will multiply!” How then will the Grace of God come? The madness of the world begins here. Fortunately, there are still devout women, both young and elderly, and for their sake God preserves this world.

— Geronda, a lady asked us to paint an icon of Saint Arsenius to hang in her living room.

⁹² Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 14:40; 1 Thess. 4:12.

⁹³ Matt. 7:6.

— Will there be only icons there? Won't there be other pictures or photographs? And also: will they smoke in that living room? She'd better place this icon in another room, in the iconostasis along with the other icons, and pray there. In one house I once visited, they had set up an iconostasis under the stairs, even though there was plenty of space. And in another house, the lady of the house had set up her iconostasis right in front of a sewer pipe. "Well," I asked her, "how on earth did you come up with the idea of setting up an iconostasis in a place like that?" "Well," she said, "I like it here." And it wasn't even facing east—no, it faced north! So how is Grace supposed to come after that? "*For whoever has,*" says Holy Scripture, "*will be given more, and will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.*"⁹⁴ We think we have, but even what we have is taken away from us.

Reverence is slowly fading away, and the evil we see stems from this. Carelessness can even drive a person into a frenzy. There was a woman—may God forgive her, she has already passed away—who went into a frenzy because she poured holy water down the sink. She had a little bit of holy water left in a bottle. "Ah," she said, "this holy water is stale; I need to pour it out, and I need the bottle anyway." She poured out the holy water and even washed the bottle, because there were traces of basil inside, and then she began to act like a person possessed. Grace departed, because Grace cannot dwell in an irreverent person.

— But Geronda, what if someone pours out holy water by mistake?

— If he himself placed the bottle of holy water, for example, in a cabinet, and after some time failed to notice that it was holy water, then he bears half the blame. But if someone else put it there, and the person who poured it out didn't know it was holy water, then he is not at fault.

How can Divine Grace come near a person if he does not revere the holy? Grace will go to those who honor it. "*Do not give what is holy to the dogs,*" says Holy Scripture. Progress is impossible without spiritual sensitivity. One [monk from the Keliot community] on the Holy Mountain took the icon stands from some church and placed them in his own. Another removed the stone tiles from the roof above the altar and carried them to his cell to cover the veranda. The rains began, water seeped into the altar, and poured directly onto the holy throne! I went inside one day and what did I see: the church had been consecrated with great ceremony, and in the center of the altar were holy relics—a vertebra. I took these relics and washed them in a special place. "What on earth have you done there!" I said to those responsible. "The church has been consecrated, yet you've removed stones from the roof, and water is pouring onto the holy altar!" Then they found a contractor, went and made a few repairs to the roof. And in another instance, they took planks from the altar to use them for building the seawall. Both those planks and the cement were swept out to sea by a storm that had arisen. Those who act this way don't even realize how much irreverence there is in all of this. I remember there was an old man in Konitsa who would chase children away for scratching the church wall—he considered it irreverent. And look where we've ended up now!

Reverence in Everything

And here's another thing to be mindful of: you had something with crosses spread out on your couch, but you mustn't sit on the crosses or step on them. Jews make shoes with crosses depicted not only on the outside of the soles, but also on the inside—under the heels and soles. Pay your money and trample on the crosses! They

⁹⁴ Matt. 13:12.

used to make rattles with Christ and the Mother of God on one side and Peter on the other. It was as if they were saying, “What’s the difference—Peter or Christ!” Unfortunate people saw Christ and the Mother of God and bought these rattles for their children. Babies would throw the rattles on the floor, step on them, and dirty them. . . And now, I’ve been told, somewhere near China, Catholic missionaries wear medallions with Christ depicted on the inside and Buddha on the outside. Either depict Christ alone on the inside, or profess Him openly! Otherwise, God’s grace will not come! And here in Greece, unfortunately, there are those who, without a second thought, have depicted the Most Holy Mother of God on postage stamps, which are thrown away and trampled underfoot.

— Geronda, can a person have reverence in some things but not in others?

— No. If reverence is genuine, then a person has it in everything. Once, a priest was staying at the Stavronikita Monastery. During the Sixth Psalm (“⁹⁵ ”), he lowered the seat of the stasidia and remained seated. “Father,” I said to him, “they’re reciting the Sixth Psalm.” —“But,” he replied, “I find it easier to absorb this way!” Just think about that! Many years later, he came back and found me. During our conversation, he mentioned that he had been gluing paper icons onto small wooden boards and handing them out as blessings. “How do you glue them on?” I asked. “I spread,” he said, “glue on the wood, place the icon on it, and when I’ve made a bunch of them, I stack one icon on top of another, and then I sit on top of them myself so the glue sets well . Then I’ll pick up a book and read a little.” When I heard that, the hair on my head stood on end! “What on earth,” I said, “are you doing! You’re sitting on the icons so they’ll stick?!” —“Well,” he asked, “is that not allowed?”

See how far they’re slowly going? The problem is that irreverence doesn’t stand still—it gets worse. A person develops either toward good or toward evil. And look at this priest—where he started and where he’s ended up! First: “I understand the Six Psalms better this way,” and then he went so far as to say: “That way the icons will stick, and I’ll venerate them.” Back in Stavronikita, it struck him as strange that I told him about the Six Psalms. But there were other elderly monks there who were standing. They leaned slightly against the stasidia and didn’t move a muscle. It’s one thing when you’re tired, sick, your legs are shaking, and that’s why you sit down; Christ won’t punish you for that. But it’s another thing to think that the way you’re doing it is better and to say, “I understand it better when I’m sitting.” What excuse is there for that? The spiritual life is not a pleasant pastime. If you’re in pain—sit down; Christ is no tyrant. And Abba Isaac says, “If you cannot stand, sit down.”⁹⁶ But he doesn’t say, “If you can, sit down!”

— Geronda, tell me, why don’t we sit during the Six Psalms?

— Because it symbolizes the Last Judgment. That is why it is good if, while reading the Six Psalms, your mind turns to the hour of the Last Judgment. The Six Psalms take six or seven minutes. After the first stanza,

⁹⁵ The Six Psalms—six selected psalms (3, 37, 62, 87, 102, 142) from the Psalter, read at the beginning of Matins. After the first three psalms, which constitute the first section of the Six Psalms, when the words “Glory, and now. Alleluia (3)” are recited, the sign of the cross and waist bows are not performed, as prescribed by the Church’s statutes in other similar cases.

⁹⁶ “If, while you are keeping vigil, prolonged standing overwhelms you with its length, and you grow weary from exhaustion, and a thought tells you—or rather, the crafty one speaks in your mind, like a serpent: ‘Stop, because you cannot stand,’ then answer him: ‘No; but I will sit for one kathisma, and this is better than sleep. And even if my tongue is silent and does not utter the psalm, my mind is still conversing with God in prayer and in communion with Him; therefore, staying awake is more beneficial than any sleep.’” Cf.: *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. Discourse 52. p. 231.

we do not even make the sign of the cross, because Christ will come now not to be crucified, but will appear [to the world] as the Judge.

On the reverence that existed in the past

— Why, Geronda, is piety so rare in our times?

— Because people have stopped living spiritually. They interpret everything through worldly logic and drive out Divine Grace. But what reverence there used to be! In Aetolia and Acarnania⁹⁷ there were elderly women, very simple and devout, who would fall to the ground before the mules of the Proussa Monastery and bow to them when [the monks] rode down on mules to run errands. “After all,” the old women would say, “these are the Mother of God’s little mules!”—and off they’d go, bowing to them! If they showed such reverence toward the mules of the Monastery of the Most Holy Mother of God, just imagine how much reverence they had for Her Herself!

— Geronda, was the reverence that the people of Farasi had instilled in them by Saint Arsenius?

— They had always been devout, and the saint further cultivated that devotion in them. The people of Farasio had a tradition of piety. Old Prodromos Kartsinoglou, the cantor of Saint Arsenius, was deeply devout. Even in Konitsa, [after moving there], he served as a cantor in the church. This old man, who was over eighty years old, would walk down to Lower Konitsa every morning at the crack of dawn for about half an hour to sing in the church. “I,” he would say, “am a dog of Christ.” In winter, during frosts, the descents were very dangerous. The road was covered with ice, and one had to watch one’s step to avoid slipping. But he paid no attention to any of that. What devotion!...

My parents told me that the people of Farasi [when they were still] in their homeland had collected money to build a church there, in Farasi. However, Saint Arsenius later wanted to distribute this money to the poor, because there was already a church in Farasi. The saint himself went from house to house among the poor families to hand out the money, but the unfortunate people would not take it. How could they take money from the church? And since they wouldn’t accept the money, the reverend was forced to send the village elder⁹⁸ to the bishop in Caesarea with the funds. “Take,” the saint told him, “a companion for the journey.” “Your blessing is enough for me,” replied the elder. When he brought the money to the bishop, the bishop asked him, “All right, but what did Hajjefendi tell you to do with it?” “Distribute it to poor families,” replied the village headman. “Why didn’t you listen to him?” “People won’t take this money because it belongs to the church.” In the end, the bishop returned the money to the village headman. The people of Faras, as they were leaving Faras under the terms of the exchange, told Saint Arsenius that they would take the money with them to build a church in Greece. Then Saint Arsenius wept and said to them, “In Greece you will find many churches, but you will not find there the faith that is here.”

⁹⁷ Neighboring regions in Central Greece. The Elder performed his military service in those areas. — *Translator’s note.*

⁹⁸ The head of the rural community of Faras was Prodromos Eznipedis—the father of Elder Paisios.

Veneration of Icons

And what reverence should we have toward icons! One monk prepared an icon of Saint Nicholas as a blessing for someone: he wrapped it in fine paper and set it aside in a closet for a while. But through carelessness, he placed the icon upside down. Soon, a knocking sound could be heard in the room. The monk began looking around to figure out where the sound was coming from. But how could he have guessed that it was coming from the closet! The knocking went on for quite a while: knock-knock-knock!—and it wouldn't leave the monk alone. Finally, approaching the closet, the monk realized that the knocking was coming from inside. He opened the closet and saw that the knocking was coming from the bundle containing the icon. "What's going on with this icon?" the monk wondered. "Let me take a look."

Unfolding the icon, he saw that it was standing upside down. He then placed it as it should be, and the noise stopped immediately.

A devout person shows particular reverence toward icons. When we say "shows reverence toward icons," we mean that he reveres the one depicted on it. If a person, having a photograph of his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, or brother, cannot tear it up or step on it, then surely this applies to an icon to an even greater extent! Jehovah's Witnesses do not have icons, and they consider the honor we bestow upon icons to be idolatry. Once I asked a Jehovah's Witness, "Don't you have any photographs in your homes?" "We do," he replied. "All right," I said, "doesn't a mother kiss her child's photograph when the child is away on a long journey?" "She does," said the Jehovah's Witness. "And what is she kissing: the paper or her child?" "Her child," he replied. "Well then," I said, "just as she, by kissing her child's photograph, is kissing the child himself and not the paper, so we kiss Christ and not the paper or the board."

— Geronda, what if there used to be an icon of Christ, the Mother of God, or some saint on a certain board, and the paint has worn off over time—should we still kiss it?

— Yes, of course! When a person venerates holy icons with reverence and fervent love, he, as it were, absorbs the colors of these icons into himself, and within him, deep inside, these saints are depicted. The saints rejoice as they "break free" from the paper and wood and are imprinted in human hearts. When a Christian reverently kisses the holy images and asks for help from Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, he performs this act of kissing with his heart, which absorbs not only the Grace of Christ, the Mother of God, or the saints, but the whole of Christ, or the Most Holy Theotokos, or the saints, who take their place in the iconostasis of his [inner] temple. "Man is the temple of the Holy Spirit."⁹⁹ See, every service begins and ends with the kissing of icons. If people understood this, how much joy they would feel, how much strength they would receive!

— Geronda, why does one of the hymns to the Most Holy Theotokos in the prayer canon to her say: "May the lips of the ungodly, who do not bow before Your honorable image, be silenced"?

— If someone lacks reverence and kisses the icons, aren't their lips mute, soundless? And aren't the lips of a reverent person melodious when they kiss the holy images? Some, when kissing an icon, don't even touch it. Others, when kissing an icon, merely touch it with their lips. Just like that.¹⁰⁰ Did you hear anything?

— No.

⁹⁹ See 1 Cor. 3:16 and 6:19.

¹⁰⁰ The Elder kissed an icon so fervently that nothing could be heard.

— Well, then, that means the lips are “silent,” soundless. But when a devout person kisses an icon, his kiss can be heard. And then the lips are melodious. When lips are described as “silent,” it does not mean that they are blaspheming. But [the fact remains] some lips are soundless, while others are melodious. When we see holy icons, our hearts should overflow with love for God and the saints, and we should fall down before them, worship them, and kiss them with great reverence. If only you could have seen a certain devout elderly monk from the Philotheos Monastery—Father Savva—with what reverence, what tenderness, and what love he would kiss the icon of the Most Holy Mother of God, “The Sweet Kiss”! A small bump has even formed on this icon of the Mother of God because the fathers have been kissing it in the very same spot.

An icon painted with reverence absorbs God’s grace from the reverent iconographer and conveys eternal comfort to people. The iconographer “transfers” himself onto the icon he is painting; therefore, his spiritual state is of great importance. Father Tikhon¹⁰¹ once told me: “My son, when I paint shrouds, I sing, ‘Joseph the Righteous, take it down from the tree...’” He sang and wept unceasingly, and his tears dripped onto the icon. Such an icon delivers an eternal sermon to the world. Icons preach and preach for centuries. And when someone—for example, a person who is suffering—casts a glance at an icon of Christ or the Mother of God, they receive comfort.

It all comes down to reverence. Someone need only touch the wall against which an icon is leaning to receive Grace, while another may possess the finest icon yet derive no benefit from it because he lacks reverence. One person may benefit from an ordinary cross, while another, lacking reverence, will derive no benefit even from the Life-Giving Tree itself.

One must offer the purest things to God

Once, here in your church, I was taken aback: I saw that you were lighting a small candle like this on the holy altar. In my own church, I do not even leave such small candles on the candlestick in front of the iconostasis—I consider it a sign of disrespect.

— However, Geronda, they say that a candle should burn all the way down to the very bottom.

— Yes, let it burn down to the very bottom, but what matters is where it burns down. It’s one thing if it burns down to the bottom on those candlesticks where people place their candles, and quite another if it’s on the holy altar or the sacrificial table. It is not proper to light half-candles in the altar; this is disrespectful. And in the chandelier, even if the candles last until the end of the service, if they are very small, replace them anyway. And at the entrances of the Divine Liturgy—both the Small and the Great—always use a large candle, because it symbolizes the Holy Forerunner. In some places, to save money, they even extinguish the oil lamps, not realizing that if we revere God, He will send great blessings. And at memorial services, it is a sign of disrespect to use very thin candles—they’re like threads dipped in wax. It’s even embarrassing to give such candles to people.

— Geronda, should the sisters in their cells light as many candles as they want?

— Let them burn them, so that even the devil may be consumed. The whole world is ablaze right now. But the little candle they light must have meaning—that is, it must be accompanied by prayer.

¹⁰¹ See *Elder Paisios*. The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 13–40.

It is a great thing to give oneself to God! We eat sweet fruits, yet we offer the resin of trees in a censer as a sacrifice to God. We taste honey, yet we offer wax as a sacrifice to God—though we often mix even that with paraffin! We offer God just a single wax candle out of gratitude for His generous, bountiful blessings—so are we going to skimp on that, too? What if God wanted us to offer Him honey? I can only imagine what we'd do then! We'd offer Him either some honey syrup or a little water with sugar. God wouldn't take us seriously! You can save money on everything except serving God. We must offer God the purest and the very best.

— But people, Geronda, don't really understand why burning paraffin candles is irreverent.

— Tell them: "Burning paraffin candles in churches is harmful to your health." Then they'll give it some thought. And if the church is small to begin with, you could actually suffocate [with those unnatural candles]! It's better to light one small candle made of pure wax than a huge paraffin candle. That's exactly why many people feel sick in churches and faint. A small church—and all that paraffin is blazing away!... But if only that were all... They want to fill the oil lamps with oils unfit for food. What have people come to! The Old Testament states that the oil used in the temple was to be made from olives picked from the trees, not from those that had fallen to the ground. Does God need oil and incense? No, but [this] moves Him to compassion, because it is an offering through which a person's gratitude and love for Him are expressed. On Mount Sinai, I was struck by this: the Bedouins, poor souls, have nothing to offer [to God]. So what do they do? They pick up a pebble that's just a little different from the others—just this tiny little one—or if they find two or three leaves somewhere in a crevice, they place them on the rock that Moses struck with his staff and from which water flowed, and they leave their offering there. And nursing mothers go there and squeeze a few drops of milk [onto that rock], thinking, "May God give me milk to feed my children." Just look at how grateful they are [to God]! This is no trivial matter. And what are we doing?.. These people will judge us. They leave little pieces of wood, leaves, and pebbles there on the rock... Does God need all this? No, He doesn't, but God helps when He sees a good heart and a good intention.

— Geronda, when lighting a candle, should one say that it is being placed for a specific purpose?

— When you light a candle—where are you sending it? Aren't you sending it somewhere? With a candle, we ask something of God. When you light it and say, "For those who suffer physically and emotionally, and for those who need it most," then among these people there are both the living and the departed. Do you know what a sense of peace the departed feel when we light a candle for them? In this way, we are in spiritual communion with both the living and the departed. In short, a candle is an "antenna" through which we come into contact with God, with the sick, with the departed, and so on.

— Geronda, why do we burn incense?

— We light it to glorify God. We glorify Him and thank Him for His great blessings throughout the world. Incense is also an offering. And after we have incensed the icons in the church and offered it to God and the saints, we incense people—the living icons of God.

Whether in supplication or in thanksgiving—put your heart into it. "My God, with all my heart I ask that You grant me this mercy"—that is how I "speak" with the candle. And with incense, I "cry out" thus: "I thank You, my God, with all my heart for all Your gifts. I thank You for forgiving my many sins, the ingratitude of the whole world, and my own great ingratitude."

As much as you can, cultivate reverence and humility within yourselves. This will help you receive God's grace. For when a person possesses reverence and spiritual humility—and is also meek—he receives Divine

Grace. But if he lacks reverence and humility, then God's grace does not draw near to him. It is written in Holy Scripture: "*Whom shall I look upon? Only the meek and quiet, who tremble at my words.*"

Chapter 5.

On the fact that the gift contains within itself divine oxygen

People forget about those who suffer

— Geronda, you once said that the more you avoid human comfort, the more you receive the Divine. So is that why, when you're hungry, you feel prayer more deeply?

— Yes, but besides that, one who is hungry understands another. One who is full does not understand the hungry. I've heard that in one city they throw away food, while just a short distance away there are immigrants from Russia who have nothing to eat. These unfortunate people huddle in some greenhouses, in tin sheds. Let's assume that those who throw away food don't know there are people in need right next to them. But why don't they ask to find out? They're throwing away food! We do not even give away the unnecessary things we have. When one person cannot afford what they need, while another has things they do not use themselves and refuses to give them to someone in need—that is a sin. For me, this is the greatest torment. Christ will say to us at the Last Judgment: "*You were hungry, and you did not give Me anything to eat.*"¹⁰²

Some have everything and say, "There is no poverty today." They do not think about their neighbor. They do not put themselves in another's shoes, so as not to be disturbed or lose their peace of mind. But with such an inner disposition, how can they find a poor person? If a person thinks of others, then he finds the poor and finds what they need. And how many orphans are there whom no one is there to pat on the head! People forget about those who suffer. Their minds are preoccupied with those who live the good life, and they compare themselves to them, not to those who suffer. But if they were to think, for example, of those unfortunate residents of Northern Epirus (Albania) who, for having crossed themselves, have been sitting in prison for twenty years, crammed into a tiny cell, piled on top of one another!... Then people would see things differently. It's terrifying! We can't even imagine it. Do you know what it means to be piled on top of one another? Not sitting, not lying down, not standing... And as for a window—you'd be lucky if there was even a hole in the wall¹⁰³

— You mean in graves, Geronda!

— At least in a grave you can stretch out your legs. What torment! There's so much suffering in the world today because they're manufacturing ammunition, while people have been left to fend for themselves. In Africa, I saw people eating camel dung. Human bodies there don't look like bodies. They're like frogs. The ribcage is

¹⁰² Matt. 25:42.

¹⁰³ Delivered in May 1990.

like a little wicker basket. Why does it hurt me? We have everything, and that's why we don't feel the pain of others. And yet we still want to get into Heaven...

When I arrived at the Stomion Monastery in 1958, there was a Protestant in Konitsa who, thanks to financial support from America, had converted eighty families to Protestantism. He even managed to build them a house of prayer for their gatherings. These unfortunate people were in great need; extreme poverty forced them to become Protestants because the latter provided them with material assistance. Once, one of these unfortunate souls said to me, "I'm ready to become not only a Protestant but even a Jew, because I'm in such dire straits." Upon hearing this, I said, "We must do something." I gathered together people who, having some financial means, were able to help others, and spoke with them. These poor people were, at that time, entirely secular, but they had good intentions. In particular, one of these men, despite leading a completely secular lifestyle, had a generous heart. When I first saw him, I said, "On the outside he looks like a rotten log, but inside there's a spark of goodness." So, we decided to collect some money and distribute it to poor families. I advised those who were well-off to go to the poor themselves and hand out the money, so that they, too, might be moved to compassion and benefit from the experience. In this way, even if their hearts were made of stone, they softened and became human. Thus, the gates of paradise opened to them. In a short time, all these benefactors changed, because they saw the suffering that existed [right beside them], and they no longer felt drawn to seek entertainment in clubs and dance halls. "You," they said, "have disarmed us. How can we go out to have fun now?" They even began to attend church, and I later learned that one of them had even become a cantor. But those eighty families, too, by the grace of God, returned to Orthodoxy one after another. When American Protestants later arrived to see what the Protestant preacher had accomplished, they sued him—because he no longer had any followers!

— Geronda, some people, when in need, aren't shy about asking for help, while others say nothing.

— Many are ashamed and do not want to ruin their reputation. Such people need help more than others. And it is more proper to help them [first and foremost]. I know two doctors who, when some misfortune struck, did not even have money for aspirin. A person who has love is not content merely to give to those who ask for alms, but also seeks out people in need to support them. My mother tried very hard to do this.

The Test of Love

If a person is well-off and gives alms, it is impossible to tell whether he has love or not, because he may be giving not out of love, but to get rid of certain things. Love is evident when a person gives while he himself is in need. Let's say I believe I have love. God, in order to test my love, sends a poor person my way. If I have, for example, two watches—one good and the other slightly damaged—and I give the damaged one to the poor person, that means my love is second-rate. If I have true love, then I give the poor man the good watch. However, flawed logic creeps in, and we say something like this: "Should I give him the good one? Well, for him—since he doesn't have a watch at all—even an old one will be a good one." And so I give him the old watch. But when you give something old, the old man still lives within you; if, however, you give something new, you are a reborn person. The state in which you keep both the old and the new for yourself and give nothing at all is hellish.

— Geronda, how can one escape this state?

— One should reflect as follows: "If Christ Himself were in the beggar's place, what would I give Him? Undoubtedly, the very best." In this way, a person comes to understand what true love is, makes a firm decision

[to follow its principles], and the next time gives the very best. At first it may be a little difficult for him, but by striving in this way, he reaches a state where, in helping others, he gives both the old and the new. Although he himself may be completely without a watch, he will have Christ within him and will hear the sweet beating of his own heart, rejoicing with divine joy. If someone takes your robe, and you give even that ragged garment you have,¹⁰⁴ then Christ will clothe you afterward. If you feel compassion for some unfortunate person and help them, then consider what sacrifice you would make if Christ Himself were in their place. This is how a person passes the tests. In the face of his neighbor, the believer sees Christ. And Christ Himself says that by doing something for one of the needy, you are thereby doing it for Me.¹⁰⁵ Of course, everyone deserves the honor due to them, but love must be the same for everyone. A minister and a beggar, a general and a soldier occupy the same place in the heart of a believer.

— Geronda, why is it sometimes the case that the person who has received a favor behaves disrespectfully toward the one who helped him?

— The devil intervenes and incites the one we've helped to behave badly toward us, so that we'll become angry. In doing so, we lose the good we've done. The person isn't to blame; the devil is inciting him in order to deprive us of everything. When doing good deeds, always feel that you are obligated to do them, and be prepared to face temptation so that you do not lose the good you have done, and so that all the benefit from that good may be yours. For example, a person donates some money without wanting to make a show of it. But the tempter intervenes and incites others to say to him, "You're just a money-grubber: you didn't donate anything, while so-and-so did this, and so-and-so did that." Thus, the devil forces this person to reply "humbly," "Well, I did do a little something. I set up... a hospital." Or the enemy provokes him to become angry and blurt out: "Who, me?! Me, the one who did this and that?!" And so he loses... everything. Or the devil will prompt the person to whom the man did a good deed to say to him: "Miser! Exploiter!"—so that the benefactor will reply: "Who? Am I, perhaps, an exploiter? I, the man who did you a good deed, who showed you such kindness?"—"Ah, he's ungrateful," he'll say afterward, "after all, I certainly didn't want him to say 'thank you' to me, but at the very least, he could have acknowledged [that I'm his benefactor]!" However, if a person expects recognition for his merits, he loses everything. But if the one who did the good deed with a good intention says, "It's actually good that he forgot the kindness I showed him," or, "Perhaps he was upset or tired and that's why he spoke in that tone," then he justifies his neighbor and does not lose out himself. When we do not expect a reward, we receive a pure reward. Christ did everything for us, yet we crucified Him. How do we sing in church? "For manna, gall."¹⁰⁶ So let us always strive to do good without expecting a reward for it.

The Giver Receives Divine Joy

A person has two kinds of joy: one is when he receives, and the other is when he gives. The joy one experiences in giving is incomparable to that felt in receiving. In order for a person to understand whether they are truly progressing spiritually, they must first of all examine themselves to see if they find joy in giving rather

¹⁰⁴ See Luke 6:29.

¹⁰⁵ Matt. 25:40.

¹⁰⁶ From the 12th antiphon of Matins on Great Friday.

than in receiving. Do they feel upset when they receive, and do they experience joy when they give themselves? Furthermore, if they are working correctly on a spiritual level, then when they do a good deed, they never remember it, but they never forget even the smallest kindness done to them. They cannot overlook even the most insignificant act of kindness others have shown them. He himself may have given someone an entire vineyard and forgotten about it. But he can never forget a single bunch of grapes given to him from the very vineyard he himself had gifted. Or perhaps he gave someone many carved wooden icons and does not remember it. If, however, this “someone” gives him a single little icon sealed in plastic, he will be deeply moved by it, despite its low value, and will later think with gratitude about how to repay the favor. He might build an entire church, donate land for its construction, and forget all about it. In other words, the correct spiritual path is this: to forget the good you have done and to remember the good others have done for you. One who reaches this state becomes a person, a person of God. But if someone constantly forgets the good deeds done for him by others and remembers the good deeds he has done himself, then this behavior is the opposite of what Christ desires. And calculations like, “You gave me this much, and I’ll give you that much in return”—that’s petty haggling. I try to give to those who are in greater need. I don’t haggle like a market vendor, thinking, “So-and-so gave me these books; now I owe him this much, so I have to give it back to pay him off.” Or, “If someone else didn’t give me anything, then he won’t get anything from me either.” This is a human truth.

Whoever takes something receives human joy. Whoever gives receives divine joy. We receive divine joy through giving. For example, someone gives me a book, and at that moment he rejoices spiritually, divinely, while I, having taken the book, rejoice in a human way. By giving this book to someone else, I, too, will rejoice divinely, while the one who receives it from me will rejoice in a human way. By giving it, in turn, to someone else, that person will experience Divine joy, and the next person to receive it will feel human joy. But if that person, in turn, gives it to someone else, they will rejoice divinely, and so on. Do you see how many people can experience both divine and human joy from a single thing?

We must learn to find joy in giving. A person takes the right stance when he finds joy in giving. He is then “connected” to Christ’s “network” and experiences divine joy. The joy they experience when giving something away or helping with something contains divine “oxygen.” But when a person rejoices in what they receive, or in what others sacrifice for their sake, there is a stench and suffocation in their joy. People who, without regard for their own “self,” give themselves to others will very soon judge us. What joy they experience! Christ is their protector. But most people rejoice in receiving. They deprive themselves of divine joy and therefore suffer torment. Christ is moved to compassion when we love our neighbor more than ourselves, and He fills us with divine joy. Behold, He did not limit Himself to the commandment, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (¹⁰⁷), but offered Himself as a sacrifice for humanity.

The miser collects for others

— Here, Geronda, are two little brothers: the younger one gives, but the older one doesn’t.

— Let their parents teach the older one to find joy in giving. And if the older one works at this, he will receive a greater reward than the younger one, who gives by nature, and will become better than him.

¹⁰⁷ Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

— Geronda, how can we get rid of the reluctance in our hearts that prevents us from giving to others?

— What’s the matter with you, you miser?! I’ll show you! I’ll kick you out! And when it comes to obedience, for example, if you’re working in the archondarion,¹⁰⁸ then right away, for the future, take upon yourself the blessing to distribute [so you don’t have to ask for it anew every time]. Do you see how generously God bestows His blessings on everyone? And if you don’t get used to giving, you’ll eventually become accustomed to stinginess, and it won’t be easy to give anything to others anymore.

A miser is like a piggy bank; he hoards for others. In this way, he loses both the joy of giving and God’s reward. “Why are you hoarding them?” I once asked a rich man. “You have no obligations. What are you going to do with them?” “When I die,” he replied, “they’ll stay here.” “And I,” I told him, “give you my blessing to take everything you’ve saved with you to the next world.” “Here,” he said, “they’ll stay here. “If I die, let others divide it up.” “Here,” I said, “it will remain. But the point is for you to give it away with your own hands now, while you’re still alive!” There is no one more foolish than a miser. He is constantly hoarding, constantly living in deprivation, and ultimately uses all his savings to buy himself eternal torment. The miser has reached the height of foolishness because he does not give material goods to others; he drowns in them and loses Christ.

People laugh at the miser. There was once a landowner who was very rich: he owned land in one region and an apartment in Athens, but he was extremely stingy. One day, he cooked a pot of bean soup—watery and thin—for the workers toiling in his fields. In those days, the unfortunate workers began their labor in the morning, at sunrise, and finished at sunset. At noon, when they sat down to rest, the landowner poured the soup into a large baking sheet and called them to eat. The poor workers sat down around it and began to eat: sometimes they’d scoop up a bean with their spoon, and other times just a mouthful of slop! But one of these workers was quite skilled at scooping. He set his spoon aside, stepped to the side, took off his shoes and socks, and pretended he wanted to stick his feet into the baking sheet of soup. “What are you doing?” the others asked him. “Well,” he said, “I want to climb inside and see if I can find a bean or two!” That’s just how stingy this unfortunate landowner was. That’s why it’s a thousand times better for a person to be generous than to be stingy.

— Stinginess, Geronda, is a disease.

— A very terrible disease! There is no disease more terrible than the stinginess that takes hold of a person. Thrift is a good thing, but you have to be careful that the devil doesn’t quietly take hold of you through stinginess.

— But some people, Geronda, go hungry because of their stinginess.

— Is that all they suffer—just hunger? There was once a wealthy merchant who ran a large store, yet he would cut matches into three pieces with a pocket knife. And there was another very wealthy woman who had sulfur; she always kept burning coals, and to start a fire, she would light the sulfur from the coals so as not to waste a single match. And yet she herself had a house, land, and a vast fortune.

I’m not saying you have to be a spendthrift. But if you ask a spendthrift for something, at least he’ll give it to you readily. A miser, on the other hand, will be reluctant to give you anything. Once, two neighbors, both housewives, struck up a conversation about salads and vinegar, and during the conversation, one of them said: “I have some very good vinegar.” Some time passed, and the other poor soul needed a little vinegar. She went to her neighbor with a request, and the neighbor replied: “Listen, dear, if I were to give away my vinegar, I wouldn’t have any left even after seven years!”

¹⁰⁸ Archondariki—a place for receiving guests in Greek monasteries. —*Translator’s note.*

It's good to be thrifty and generous at the same time. Being thrifty doesn't mean being a miser. Money never lingered with my father. There was no hotel in Faras; instead, there was our house. Anyone who came to the village would go to the village elder's house to spend the night. The guest was fed, his feet were washed, and he was even given clean socks.

Now I see how even in some churches where pilgrims visit, entire storerooms are crammed with oil lamps, yet they still don't say, "We have enough," so that people would stop bringing them. They can neither use these lamps nor sell them, yet they don't give them away either. Once a person starts collecting, they become tied to it and can no longer let go. But if a person stops collecting things and starts giving them away instead, then his heart—without him even realizing how—will be united with Christ. Some widow doesn't have the money to buy even an arshin of fabric to clothe her children, and I'm going to hoard? How could I bear that? I have neither plates nor pots in my cell—just tin cans. Rather than buying something for myself, I prefer to give five hundred drachmas to some student so he can travel from one monastery to another. By not hoarding, you have God's blessing. When you give a blessing to another, you receive a blessing yourself. A blessing begets a blessing.

A kind disposition is everything

— But Geronda, what if someone asks me for help, but I have nothing to give?

— When I want to give alms and have nothing to give, I give alms with my blood. The one who has something and provides material help to others experiences joy, whereas the person who has nothing to give to others suffers constantly and says to himself in humility: 'I have not given alms to my neighbor.' A good disposition is everything. There is a certain rich man who has something to give but does not give it. And there is a certain poor man who wants to give but does not, because he has nothing to give. One differs from the other. The rich man, having given alms, feels satisfaction. But the poor man suffers; he wants to do good, but he has nothing to give to his neighbor. He suffers emotionally, whereas, if he had something, he would give it away and not be tormented. A good disposition is evident in one's deeds. If someone asks a poor person for alms and the poor person, despite his own hardships, gives it to him, then regardless of whether the recipient spends the money on drink, the poor person who gave it will experience inner joy, and God, having enlightened someone else, will provide material help to the charitable poor person. And sometimes, do you know what kind of injustice occurs? A person, in order to help a neighbor, gives him what he himself has, while another, in his own mind, interprets this however he pleases...

— What do you mean, Geronda?

— Let's suppose that some poor soul has no more than five thousand drachmas¹⁰⁹ in his pocket. He meets a beggar on the road, shoves the money into his hand, and runs off. The beggar sees that it's five thousand and rejoices. Just then, a very rich man walks by and, seeing that the other man has given five thousand in alms, thinks to himself: "If he's handing out fives like that, who knows how much money he has? He must be a millionaire!" And this wealthy man gives the beggar five hundred drachmas, reassuring himself that he has fulfilled his duty. Meanwhile, all that the poor man had was that five-thousand. And as soon as he saw the beggar, his heart leaped, and he gave it away. But if the rich man had done even a little spiritual work [on

¹⁰⁹ About 15 U.S. dollars. — *Translator's note.*

himself], he would have had a good thought and said, “Look, he gave away his very last coin,” or, “He only had ten thousand to begin with, and he gave five to the beggar.” But how can a good thought come to him if he hasn’t worked on his spiritual development? So he comments, “Since he’s throwing money around like that, he must be raking it in by the shovelful.”

And some people give five hundred or a thousand drachmas to a beggar, but with a poor worker who labored for them, they make a huge fuss over five or ten drachmas. I can’t understand it: all right, you give five hundred or a thousand drachmas to someone you don’t know, yet you leave the one right next to you—who helps you—hungry? But you are obligated to love him and help him first and foremost. Yet, apparently, these people give alms just to be praised. And such people, driven by worldly logic, might even drag some worker into court—supposedly so as not to be a laughingstock in the eyes of others. A woman who attended church told me,¹¹⁰ that once she wanted to buy firewood from an old woman who had spent three hours hauling it on mules from the forest to the village. But that day, the old woman had to walk an extra half hour—that is, three and a half hours in total—because she had to go around the guard posts so the forest rangers wouldn’t catch her. “And how much is it?” the lady asked her. “Fifteen drachmas,” the old woman replied. “No,” said the lady, “that’s too much. I’ll pay you eleven drachmas for them.” “That’s just it,” she told me later, “so that we, people of the spirit, aren’t taken for fools.” I gave her a piece of my mind afterward! The old woman had two mules and wasted two days just to make twenty-two drachmas. Why not just give her twenty drachmas on top of that?! But no, instead she had to put on a real Jewish haggle.

Almsgiving greatly helps the departed

Wealth, when not distributed to the poor for the health and salvation of our souls or for the repose of the souls of our deceased loved ones, brings ruin upon a person. Alms given to the sick, widows, orphans, and other unfortunate people are of great help to the departed as well. For when alms are given for the sake of the departed, those who receive them say: “May God forgive him. May his remains be blessed.” If someone is suffering from illness, unable to work, and in debt, and you, in such a difficult situation, help him and say, “Take this money for the repose of so-and-so’s soul,” then that person will say, “May God forgive him. May his remains be blessed.” Those who receive alms offer a heartfelt prayer for the departed, and this is of great help to them.

— If a woman’s husband dies without receiving Communion or going to Confession, or if her child dies, what else can she do to help their souls?

— Let her herself, as much as she can, become a better person. Naturally, by doing this she will help herself, but also her husband, because since they were married, the deceased also has a share [in her spiritual progress]. This is the most important thing: to become a better person herself. Otherwise, she may do something good, but at the same time not change for the better. ‘I’ve done my duty,’ she’ll say. ‘What more do you want from me?’ And she’ll remain unchanged—or even become worse.

¹¹⁰ In 1958

Almsgiving “in secret”¹¹¹

— Geronda, some people consider it hypocrisy when a person goes to church but falls short in love and self-sacrifice.

— Well, how do they know that? Are they sure of it?

— That’s how they judge.

— What did Christ say? “*Do not judge.*”¹¹² One person might not give alms to a Romani person because they know of a sick person in great need and choose to help that person instead. A passerby will meet the Romani person and give him alms, but who will give to the sick person? How can one draw such conclusions without knowing the facts? Hypocrisy is when someone gives alms clearly in order to be praised.

I remember when, in 1957, I was at a monastery with separate living quarters;¹¹³ for each task, depending on its difficulty, the brothers were given a monetary reward. Since there was a shortage of people in the monasteries at that time, some of the brothers who had the strength took on many tasks and received more compensation, but they distributed what they received to the poor. There was one monk there whom they called “the miser” because he did not give away his money. When this monk died, poor peasants from here—from Chalkidiki, from Great Panagia, from Paleochori, and from Neochori—gathered at his funeral to mourn him.¹¹⁴ These peasants kept oxen and hauled timber and wooden logs; back then, everything was transported by oxen, unlike today—when it’s done with dump trucks and logging trucks. So, here’s what this monk did: he saved up money— which he received for the tasks he performed, and when he saw that a certain farmer, the head of a household, had only one ox or that his ox was dying, the monk would buy him a new one. Buying an ox in those days was no small matter; it cost five thousand drachmas, and money back then was “hard currency.” Other monks would give five drachmas to one beggar, ten to another, twenty to a third, and their acts of charity were visible. But the deceased went completely unnoticed, because he did not give alms like the others; instead, he saved money and helped people in his own way. So they called him a miser, a tightfisted man. And in the end, when he passed away, the poor gathered and wept: “He saved me!” said one. “He saved me!” said another. In those days, owning an ox meant you could haul lumber and support a family. The monastic community was astonished. That is why I say, “How can we know what others are doing?”

— Geronda, sometimes a person gives alms but still feels a certain emptiness. What is the reason for this?

— Let him take a good look at himself; perhaps he’s motivated by a desire to please others. When one’s motives are pure, one feels joy. Do you know what they organized once in a certain city? An acquaintance of mine, a devout man and a lawyer by profession, told me about it. Christmas was approaching, and some Christians decided to collect various items, wrap them up as gifts, and distribute them to the poor in the town square. Back then, after the occupation,¹¹⁵ people were living in poverty. This lawyer said, “Since we know who

¹¹¹ Matt. 6:4.

¹¹² See Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; John 7:24.

¹¹³ A monastery where the monks live together without a common abbot and follow their own individual paths in spiritual life and material self-sufficiency.

¹¹⁴ Villages in Chalkidiki. — *Translator’s note.*

¹¹⁵ This refers to the occupation of Greece in 1941–44 by Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria. — *Translator’s note.*

is poor [and who isn't], let's just hand out these gifts quietly." —"No," they replied, "we'll hand them out in the square for the glory of God, so that people can see that we care." —"Why is that necessary?" my acquaintance objected again. "In what book have you ever read that alms should be given out this way?" They stuck to their guns: "For the glory of God." He couldn't convince them otherwise, and when he realized this and was completely exhausted, he let them do as they pleased. So what happened? They took the gifts to the town's main square and announced that they would hand them out there. Word got around, and immediately the most ruthless crowd—like gorillas—rushed in: they grabbed and grabbed, leaving nothing for the rest. The gifts went to those who were uncivilized and had no needs, while the unfortunate poor were left empty-handed. And when those in charge of the event tried to restore order there, they got a good beating—"for the glory of God"! Do you see how spiritual laws work? For a worldly person, there is an excuse to be proud and boast, but what excuse is there for a spiritual person?

— But Geronda, there are unbelievers who are compassionate and do good deeds...

— When a worldly person gives alms out of a good heart, rather than to please others, God will not forsake him, and at some point He will speak to his heart. An acquaintance of mine who lived in Switzerland told me about a wealthy woman, an atheist, who—being extremely compassionate—went so far as to give away her entire fortune to the poor and the unfortunate, and in the end was left completely destitute. Then those whom she had previously helped made sure to place her in the very best nursing home. However, despite all the good deeds this woman had done, she remained an atheist. When people tried to talk to her about Christ, she avoided the conversation, saying that Christ was merely a good person, a social activist, and expounding other similar theories. It's also possible that the Christians who spoke with her didn't help her; she didn't see anything special in their lives. "Pray for this soul," my friend told me, and he himself prayed a great deal for her conversion. After some time had passed, he told me that when he visited the nursing home one day, he saw her completely transformed. "I believe," she exclaimed, "I believe!" A miraculous event had taken place that changed her, and after that she wanted to be baptized.

***"For in doing this, you are heaping burning coals on his head"*¹¹⁶**

— Geronda, if a person is not in need but is only pretending to be, should we help him?

— Christ said that we should give to those who ask of us without testing them.¹¹⁷ And even if the one asking is not in need, you should still give to him. Rejoice that [you have the opportunity] to give alms. God *"pours out His rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,"*¹¹⁸ so why shouldn't we help our neighbor? Are we ourselves worthy of all the gifts that God bestows upon us? He *"has not dealt with us according to our iniquities, nor has He repaid us according to our sins."*¹¹⁹ A poor person asks you for help. Even if you have doubts about him, still, with discernment, help him so that you won't be tempted by a guilty thought later. Remember what

¹¹⁶ Rom. 12:20.

¹¹⁷ See Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:30.

¹¹⁸ Matt. 5:45.

¹¹⁹ Ps. 102:10.

Abba Isaac wrote: “Even if a man is sitting on a horse and asks you for something—give it to him.”¹²⁰ You do not know the true state of affairs. Your duty is to believe what the beggar tells you and to give him whatever amount he asks of you.

If, for example, we have only a thousand drachmas and, in giving them to a beggar, we feel distressed that we cannot give more, then, in addition to the blessing we offer (that is, this money), we are planting Christ and a good sense of concern in the beggar’s conscience. What we have done will stir his heart, because his mind will constantly return to that merciful person who, together with the “chiliaric”¹²¹, gave him his heart filled with pain. This unfortunate person will eventually go so far as to anonymously send his benefactor all the money he received—or even more. Something similar happened to me once. One day, when I was in Thessaloniki, a woman—who appeared to be a Romani woman—stopped me and asked for money for her children because her husband was sick. I only had five hundred drachmas; I gave them to her and said, “I’m sorry, but I have nothing else to give you. If you’d like, take my address and write to me about your husband’s health. I’ll try to send you more from the Holy Mountain.” Soon after, I received a letter containing five hundred drachmas and a note: “Thank you for your kindness. I am returning the money you gave me.” If one gives with a heavy heart, the recipient of alms will be touched by love—by Christ—and will himself begin to give, rather than to collect. But if the beggar turns out to be a very hard-hearted person and hoards the money he collects, it will bring him no joy. God will arrange it so that the money he has collected goes where it is needed. As for the hard-hearted beggar, he will be left with nothing but fatigue and exhaustion from that “fundraising” (let’s call it that), which he [without even realizing it] organized for others.

— So, Geronda, how much should one give?

— Just enough so that your conscience doesn’t gnaw at you afterward. You need to use your judgment. Don’t give a hundred and then regret not having given fifty. Special care is needed if a person’s love is accompanied by great inspiration and enthusiasm. In such a case, one should rein in one’s love and enthusiasm a little, so as not to later regret having given too much to that unfortunate person—when one should have given less—and now find oneself left empty-handed. Little by little, such a person will gain experience and will give alms in accordance with the self-sacrifice they possess.

— Geronda, when a beggar’s demands are excessive, should they be met?

— This calls for prudence—and then some. When someone asks you for something just to show off in front of others, give it to them. After all, Christ didn’t say to Judas, “What kind of apostle are you? Put an end to your greed!”—but instead entrusted him with the money box. However, if someone asks you, for example, for a jar of jam, and you have it, but you know that the person asking already has a whole barrel of it, while someone else has no jam at all, then say to the one who has it and is still asking: “Brother, if you wish, give a little of what you have to so-and-so.”” But if there is no one in need, then give to the one who is asking, since he has asked you for it, and say nothing to him. If he has a tender heart, this act of giving may move him to compassion and lead him to reform.

¹²⁰ “If someone, sitting on a horse, reaches out his hand to you to receive alms, do not refuse him, for at that moment he is undoubtedly as destitute as one of the beggars.” Cf.: *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. Discourse 56. p. 286.

¹²¹ A thousand drachmas (colloq.) – *Translator’s note*.

Thus, in such cases, what the Holy Apostle Paul writes comes to pass: “If your enemy does you harm, but you do him good, you are heaping burning coals upon his head.” Not in the sense that you are reducing your enemy to ashes, but in the sense that when you do him good, love is stirred within him. Love is Christ, and Divine Grace begins to work within a person. And then the person changes, because his conscience convicts him—that is, he is then convicted by his own conscience. However, it is wrong to do good merely so that someone’s conscience might convict him and lead him back to the true path, since this robs the good deed of its power. Do good with love. When you “repay” your enemy with good, he changes for the better and reforms.

There was a drunkard in Konitsa who had a family. I used to give him some money. Some people found out that I was helping this unfortunate man (he told them about it himself), and they said to me, “Don’t give him money; he drinks.” He himself would say to me, “Give me this for my children,” and when I gave him alms, I would say, “Take this for your children.” I knew he drank, but I also knew that my words would help him a little: he would continue to drink, but he would also think a little about his children. If I hadn’t given him money, he would have tormented his wife, because he would have taken the money she earned (and she, poor thing, toiled away in other people’s homes), drunk it all away, and the children would have suffered even more. However, when I told him, “Take this for your children,” he would remember his children just a little. Do you understand? I felt pain for him; he saw that, and an inner transformation began within him. Many were reformed in this way. And some, later convicted by their conscience, even returned the money.

With our own logic, we prevent Christ from working. If you want to be evangelists (but, of course, not Protestants), then learn the true Gospel right now.

Part 3.

On Spiritual Courage

“The highest joy comes from sacrifice. Only by sacrificing does a person remain in communion with Christ, for Christ is the Sacrifice.”

Chapter 1.

On the Signs of the Times¹²²

The Antichrist

— Geronda, tell us something about the Antichrist.

¹²² The material collected in this chapter was spoken or written by the Elder between 1981 and 1994.

— Let’s talk about Christ now... Let’s stay as close to Christ as possible. And if we are with Christ, why should we fear the Antichrist? Or perhaps the spirit of the Antichrist does not exist right now? Either way, it is the spirit of the Antichrist that works evil. And if the beast, the Antichrist, is born and commits all sorts of insane acts, in the end he will [still] turn out to be a laughingstock. However, many events will take place. It is possible that you, too, will have to endure much of what is described in the Book of Revelation. Little by little, much is coming to light. And I, wretched as I am, began crying out about this many years ago! The situation is terrible, insane! The madness has crossed [all] boundaries. The apostasy has come,¹²³ and now all that remains is for *the “son of perdition”* to arrive.¹²⁴ [The world] will turn into a madhouse. Utter chaos will reign, amid which every state will begin to do whatever it pleases. May God grant that the interests of those who shape major policy work in our favor. Every now and then we’ll hear something new. We’ll witness the most incredible, the most insane events unfolding. [The only good thing is] that these events will follow one another very quickly.

Ecumenism, a common market, one great state, one religion tailored to their specifications—such are the plans of these devils. The Zionists are already grooming someone to be the Messiah. For them, the Messiah will be a king—that is, he will reign here on earth. The Jehovah’s Witnesses are also waiting for an earthly king. The Zionists will present their king, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses will accept him. They will all recognize him as king and say, “Yes, it’s him.” There will be great turmoil. In this turmoil, everyone will want a king who could save them. And then they will put forward a man who will say: “I am the Imam, I am the Fifth Buddha, I am the Christ whom Christians await, I am the one the Jehovah’s Witnesses are waiting for, I am the Messiah of the Jews.” He will have five “I’s.”

*The evangelist John says in his First Epistle: “Children... the Antichrist is coming, and even now there are many antichrists...”*¹²⁵ He does not mean that the expected Antichrist will be like the persecutors Maximilian and Diocletian, but that the expected Antichrist will be, so to speak, the incarnation of the devil.¹²⁶ He will appear to the people of Israel as the Messiah and deceive the world. Hard times are coming; great trials await us. Christians will endure great persecution. Meanwhile, it is obvious that people do not even realize that we are already experiencing the signs of the [last] days, that the mark of the Antichrist is becoming a reality. It’s as if nothing is happening. That is why Scripture says that even the elect will be deceived.¹²⁷ Those who lack a good disposition will not receive enlightenment from God and will be deceived during the years of apostasy. For whoever lacks Divine Grace lacks spiritual clarity, just as the devil does.

— And the Zionists, Geronda, do they believe in the Antichrist and in what is associated with him?

¹²³ Αποστασία (Greek) — apostasy, falling away. — *Translator’s note.*

¹²⁴ See 2 Thess. 2:3.

¹²⁵ 1 John 2:18.

¹²⁶ When he says, “The Antichrist will be, so to speak, the incarnation of the devil,” the Elder means that the Antichrist will be a human being who embodies all of the devil’s energy, an obedient instrument for the realization of Satan’s plans. The Holy Fathers unanimously attest that the Antichrist will be a human being. Both above and below, Elder Paisios explicitly states that the Antichrist will be a human being. Thus, his view on this matter is in complete agreement with that of the Holy Fathers. — *Translator’s note*

¹²⁷ See Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22.

— They want to rule the world. To achieve their goal, they use witchcraft and Satanism. They view the worship of Satan as a force that will help them carry out their plans. Therefore, they want to rule the world with the help of satanic power. They do not take God into account. However, will God bless them in this endeavor? God will bring about much good from all of this. The previous satanic theories reigned for seventy years, but these will not last even seven.

— Geronda, when I hear about the Antichrist, I feel afraid.

— What are you afraid of? That he'll be more terrifying than the devil, or what? He's just a man. Look at Saint Marina—she beat the devil soundly, and Saint Justina—how many demons did she vanquish! But [we must remember] the most important thing: we didn't come into this world just to make ourselves comfortable.

The Earthly King of the Jews

A sign that the fulfillment of the prophecies is approaching will be the destruction of the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem. It will be destroyed in order to rebuild Solomon's Temple, which, they say, once stood in its place. In the rebuilt temple, the Zionists will eventually proclaim the Antichrist as the Messiah. I have heard that the Jews are already preparing to build Solomon's Temple.

— Geronda, why is it that the Jews, even though they read the Old Testament, do not believe in Christ?

— Why don't you go and ask them yourself? The Jews have always been fanatical. They do understand, but they are blinded by selfishness. If they were just a little more attentive, none of them would remain Jewish.

— And how did they interpret what they read?

— How they interpreted it—and how they still interpret it! They turn spiritual meanings into material ones. [Go,] for example, and see how they interpreted the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*The wilderness of the Jordan shall flourish.*"¹²⁸ To show that the desert "has blossomed," they diverted a river, built terraces and gardens, planted bananas, lemons, and oranges, and turned the whole area green, so that now they say, "The desert has blossomed." And they explain everything in this way. Meanwhile, these words of the prophet refer to the rebirth of the world through Holy Baptism—the "bath of rebirth."

— Are they waiting for an earthly king now?

— Yes, the Antichrist. The rabbis know that the Messiah has come and that He was crucified. I learned from one person that when a Jew is on his deathbed, a rabbi comes to him and whispers in his ear, "The Messiah has come." You see, their conscience accuses them; they feel their guilt, but they do not humble themselves.

— And what good does it do to say these words to a dying person?

— None at all. They say this simply because their conscience is tormenting them. They think that once these words are spoken, everything is all right.

— Don't the others hear these words?

— No, it's whispered in their ear. And Jewish youth have rebelled against the rabbis. "The Messiah," they say, "has come—what Messiah are you seeking?" In America, a group of young people studying the Scriptures from a historical perspective publishes a magazine that states: "The Messiah has come. To anyone who does not believe that the Messiah has come, we will send this magazine free of charge so that they may come to believe.

¹²⁸ See Isa. 35:2.

And if they do come to believe, let them subscribe to the magazine so that we may send it to others and they, too, may become believers.”

— Are they Jews?

— Yes, they’re Jewish.

— And did they become Christians?

— Well, for now, the fact that they’ve come to believe already means something.

— Can rabbis be secret Christians?

— A rabbi and a secret Christian? Would a person still be a rabbi after becoming a Christian? So what then—would he teach Jews that the Messiah hasn’t come yet, and then, when they’re dying, tell them that He has come?

The Mark of 666

— Geronda, how soon will all these events take place?

— They are being delayed for your sake and for mine—so that we may attain a sound spiritual disposition. God is patient with us because, if all this were to happen now, you and I would be lost. Nowhere in Christ’s teaching is a specific time mentioned,¹²⁹ ; however, Holy Scripture says that the coming of these events will be foreshadowed by the signs of the times.¹³⁰ Let us remain constantly prepared, and when that time draws near—we will see. Then we will be more certain. St. Andrew of Caesarea says: “Time and experience will reveal this to those who are sober-minded.”¹³¹

I came across a book with three large sixes on the cover. What shameless people! They do this to make the number six look attractive and accustom people to it. That’s how the mark will come, little by little.

— Geronda, even clothing snaps are sold on cardboard boxes marked with the number 666.

— Yes, may the devil take you! They’ve had three sixes on credit cards for a long time now, and now even on snaps! Many use “666” as a trademark so that people will prefer their products. One supports the other. That is, “666” [is like a password; it] accepts “666.” It is written that when the emblem of a serpent devouring its own tail becomes widespread, it will mean that the Jews have enslaved the whole world. Now this symbol has been placed on some banknotes. The number 666 is already spreading in both China and India.

— Geronda, how do they know this number well enough to put it on things?

— The Evangelist John knew what the devil would do, just as the prophets had foretold that Christ would be sold for “*thirty pieces of silver*,”¹³² that He would be given vinegar to drink,¹³³ and that His garments would

¹²⁹ See Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1.

¹³⁰ See Matt. 24:29 ff.; Mark 13:24 ff.; Luke 21:25 ff.

¹³¹ “A careful study of the number of the mark and everything else written about him (the Antichrist) will reveal the time of tribulation to those who are watchful and of sound mind.” Cf.: *St. Andrew, Archbishop of Caesarea*. Apocalypse. St. Petersburg, 1909, p. 120.

¹³² See Zech. 11:1–13

¹³³ See Ps. 68:22.

be divided among them.¹³⁴ Two thousand years ago, it was written in the Book of Revelation that people would be marked with the number 666. *“Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred sixty-six.”*¹³⁵ “666” is a symbol of the economy for the Jews. As Scripture says, the Jews imposed a specific tax on the peoples they conquered in various wars. The annual tax amounted to 666 talents of gold.¹³⁶ Now, in order to conquer the whole world, they are once again introducing their old tax number, which is linked to their glorious past. That is why they do not want to replace this number with another. In other words, “666” is a symbol of Mammon.¹³⁷ It was derived from a measure of gold. They did not know what St. John the Theologian was referring to, but Mammon remains Mammon nonetheless. *“You cannot serve both God and Mammon.”*¹³⁸

Everything is proceeding as usual. In America, they’ve tagged dogs. Through a transmitter, they emit radio waves, and they track them—they know where every dog is. Stray dogs without tags are killed with laser beams. And then they’ll start killing people, too. They’ve marked entire tons of fish and are monitoring from a satellite which sea they’re in. And now another disease has emerged, for which a vaccine has already been found. It will be mandatory, and when a person receives the vaccination, they’ll also be marked. How many people in America have already been marked with laser beams—some on the forehead, others on the hand? And eventually, anyone who is not marked with the number 666 will be unable to buy, sell, take out a loan, or get a job. My intuition tells me that the Antichrist wants to subjugate the entire world through this system. People—whether they are red, black, or white—who remain outside this system will be unable to work and will become social outcasts. In this way, [the Antichrist] will be imposed through a system that controls the global economy, and only those who accept the mark—the inscription bearing the number 666—will be able to engage in commercial transactions.

But how will those who accept the mark suffer! One expert told me that laser beams are very harmful to humans. People who have received the mark will “absorb” the sun’s rays and suffer such harm that they will bite their tongues in pain.¹³⁹ Those who do not receive the mark will fare better than others, because Christ will help them. And that is no small matter...

— When will He help them, Geronda? Afterward?

— No, right then.

— Geronda, but how will they be better off than others if they won’t be able to buy or sell?

— You’ll see. God knows how. And I know, too. Such are the ways of things... This question had been weighing heavily on my mind, and God sent me... a telegram. How God cares for us! Oh!...

¹³⁴ See Ps. 21:19.

¹³⁵ Rev. 13:18.

¹³⁶ See 3 Kings 10:14 and 2 Chronicles 9:13.

¹³⁷ Mammon—wealth, profit, worldly goods. —*Translator’s note*

¹³⁸ Matthew 6:24.

¹³⁹ See Rev. 16:10.

— Tell me, Geronda, why is a seal also called a “mark”?¹⁴⁰

— Because it won’t be superficial. What does “to inscribe” mean? To draw deep, straight lines, isn’t it? The mark will be an inscription that will first be placed on all goods, and then people will be forced to have it placed on their forehead or hand. Two years ago, I told a doctor from Toronto about the mark, and now he’s told me that he read in the newspaper how they’re already requiring a fingerprint instead of a credit card. They’re moving forward, but we can’t say for sure what will happen. Some televisions recently imported into Greece have a special device that monitors who is watching TV. Soon, those who own a TV will be watching it, while others will be watching them at the same time! People will both observe and be observed. Their entire lives—everything they say and do—will be controlled by a computer. Do you see what kind of dictatorship the devil has planned? In Brussels, an entire palace with three sixes has been built over the [central] computer. This computer can control billions of people. Six billion—that’s almost the entire world. Confession at the push of a button! Some Europeans have protested because they fear a global dictatorship. And we, the Orthodox, oppose this because we do not want the Antichrist—and, of course, we do not want a dictatorship either. Serious events await us, but they won’t last long. Just as Orthodoxy supposedly disappeared under communism, so will it “disappear” now.

New ID Cards

— Geronda, one person said: “But what about the five-thousand-drachma bill? It has three sixes on it, and we use it, don’t we? The same will be true of the ID card.”..

— Five thousand drachmas is a banknote. Queen Victoria is also depicted on the British pound, but that doesn’t bother me. “*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*” However, [it’s a different matter] when it comes to an ID card. It’s not money, but something personal. The word “tautotita”¹⁴¹ has a literal meaning—that is, a person is identified with what he declares. So they’re slipping the devil in there, and I’m signing off on accepting him? How on earth could I go along with that?

— Geronda, what is the connection between the new ID card and the seal?

— The new ID card is not the mark. It is the introduction of the mark.

— People, Geronda, are asking what they should do about the imposition of these new ID cards.

— If they ask, you’d better advise them to consult their spiritual fathers and be patient to see how the Church will act,¹⁴² because many ask questions, but few understand the answers. In the brochure “Signs of the

¹⁴⁰ Inscription — χάραγμα (Greek) from the verb χάρασσω — to mark, carve, or cut out. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁴¹ In Greece, there are two types of documents certifying citizens’ identity: an ID card for use within the country and a passport for travel abroad. The Greek name for the identity card is ταυτότητα. Ταυτότητα means “1) identity (math.), sameness, equivalence, coincidence; 2) passport, identity card; 3) person” (*I. P. Khorikov, M. G. Malev. Modern Greek–Russian Dictionary. Moscow, 1980. p. 743*). The introduction of new identity cards—as planned by the Schengen Agreement—bearing a barcode based on the number of the beast sparked a storm of protests from the Church of Greece, Mount Athos, and the overwhelming majority of Greek citizens. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁴² Decisions adopted by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece after the passing of Elder Paisios state that documents bearing the number of the Antichrist are unacceptable to Orthodox Christians. During discussions on this issue, the opinion of the late Elder proved to be one of the decisive factors for the hierarchy, clergy, and laity of the Church of Greece. — *Translator’s note.*

Times”¹⁴³ , I write about everything with the utmost clarity. Let each person act according to his or her conscience. Of course, there are those who say, “Ah, this is just the opinion of one monk. This is not the Church’s position.” However, the opinion I expressed was not my own. I merely set forth the words of Christ, the words of the Gospel, since we must submit our own opinions to the will of God, which is expressed in the Gospel. Others, on the other hand, say the opposite of what I said [and, hiding behind my opinion], claim that Father Paisius said it. Still others, upon hearing this, fail to take into account that these matters are extremely serious; they do not ask whether I actually said such a thing, but simply take it on faith. I’m not afraid; I speak without hesitation. Some people come to my hermitage and drop six-ruble notes into the box. That’s fine, all in all. But once they left a single piece of cardboard behind the gate. I thought someone had come by, didn’t find me at home, and wrote “He’s not here” for others. Then I read it and saw this!... Such vile cursing that even a worldly person wouldn’t want to hear it! A purge will come, a purge for all this filth, but we’ll weather the storm. People have already risen up to fight. We, too, must rise up with much prayer.

Some are worried about the issue with ID cards, while others are exploiting it to create difficulties. The Church must take the right stance; it must speak out and explain to the faithful so that they understand that accepting the new ID card would be a fall from grace. At the same time, the Church must press the government to ensure that the new ID card, at the very least, is not mandatory. If the Church takes a firm stance, if the freedom of believers is respected—so that those who wish to may obtain the new ID, and those who do not wish to may keep the old one—then only a few people of strong convictions will refuse to accept the “three sixes.” Trials await them, because the rest will turn against them. Most people will accept the ID card bearing the number of the beast. Those who seek peace and comfort will accept the new ID cards, while the unfortunate, devout people will keep their old documents—and for that reason, they will be persecuted.

Right now, the minister’s promise that 666 will not appear on the ID cards—neither explicitly nor implicitly—also means something. Let’s be patient; time will tell. Their statement that there will be no “three sixes” is already something. They have begun to back down on their own. Let’s see what they end up putting on the ID cards. And by the time the new ID cards start being distributed, God’s wrath might even break out. Besides, not everyone will receive new ID cards in twenty-four hours. The first cards will appear, they’ll be reviewed, and if the minister turns out to be a liar, then the struggle will be just. But if we continue our protests now, those who are pulling the strings will say: “Look, the Orthodox are stirring up trouble. The issue hasn’t even come up yet, and they’re already shouting and protesting.” A good guard dog barks when a thief comes. When the thief runs away, it stops barking. But if the dog barks incessantly, you can’t call it a good guard dog.

— And also, Geronda, it was said that since we have religious tolerance, the new ID cards will not indicate religious affiliation.¹⁴⁴

— Yes, they aren’t interested in that, but I am, because this is my identity document. It states where I’m from and what kind of person I am. If religious affiliation is omitted, problems will arise. For example, someone might go to the marriage registry office. If their ID says “Orthodox”—it doesn’t matter which denomination—then everything is fine. But if no religious affiliation is listed, how will they be granted permission to marry?

¹⁴³ In 1987, the Blessed Elder Paisios published a pamphlet titled “Signs of the Times—666,” dedicated to this topic. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁴⁴ In Greece, until recently, the “religion” field on identity cards was mandatory. — *Translator’s note.*

This will cause confusion for the churches. But if religious affiliation becomes optional, then that in itself will be a profession of faith. Europe is Europe. We have a different situation here.

A Sneaky Way to Introduce the Stamp

Little by little, after the introduction of ID cards and identity documents—that is, the creation of personal files—they will slyly begin to apply the mark. Using various tricks, people will be forced to accept the mark on their forehead or hand. They'll create difficulties for people and say, "Use only credit cards; cash will be abolished." To buy something, a person will give their card to the salesperson at the store, and the store owner will receive money from their bank account. Anyone without a card will be unable to sell or buy anything. On the other hand, they will begin to advertise a "perfect system": the number 666 inscribed on the forehead and hand, invisible to the naked eye. At the same time, television will show footage of someone taking another person's card and withdrawing money from a bank using it. They'll keep saying nonstop: "A laser-etched mark on the forehead or hand is more reliable, since only the owner knows the mark's number. The mark is the most perfect system: a thief won't steal your head or your hand, nor will he be able to peek at the number." That's why criminals and villains are currently being given free rein. On Mount Athos, around Karyes, fifteen cells were robbed, and one monk was killed during the robbery. In this way, everyone will have the opportunity to appropriate what belongs to others and steal whatever they want. Suppose someone decides to acquire a plot of land by deception. He'll claim that it supposedly belonged to his grandfather or that he himself once leased this land for pasture. Try figuring that out! And then the authorities will say, "Unfortunately, we can't keep track of them. Monitoring can only be done with a computer." And they'll start registering people. The computer will show whether you're registered, and depending on that, they'll either serve you or not.

The next three and a half years will be tough.¹⁴⁵ Those who refuse to accept this system will have a hard time. They'll try to put them in jail, constantly finding some new excuse to do so. A year will pass, and they'll be taken to another city for questioning so the case can be heard in a different court; from that city, they'll be taken to a third. And then they'll say, "Sorry, you're innocent. If you'd been registered, we could have checked you in a minute. But now we weren't able to carry out the check."

— Geronda, couldn't they force the stamp on us?

— They won't go that far out of courtesy. After all, they'll be polite, as befits Europeans. They'll show the utmost nobility! They won't torment people; however, without the mark, a person won't be able to live. "You're suffering without the mark," they'll say, "but if you'd accepted it, you wouldn't have any difficulties." Even if a person has gold coins or dollars, they won't be able to use them. Therefore, by getting used to a simple, moderate life now, it will be possible to survive those years. If you have a small plot of land, grow a little wheat and potatoes, plant a few olive trees, and keep some livestock—a goat, a few chickens—[a Christian] will be able to provide for their family. Because stockpiles are of little use either: food doesn't keep for long and spoils quickly. But, of course, these hardships will not last long: about three or three and a half years.¹⁴⁶ For the sake

¹⁴⁵ See Dan. 9:26–27; Rev. 12:6; 13:5. See also: *St. Irenaeus of Lyons*. Works. Moscow: Palomnik, Blagovest, 1996. Five Books Against Heresies. Book V, Chapter XXV, pp. 500, 501, and Chapter XXX, p. 512.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

of the elect, the days will be cut short,¹⁴⁷ and they will not even notice how these years pass. God will not leave man without help.

— Geronda, will Christ intervene in what will happen during these difficult years?

— Yes. Just look: you see how saints, the Most Holy Theotokos, and Christ often appear to a person who is well-disposed but suffering injustices, in order to save him. How much more will the Lord help now, when these unfortunate people find themselves in such a difficult situation. A storm is about to break out; a brief dictatorship of the Antichrist—Satan—will ensue. And then Christ will intervene, deal a severe blow to this entire Antichrist system, trample evil underfoot, and ultimately transform it into good.

The seal is equivalent to renunciation

Even though St. John the Theologian writes with the utmost clarity in the Book of Revelation about the mark—¹⁴⁸—some people do not understand this. And what can you say to them? Unfortunately, one hears an awful lot of nonsense from the minds of some modern Gnostics. “I’ll accept the mark with three sixes and draw a cross on it,” says one. Another echoes him: “And I’ll accept the mark on my forehead and make the sign of the cross on my forehead.” And they repeat a whole bunch of similar nonsense. They think they’ll be sanctified in this way, whereas such views are a delusion. One bishop told me, “I’ll draw a little cross on my ID card, right where I’m supposed to sign. I’m not renouncing Christ—I’m just a user of the system that serves me.” —“All right,” I said to him, “so you, Bishop, because of your special position, put a cross before your name. Another is an archimandrite; his position is also special, and he, too, puts a cross before his name. But what will you tell the people to do?” Filth cannot be sanctified. Pure water receives Grace and becomes holy water. But urine cannot become holy water. A stone is miraculously transformed into bread. But impurities do not receive sanctification. Consequently, the devil, the Antichrist, appearing in the form of his symbol on our ID card, on our forehead, or on our hand, is not sanctified, even if we place a cross there. We possess the power of the True Cross—this Holy Symbol—and the Divine Grace of Christ only when we preserve the Grace of Holy Baptism, in which we renounce Satan, are united with Christ, and receive the holy seal—“the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” But they, you see, explain everything with [such simple] logic!... Just make the sign of the cross nearby—and everything’s fine! But we see that the holy Apostle Peter outwardly denied Christ, yet even that was a denial.¹⁴⁹ By receiving the mark of the Antichrist, they renounce the seal of Christ given to them in Holy Baptism, and yet they still claim to have Christ within them!

— But what if, Geronda, someone accepts the mark out of ignorance?

— You’d better say, “out of indifference.” What ignorance is there when everything is crystal clear? Even if a person doesn’t know, he ought to inquire and find out. Let’s suppose we didn’t know and therefore accepted the mark. But then Christ will say to us: “*Hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times (uckyúmu).*”¹⁵⁰ By receiving the mark, even out of ignorance, a

¹⁴⁷ See Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20.

¹⁴⁸ See Rev. 13:16 ff.; 14:9 ff.; 16:2 and 20:4.

¹⁴⁹ See Matt. 26:69–75; Mark 14:4–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:16–18; 25–27.

¹⁵⁰ Matt. 16:3.

person loses Divine Grace and falls under demonic influence. Behold, when a priest immerses a child in the holy font during Baptism, the child, without even realizing it, receives the Holy Spirit, and thereafter Divine Grace dwells within him.

Interpretations of Prophecies

— Geronda, some people say, “Whatever is destined by God will come to pass. What business is it of ours?” How should we respond to this?

— Yes, my child, they may say that, but in reality, it’s not true! I, too, have heard some people say: “The Jews aren’t so foolish as to expose themselves with three sixes, since the evangelist John writes about this in the Book of Revelation. If that were the case, they would have arranged everything more cleverly and secretly.” All right, so what—didn’t the scribes and Pharisees know the Old Testament? Didn’t Annas and Caiaphas know better than anyone else what was written about Christ being betrayed for “*thirty pieces of silver*”?¹⁵¹ Why, then, did they [give Judas] not thirty-one or twenty-nine pieces of silver, but thirty? But they were blinded. God knew that everything would happen exactly this way. God foresees, but does not predetermine. Only the Turks believe in fate, in kismet.¹⁵² God knows that events will unfold in a certain way, and people, in their folly, do what God already knew would happen. Not because God issued a command regarding something; no, He sees how far human malice will go and knows that they will not change their minds. This does not mean that God predetermines events.

Others, meanwhile, are preoccupied with prophecies, to which they offer their own interpretations. They do not even qualify their statements by saying, “This is what my mind tells me,” but instead assert, “This is how it is!” and present a whole host of their own opinions. There are also those who interpret prophecies as they please in order to justify their own passions. For example, regarding the words of Saint Cyril: “It would be better if the signs of the Antichrist did not occur in our time”¹⁵³ — a person wishing to justify himself and his cowardice will say: “See? Saint Cyril was afraid that he would renounce the faith! And what about me—am I somehow better than Saint Cyril? Therefore, even if I were to renounce Christ, there’s nothing terrible about that!” Meanwhile, the saint says, “It would be better if they did not occur,” so that his eyes might not see the Antichrist—not because he was supposedly afraid. Do you see what the devil is doing?

Unfortunately, some modern Gnostics also swaddle their spiritual children like infants so that they won’t get upset. “It doesn’t matter,” they say, “it’s no big deal, as long as you have faith within yourselves.” Or they lament: “Don’t talk about this—about certificates, about the seal—so that people won’t get worried!” Whereas, if they were to say to people, “Let’s try to live more spiritually, to be close to Christ, and to fear nothing, for the worst that can happen is that we’ll become martyrs,” they would at least be preparing them in some way for the difficulties to come. Upon learning the truth, a person will reflect and shake off their slumber. They will feel pain at what is happening; they will pray and be on guard so as not to fall into a trap.

¹⁵¹ See Zech. 11:1–13.

¹⁵² Kismet, kismet (Arabic, lit. “allotment”)—that which is destined for each person by providence. —*Translator’s note.*

¹⁵³ “Oh, if only this were merely spoken, but may God grant that it not come to pass upon us!” Cf. *St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Works.* Moscow, 1855. Homily 15, 18. p. 262.

So what is happening now? Not only do such “interpreters” comment on prophecies in their own way, but they themselves are cowards, just like worldly people. Yet they ought to show spiritual concern and help Christians, instilling in them a healthy sense of concern so that they may be strengthened in their faith and experience divine comfort. I am amazed: does everything that is happening not make them pause to reflect? And why, after offering interpretations based on their own reasoning, do they not at least raise a question mark? What if they aid the Antichrist with his mark and lead other souls to destruction as well?! When the Gospel says, “*To lead astray, if possible, even the elect*” (¹⁵⁴), the Lord means that those who interpret the Scriptures based on their own reasoning will be led astray.

So, behind the “perfect credit card system” and computer security lies a global dictatorship—the yoke of the Antichrist. “...*Let them be marked on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that no one may buy or sell unless he has the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of its name. Here is wisdom. Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred sixty-six.*”^{155 156}

Chapter 2.

On How Sacrifice Brings Joy to a Person

In our age, self-sacrifice is a rarity

“Children are nothing but a nuisance,” a woman who had everything told me. Her children were a burden to her! If a mother thinks this way, she is good for nothing, since it is natural for a mother to have love. A mother may let her daughter sleep until ten in the morning before she gets married. However, once she herself becomes a mother and has to feed her child, bathe him, and care for him, she won’t even sleep at night because the engine

¹⁵⁴ Mark 13:22.

¹⁵⁵ Rev. 13:16–18.

¹⁵⁶ In 1997, a book by His Eminence Metropolitan Meletios of Nicopolis and Preveza, titled “The Mark of the Antichrist in Orthodox Tradition,” was published in Greece. In 2001, the Sisterhood of the Holy Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth published a Russian translation of the book in Moscow.

The book was received negatively by devout clergy, monastics, and God-loving laity of the Greek Orthodox Church. Reviews of the book pointed out that the Most Reverend author, by distorting Holy Scripture and the patristic sources, reaches conclusions that contradict the pan-ecclesiastical assessments set forth in the Circular Letters of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece dated April 7, 1997, and February 9, 1998, the Appeals of the Holy Community of Mount Athos, as well as the opinion of the Blessed Elder Paisios. The most comprehensive and successful theological refutation of Metropolitan Meletios’s book was published by the monks of the Holy Mountains of Meteora under the title “Παραχάραξη του χαράγματος. ‘A Refutation of the Positions of His Eminence Metropolitan Meletios of Nicopolis and Preveza in His Book “The Mark of the Antichrist in Orthodox Tradition.”’ — *Translator’s note.*

has started running. With a spirit of self-sacrifice, a person doesn't whine or feel burdened, but rejoices. That is the whole foundation: the spirit of self-sacrifice must be present. And this woman, if she were to say, "My God, how can I thank You? You have given me not only children, but also many blessings. So many people have nothing, yet I have several houses, an inheritance from my father, my husband's high salary, and I receive rent from two places!... I have no hardships. How can I thank You, my God? I was not worthy of all this." If she had thought that way, then along with the praise, the feeling of misfortune would have disappeared—that is, if she had only thanked God day and night, that alone would have been enough.

— Sacrifice, Geronda, brings joy.

— Oh, what kind of joy is that! The taste of this sacrificial joy is unknown to people today, and that is why they are so tormented. They have no ideals within themselves; they are weighed down by the very fact of being alive. Courage and self-sacrifice are the driving forces within a person. If this force is lacking, then a person suffers. In the old days, in the villages, people would work at night, quietly and carefully so that no one would see them, to clear a path—so that after their death, others would remember them. Nowadays, this spirit of sacrifice is rarely found. Once on Mount Athos, during a religious procession, I watched as the monks, walking along a path, caught their cloaks on a bush branch, yet not a single one broke it off to make the way easier for those walking behind; they all bent down so as not to snag their cloaks. It was as if they were bowing down to the bush! If it had at least been the Unburnt Bush, then that would have been fine! But everyone was thinking: "Let someone else do it; I just want to get through myself." But why shouldn't you do it, if you were the first to see that branch? After all, that's how worldly people behave—those who don't believe in God. What good is such a life to me? It would be a thousand times better to die. The point is to think of another person, of their pain.

The world has already lost control of itself. Love and self-sacrifice have vanished from people. I once told you about the state I was in when I was struck by a hernia in my cell on the Holy Mountain. When someone knocked with a hammer near the gate, I would go out into the snow [and the cold] to open it. If a person had serious problems, I didn't even feel my own pain, even though I had been [literally] pinned to the bed just moments before. I would offer the visitor something to eat or drink: with one hand I would serve them, and with the other I would hold my hernia in place. The whole time we were talking, despite the severe pain, I didn't lean against anything so that he wouldn't guess I was in pain. And when the visitor left, I would double over in pain again. It wasn't that the pain went away or that I was miraculously getting better—no. I saw that the other person was in pain, and I forgot my own pain. A miracle happens when you share in another's pain. The main thing is that you feel the person as a brother and feel pain for him. This pain touches God, and a miracle happens. Because there is nothing else that moves God so deeply as noble generosity—that is, self-sacrifice. But in our age, generosity is a rarity, because selfishness and greed have taken hold. It is rare to find a person who will say, "I will give my turn to another, and I myself will wait." How few are these blessed souls who think of others! Even among spiritual people, this repulsive spirit—the spirit of indifference—exists.

A good deed is truly good only if the one who performs it sacrifices something of his own: sleep, rest, and the like. That is why Christ said: "*...from your own deprivation...*"¹⁵⁷ When I do a good deed after having rested, it costs me little. However, if I am tired and, for example, go out to show the way to someone who asks for it,

¹⁵⁷ Luke 21:4.

then it costs a great deal. When, having slept well beforehand, I spend a sleepless night where my help is needed, the cost is small. If, on top of that, I enjoy the conversation, then I might even do it simply to take pleasure in the interaction and have a little fun. Whereas, when I'm tired and make a sacrifice to help another, I experience heavenly joy. Then I am overwhelmed by God's blessing.

But if a person finds it a burden not only to help another but even to do something for himself, then he grows weary even of rest itself. The one who helps his neighbor, however, finds rest from his weariness. If a person has a spirit of self-sacrifice, then upon seeing someone—for example, someone who is physically exhausted, working hard, and weary—he will say to him, “Sit down and rest a little,” and will do the work himself. The one who is exhausted will rest physically, while the one who helped him will experience spiritual refreshment. Whatever a person does, he must do it from the heart; otherwise, he does not grow spiritually. What is done from the heart does not wear one out. The heart is like a self-charging device: the more it works, the more it recharges. Look at a chainsaw: when it hits a rotten stump, it snorts “fr-r-r”... and stalls. But when it hits solid wood, it keeps going, recharges, and keeps sawing. And not only in giving, but also when we are about to take something, we must not think of ourselves, but always strive for what brings peace to another's soul. There must be no greed in us. We must not think that we have the right to take as much as we want, while leaving nothing for others.

— Once again, Geronda, it all comes back to the spirit of self-sacrifice.

— But that is the very foundation of the entire spiritual life! And do you know what joy a person feels when offering themselves as a sacrifice? They cannot express the joy they experience. The highest joy comes from sacrifice. Only by sacrificing does a person remain in communion with Christ, because Christ is the Sacrifice. It is here, too, that a person begins to experience heaven or hell. A person who does good rejoices, because he is rewarded for it with divine consolation. But the one who does evil experiences torment.

My own peace comes from bringing peace to another

— But how, Geronda, can a person make a sacrifice if he has not yet experienced the joy of sacrifice?

— By putting themselves in another's shoes. When I was in the army, our bunker was often flooded. The radio batteries needed changing, and that was no easy task because the line was busy. I was soaked to the waist, and my overcoat was practically dripping wet. However, so that others wouldn't have to suffer, I preferred to do this work myself, and I took joy in doing it. The commander would say to me, “When you do this work, I'm at ease, but I feel sorry for you. Tell someone else to do it.” —“No, Commander,” I replied, “I find joy in it.” There was another radio operator in our half-battalion, but when we went on missions, so as not to put him in danger, I wouldn't let him carry either the battery or the radio, even though it was hard for me. He asked me about it [and took offense]: “Why won't you let me carry them?” — “You,” I replied, “have a wife and children. If you're killed, I'll have to answer for it before God.” And so God preserved us both: He did not allow either of us to be killed.

For a sensitive person, it is better to be killed once while shielding another out of love than to show negligence or cowardice and suffer constant pangs of conscience for the rest of one's life. Once, during the civil war, a maneuver by the rebels cut us off from the rest of our forces behind a village. The soldiers were about to draw lots to decide who would go into the village for provisions. “I'll go,” I said. If someone inexperienced and inattentive had gone, he might have been killed, and my conscience would have tormented me afterward. “It

would be better,” I thought, “if they killed me rather than someone else, and my conscience would torment me for the rest of my life. How could I bear that?”—“You could have saved him,” my conscience would say to me, “so why didn’t you save him?” Besides, I was fasting and my stomach was empty... Anyway, fine. So the commander says to me, “I’d prefer it if you went, too—you’ll come out of the water dry, and you’ll just eat so you’ll have strength.” I grabbed my rifle and set off. The rebels mistook me for one of their own and let me pass. I arrived in the village and went into some two-story house. There was an old woman there; she gave me some food, and I returned to my unit.

I experienced the greatest joy that winter [in the mountains], amid the snow. I remember waking up one night. Everyone was asleep, and our tents were buried in snow. I crawled out of the tent, grabbed the radio, and started shaking the snow out of it. I looked—it was working. I ran to the commander and told him what was going on. That night, I dug twenty-six people suffering from frostbite out of the snow with a hoe.

I did nothing for Christ. If I had done for Christ even 10 percent of what I did in the war, I would be performing miracles right now! That’s why later, in monastic life, I used to say: “In the army, I endured such torments for the sake of the Fatherland, but what am I doing for Christ?” In other words, compared to the torments I endured in the army, in monastic life I felt like a prince—it didn’t matter at all whether I had a piece of dry bread or not. Because back there, during operations, do you know what kind of fast we kept? We ate snow! Others at least scoured the area and found something edible, but I was tied to the radio—I couldn’t leave it. Once we went without food for thirteen days: we were given only one soldier’s loaf of bread and half a herring each. I drank water from hoofprints—and not even clean rainwater, but water mixed with mud. And once I even got to taste “lemonade”! That time, my thirst had reached its limit, and then I saw a hoofprint full of water—yellow water! I drank and drank of it!... And that is why later, in monastic life, water—even if it was full of all sorts of bugs—seemed to me a great blessing. At least it looked like water.

And one evening, the cable communication line broke. It was December 1948. There were snowdrifts all around. At four o’clock in the afternoon, we were given the order: to go to the village (a two-hour walk), repair the line, and return. Two hours later—it was dark. The soldiers were dead tired and couldn’t muster the courage to keep going. And how on earth were we supposed to find the cable in all those snowdrifts!

“What, Geronda, didn’t you know the way or how the cable had been laid?”

“Well, I knew the general route, but night would have caught us on the road anyway. Long story short, they gave me a few men, and we set out. First, while we were still at our unit’s camp, we cleared the road of snow with shovels to reassure the commander, and advanced a short distance. Then I told them, “Come on, come on—we still have to get back!” I went first because the others were grumbling the whole time. “Ellada,” they told me, “can’t possibly perish, but here we are, perishing!” They kept repeating the same thing over and over! That’s how we made our way forward: I’d sink into the snow, they’d pull me out, I’d sink again, they’d pull me out again... I had a saber, and every so often I’d probe the snow ahead of me with it to find a place to step. I had to check constantly. I led the way and told them, “Come on, come on—livestock don’t walk here, so they can’t break the cable. We’ll get to some ravine where the cable hangs above the ground, and only there will we check it.” We finally reached a village, in front of which were terraces hidden from view by snowdrifts, and I fell from one of the terraces down into the snow. The others were too afraid to go any further or to come get me. Finally, we made our way down, scrambling from one terrace to the next—don’t even ask how—and entered the village late in the evening. In some ravines, in one or two spots, I found a cliff edge; we connected the cable and got in touch with the commander. “Turn back,” the commander told us. But how were we supposed to turn back? Not

only had night fallen, but we also had to somehow climb back up to the terraces! We'd come down in a headlong rush! How were we supposed to find our way back? "But how are we going to get back?" I asked the commander. "We managed to get down somehow, but how are we supposed to climb back up now? Let's just go back tomorrow morning: we'll leave from the other end of the village and make a loop." — "No 'let's' about it," said the commander, "today!" Luckily for us, the commander's aide overheard this conversation and pleaded with him to let us stay in the village for the night. So that's what we did. In one house, they gave us a couple of thick woolen blankets. I started to shiver: after all, I'd been walking in front, clearing the way, and was soaking wet. My comrades took pity on me—since I'd, so to speak, had it worse than the others—and put me in the middle. For supper that night, we had a single slice of soldier's bread. I don't recall ever experiencing greater joy in my life than I did then.

I had to give you these examples so that you would understand what sacrifice is. I told you all this not so that you would applaud me, but so that you would understand where true joy comes from.

And later, in the communications department, my coworkers would trick me. "My dad's coming to visit—I need to go see him. Can you cover for me, please?" one would say. "My sister's here to visit me," another would lie (she wasn't his sister at all). Whenever anyone else needed to step away for whatever reason, I'd make the sacrifice: I was constantly on duty, covering for one person or another. After my shift, I'd sweep the floors and tidy up. No one else was allowed to enter the communications platoon's quarters—not even officers from other departments—and besides, it was wartime. So we couldn't hire a cleaning lady. I'd grab a broom and sweep all the rooms. That's where I learned to sweep. "This," I'd say, "is a service area, a place that's sacred in a way; it can't be left untidy." I wasn't required to sweep, and I didn't even know how to do it: back home, I'd never once picked up a broom. And even if I'd wanted to pick one up, my sister would have immediately beaten me with that very same broom! "The cleaner," my coworkers teased me, "the eternal martyr." I paid no attention to that. And I didn't do it to hear "thank you," but because I felt it was necessary and it brought me joy.

— Geronda, did you never have any "improper" thoughts? For example, did you ever think, "So-and-so is out having fun instead of spending time with his sister"?

— No, I never had such thoughts. From the moment someone would say to me, "Please, could you cover for me for a little while?"—that was it; the matter was settled. And there was another who asked me for money, supposedly for his children, but not only did he fail to send it to them, he even asked his wife for money to spend on himself. Understand? And I didn't do it to hear "good job"—I felt it was necessary. I never left the unit's quarters; others took advantage of that and dumped all the work on me. I had to do the work of an entire platoon. A whole bunch of call signs, the relays clicking nonstop... I turned into a wreck back then. For a while, I had a fever of thirty-nine and five, and I didn't tell anyone about it. But then, from overexertion, I collapsed and lost consciousness. They threw me onto a stretcher, and I heard my comrades saying, "Well, Venedikt,¹⁵⁸ off to the repair shop—we're going to carry you on this stretcher to where they fix old cars." And they carried me to the hospital. There I was left unattended—who was there to look after me, when everyone was busy with the wounded?—but I felt joy. That joy which comes from sacrifice, because my own peace is born from bringing peace to another.

¹⁵⁸ That was the name of a well-known priest and preacher in those parts, and his fellow clergy, wishing to tease the Elder, called him Benedict.

The more we forget ourselves, the more God remembers us

The one who possesses a spirit of sacrifice and faith in God does not take himself into account. If a person does not cultivate a spirit of sacrifice within himself, then he thinks only of himself and wants others to sacrifice themselves for his sake. But the one who thinks only of himself becomes isolated from both people and God—a double isolation—and does not receive Divine Grace. Such a person is good for nothing. And consider this: after all, no one will support—even in a human sense—the one who constantly thinks only of himself, his difficulties, and so on, in a moment of need. It goes without saying that they will not receive divine support—that much is clear—but they will not receive human support either! Then this person will seek help here and there; that is, they will struggle to find help from others, but will be unable to find it. Conversely, God is constantly thinking about the person who does not think of himself but constantly thinks of others. And then other people think of him as well. The more a person forgets himself, the more God remembers him. For example, in a communal monastery, the one who possesses love for others sacrifices himself and gives himself to others. Do you think the others don't notice this? And how could they not think of this soul who gives herself entirely to others and thinks nothing of herself? And how could God not think of this soul? It is a great thing. In this, God's blessing is evident; the image of divine action is visible.

When faced with a difficult situation, a person is put to the test. True love and self-sacrifice are revealed in such moments. When we say that someone is self-sacrificing, we mean that in times of danger, they do not consider themselves but think of others. After all, as the proverb says, “A friend is known in times of trouble.” If, God forbid, bombs were to start falling right now, for example, it would become clear who thinks of others and who thinks only of themselves. But the one who has grown accustomed to thinking only of himself will, in a time of trouble, still think only of himself, and God will not think of such a person. If, however, someone learns in advance to think not of himself but of others, then even in times of danger he will also think of others. Then it will become clear who possesses true self-sacrifice and who is driven by self-love.

If a Christian does not begin right now to sacrifice something—some desire of his own, some selfishness—how will he ever reach the point where, in a time of trouble, he can sacrifice his life? And if he is now afraid of hard work and worried about not working harder than others, how will he ever reach the point where he will rush to give his life for another? If he is preoccupied with trivial matters concerning himself right now, how will he think of another at the very moment when his own life is in danger? It will be even harder then. If hard times come and such a person sees his neighbor, who has collapsed on the road in a fever, he will leave him lying there, walk away, and say, “I'd better go lie down myself, or I might collapse too.”

But in war, it's a struggle for lives—yours and someone else's. Courage lies in rushing to help another person, but without self-sacrifice, everyone strives to save themselves. But here's what's been observed: in war, a shell or a mine always finds the one who's trying to slip away. Such a person seems to want to avoid danger, but in doing so, they're only hastening their own demise. That's why you shouldn't try to escape danger, especially at the expense of others. I remember one incident that took place during the Albanian War.¹⁵⁹ One soldier had a stone slab, which he used to shield his head from bullets and shrapnel. When he needed to step aside for a moment, he placed the slab at the bottom of the trench, leaning it against the wall. Seeing this, his

¹⁵⁹ The Albanian War (or Albanian Front) was the war of 1940–41 between Greece and Fascist Italy. — *Translator's note.*

neighbor immediately grabbed the slab and took it for himself. “Now,” he thought, “a convenient opportunity has come up to take it for myself.” However, at that very moment, a mine exploded right on top of him, leaving not even a wet spot behind. Seeing shells exploding all around him, the unfortunate man grabbed the slab, but he didn’t think about the fact that its owner would return. He thought only of himself and found an excuse for his actions: “Since he’s gone, I can take this stove for myself.” Yes, he had left, but the stove was still his own. And yet another man shirked his duty the entire time the war was going on. He didn’t think of anyone else. Others gave their lives for their homeland—while he sat at home. Right up until the very last moment, when the situation grew dire, he tried to avoid danger. Then, when the British arrived, he made his way to their lines, introduced himself to Zervas¹⁶⁰, and, since he also held American citizenship, seized the opportunity and fled to America. But as soon as he reached it—he died immediately! His wife, poor thing, said, “He wanted to slip away from God!” So he died, while others who had been at war survived.

Those who die heroically do not die

I remember that in the army, we all shared a common goal. I did my best, but others were just as self-sacrificing—regardless of whether they believed in an afterlife or not. “Why should this man die? He’s the head of his family,” they would say, and then go off on a dangerous mission themselves. The sacrifice these people made was of greater value than that made by a believer. The believer trusted in divine truth and divine reward, whereas the non-believers did not know that the sacrifice they had chosen to make was not in vain, that they would be rewarded for it in the afterlife.

During the occupation, under Davakis,¹⁶¹ the Italians arrested young officers, loaded them onto a ship, and then sank it. After that, they began rounding up civilians; those they caught first were tortured to force them to name other residents who had weapons in their homes. If only you could have seen the self-sacrifice shown by ordinary people back then! In Konitsa, near our house—where the Church of Saint Cosmas of Aetolia now stands—there used to be a mosque. The arrested were locked up in the mosque and beaten all night with whips with barbed ends or stripped cables: they would extend the wire outside, tie pieces of lead to the ends, and beat people with these wires.

The steel wire tore off their skin. And so that the screams wouldn’t be heard, the Italians sang or played music. That’s where the expression “a slaughterhouse with music” came from. In addition, the unfortunate victims were hung upside down by their feet, and blood flowed from their mouths. But they remained silent because they thought: “If we confess (and they knew who had the rifles), then they’ll beat everyone else just as badly to force them to confess too.” So those who were captured first decided: “It’s better for us to die to prove that the others don’t have rifles.” Others, after one or five *ok*¹⁶² s of torture, told the enemy where weapons were

¹⁶⁰ Napoleon Zervas (1891–1957)—leader of the anti-fascist movement “National Greek Democratic Union,” which fought against the Nazis in Epirus and certain other regions of Greece. —*Translator’s note*.

¹⁶¹ Konstantinos Davakis (1897–1942) – a colonel in the Greek Army, a talented military commander, and commander of the independent Pindus Brigade in November 1940. The victory achieved by K. Davakis in the Pindus Mountains over the Italian “Giulia” Mountain Infantry Division marked the first major defeat of the fascist bloc in World War II. – *Translator’s note*.

¹⁶² Oka—a unit of weight equal to 1,280 grams. —*Translator’s note*

hidden. There was famine, and people became traitors. Some Italians from the battalion, recruited from illegitimate children, were true barbarians with all the complexes of barbarians. They took out their anger on others. They would grab little children, strip them naked—those poor things—sit them on red-hot iron tongs, and press down with their feet so their bodies would burn. They tortured the children to force their parents to confess who had rifles. “I don’t have any, I don’t have any!”—the adults would scream, while the torturers burned their children. I want to say that many chose to die—even though they were ordinary people—so that others would not be tortured or killed. By doing so, they saved many lives. And so, thanks to a few heroes, we survived as a people.

Those who die heroically do not truly die. But if there is no heroism, expect nothing good. Know also that a person of faith will be courageous! Makriyannis,¹⁶³ —what a tragedy that he survived! And in what years!

— He once said, Geronda: “My eyes are clouded.”

— Yes, his eyes were clouded. From the strain and anxiety he endured, his eyes seemed to smoke. Living in difficult times, he constantly sacrificed himself out of pain and love. He didn’t think of himself; he never put himself first. Fighting for his homeland, he wasn’t afraid of death. Makriyannis experienced profound spiritual states. If he had become a monk, I think he would have differed little from Anthony the Great. Despite his wounds and injuries, he would perform three thousand prostrations [a day]. When he prostrated himself, his wounds would open, his entrails would spill out, and he would put them back in place himself. Three of my prostrations are worth one of his. The floor in front of him was wet with tears. And what if we were in his place? We would have run to the hospital to get medical help! Worldly people will judge us!

He who does not take himself into account receives divine strength

— And during the war, Geronda, did you ever find yourself in danger?

— Oh! Was it just once or twice? It’s only now, as I reflect on how God helped [me], that I get very emotional. But back then, I didn’t think about it. Especially death—I didn’t think about it at all. When you’ve resolved to die, nothing frightens you. The resolve to die is equal in strength to a thousand bodyguards. Death is safety. In war, the emblem of a unit of sacred volunteers is a skull. This means: they’ve resolved to die. Whoever forgets about themselves for the sake of another person or for the common good receives divine power. And look—if a person is driven by self-sacrifice, God protects them. I remember how once we took cover behind a cliff. I dug a small trench and took a little shelter in it. One guy crawled over: “Let me in,” another crawled over: “Me too.” I let them climb into the trench because they asked me to, while I stayed outside. At night, when heavy artillery fire began, a piece of shrapnel grazed my head. I wasn’t wearing a helmet, just a hood. “Guys,” I shouted, “I’ve been hit by shrapnel!” I felt my head with my hand—I didn’t feel any blood; I felt it again—nothing at all! The shrapnel just grazed my head slightly and only shaved off the hair from my forehead to the crown: it left a bare strip six centimeters wide on my head.

¹⁶³ Ioannis Makriyannis (1797–1864)—Major General, national hero of Hellas. One of the most self-sacrificing fighters against the Turks during the Greek Revolution (1821–1830). Author of “Memoirs” about the revolution and the struggle for liberation. The life of I. Makriyannis is a wonderful example of self-sacrificing Christian love for God, one’s neighbor, and one’s homeland. — *Translator’s note.*

You didn't live through the hard years, during the occupation; you didn't see war, enemies, or grief. I hope you never have to see any of that, but that's precisely why you don't understand what it's like. However, our times are like a boiling, hissing cauldron. We need resilience, courage, and bravery. If something happens, make sure you aren't caught completely unprepared. Prepare yourselves now so that you can stand up to difficulties. And as Christ said: "...*be ready*,"¹⁶⁴ isn't that right? Today, living in such difficult times, we must be not just ready, but thrice ready—if not more! Perhaps we will have to face not only sudden death, but other dangers as well. So, let us cast aside any desire to make ourselves comfortable! May love be at work within us, and may the spirit of self-sacrifice be present.

Right now, I can see that something is in the works—it's about to happen but keeps getting postponed. There are constant small delays. Who's pushing back these deadlines? Is God the one pushing them back? "Just one more month," "just two more!"... That's how it goes.¹⁶⁵ But since we don't know what lies ahead, cultivate within yourselves, as much as you can, love. This is the most important thing: that there be true, brotherly love between you, not false love. If there is genuine concern, compassion, and love, a person will always act correctly. Kindness and love are a source of strength. Keep secrets as best you can, and don't be too open: after all, if the secret is known "only by you, me, him, and the bell-ringer Simeon," what good will come of it? Even out of simple foolishness, you can do harm and then beat your head against the wall. You should see how they keep secrets in the army! If you realized you might be taken prisoner, the first thing you had to do was destroy your call signs: cut the note into pieces and swallow them. Once, when I found myself in a dangerous situation, that's exactly what I did, because if the call signs had fallen into the hands of the rebels, they would have learned that [our] troops were in such-and-such a place, that they had no food, and so on. And then they would have sent a radio message to [our] headquarters, asking [our] air force to fly in and drop supplies for them—and bombs on our heads. Understand? [Knowing the call signs], they would have contacted headquarters on behalf of the government army. If you were a radio operator and were taken prisoner, they would pull out your fingernails with pliers to make you reveal the call signs. And you would rather have your fingernails torn out than be a traitor. To force one [radio operator] to reveal the contents of a radio message, they burned his armpit with fire, yet he did not confess—as if he had gone numb. He did not reveal the secrets to the enemy and thus became a martyr. And women carried documents for the army on the backs of mules and were ready to die.

Death in war can greatly appease God, because a person who dies a brave death sacrifices himself to protect others. Those who, out of pure love, sacrifice their lives to protect their fellow human beings, their neighbors, follow the example of Christ. These people are the greatest heroes; even death itself fears and trembles before them, because out of love they despise death and thus attain immortality, finding beneath the tombstone the key to eternity and effortlessly entering into eternal bliss.

A monk's entire life is a sacrifice

A monk's entire life naturally helps him to cultivate love and self-sacrifice. He set out on his journey in order to die for Christ. This means he set out on his journey for the sake of sacrifice. A monk has no [worldly]

¹⁶⁴ Matt. 24:44; Luke 12:40.

¹⁶⁵ Delivered in November 1984.

obligations, so he must cultivate a spirit of self-sacrifice within himself. A layperson did not set out to die for Christ, and besides, he has worldly obligations: he cares for his family and his children; therefore, the demands placed on him are not as strict—he has an excuse. For example, in war, a family man strives to avoid danger so that his children won't be left on the street. He doesn't think about the fact that if he avoids danger, someone else—who also has children—might be killed instead. Well, that's still somewhat acceptable: here, at least, there is concern for one's family. "My children," such a person might say, "will be left on the street." He may, without believing in any other life at all, strive to save this one.

— So, Geronda, does a monk have to constantly sacrifice himself?

— After all, we've already said that a monk's entire life is a sacrifice. Otherwise, why do we become monks? If a monk falls short in this regard, he is not a monk. What kind of spiritual struggle can we even speak of then? If there is no sacrifice, there is no room for spiritual struggle. And if there is no sacrifice, then no matter how hard a monk tries to live spiritually, it will all be in vain. On the Holy Mountain, they say that such a spiritual life is like a garden scarecrow: a monk leading such a spiritual life cannot even cast out demons—for him, chasing away a crow would be an achievement in itself. When a person fervently takes up the task that lies before him in this life, the divine flame burns within him as well. If this divine flame is absent, he is good for nothing. This flame gives him joy, gives him courage, and gives him love. This is what the Lord said: "*I have come to bring fire on the earth...*"¹⁶⁶ When this divine fire is present, both the psalm-singing and the monk's prayer—whether for himself or for others—bear fruit. A woman's heart, in particular, when purified, possesses great power and excels greatly in prayer, becoming "a radar." But the one who lacks love and sacrifice will experience either worldly joy or worldly distress; such a person cannot experience spiritual joy.

That is why I say to you: cultivate self-sacrifice and brotherly love. May each of you attain a spiritual state so that, when faced with a difficult situation, you may be able to extricate yourselves from it on your own. Without being in a spiritual state, a person cowers because they love themselves. They may even renounce Christ; they may betray Him. You must be prepared to die. Look at those worldly people over there—who don't even believe in Paradise—yet they sacrifice themselves. But we believe that nothing is in vain, that there is meaning in our sacrifice. Worldly people, in complete ignorance, will sacrifice themselves and put their lives in danger to protect another—and monks will not offer themselves as a sacrifice? We set out on this path in order to die for the love of Christ. We have no worldly obligations, and if we lack even a spirit of sacrifice, then what are we doing at all? Even the ants will laugh at us! Have you seen how ants mock people? They mock the lazy ones!

— Geronda, is it possible that I'm willing to help others, but my motives aren't pure?

— That's always evident. When one's motives aren't pure, the spirit finds no rest; it understands this and strives to purify them. I was deeply impressed by the soul of a woman who came to see me the other day. Upon learning that someone is sick and suffering, she can't sleep—she agonizes and weeps. And yet she herself lives a worldly life. She shared what was happening to her with someone, and in response received: "Perhaps this is a temptation from the enemy." But can such a thing really stem from temptation? The devil can deceive a person only if they do such things for show, and then their experiences will be false.

¹⁶⁶ Luke 12:49.

Remove your “self” from your actions. When a person steps out of their “self,” they step out of the earth and move into a different atmosphere. As long as a person remains within themselves, they cannot become a heavenly being. There can be no spiritual life without sacrifice. Remember, at least a little, that death exists. And since we’re all going to die anyway, let’s not be too careful with ourselves. Not to the point of neglecting our health, but also not to the point of bowing down to comfort. I’m not calling on you to throw yourself into dangerous adventures, but come on, my brother, you’ve got to have at least a little bit of heroism! With what courage the heroes faced death during the war! One monk who fought alongside Kondilis¹⁶⁷ (Kondilis was a patriot, a hero) told me that during the War of Asia Minor, when the Greeks were landing a marine assault force near Constantinople, Kondilis was on a ship and, as soon as he saw Constantinople in the distance, began to act like a madman. “Come on, guys,” he shouted, “if we’re going to die, let’s die! Whether today or tomorrow! If we’re going to die, let’s die like heroes! Hey, guys! Let’s die as heroes for our Motherland!” He couldn’t even wait for the ship to dock. Because of the tension and his intense desire, he didn’t notice that the ship hadn’t yet reached the shore—he jumped and fell into the sea. That’s how fiercely he was burning with passion! He didn’t know how to swim: the others ran over and pulled him out of the water.

— Geronda, you said that we must strive to free every action of ours from our “self.” How can we do that?

— You want everything handed to you on a silver platter. What does it mean to set aside your “self”? When do I set aside my “self”? How can we banish our “self” from our love? How can we purify our love? To the extent that I do not take myself into account, to that extent I banish my “self.” And by setting aside our will, our weakness, and our peace, we also remove our “self.” Through obedience and silence, much disappears from our sense of self. When our love is selfless, we also banish our “self,” but there must also be sacrifice in our love. Do you understand this? For example, a nun wants to go see the Mother Superior and notices that another sister also wants to see her. If the first sister immediately yields her turn to the other, even knowing that the other sister has no particular problems, then she demonstrates obedience, self-sacrifice, and the like. And when she wholeheartedly yields her place to the other and does not speak with the Mother Superior, Christ Himself will speak to her. However, she must realize that this is necessary; she must do it because her heart has prompted her to do so, and not simply because “that is what the Holy Fathers say.” In this way, she receives a double portion of God’s grace. And in this case, one sister receives spiritual help in a human way, while the other receives help in a divine way, directly from Christ.

Observe also those worldly people who display a self-sacrifice that even monks lack. I notice that in the world, even though people may not believe, may have weaknesses and passions, they—as God arranges it—have a tender heart. They see someone in need and, even if they do not know him, offer him help. Many people, who do not even believe in the existence of Heaven, upon seeing some danger, rush to avert it, are willing to sacrifice their own lives so that others may live, and hasten to give away their possessions to others. Many years ago, at a factory, a worker got caught in a machine and was being pulled into it. Even though there were many men around, it was a woman who rushed to save him. The men—so “brave”—stood there watching. But she pulled him out of the machine; then her dress got caught, she was pulled into the machine, and she died. A martyr! What a great deed!

¹⁶⁷ Georgios Kondylis (1879–1936)—a prominent Greek military and political figure. An active participant in the hostilities in Asia Minor in the 1920s. In subsequent years, he held the posts of Minister of Defense, Minister of the Interior, and Prime Minister of Greece.
—*Translator’s note.*

People like this don't think of themselves: they cast aside their "self." And when they cast it aside, Christ rushes into them.

Chapter 3.

On How Courage Is Born of Trust in God

There is no barbarism in courage

Feats are accomplished not by those who are tall, but by those who possess courage, a generous heart, and the resolve to sacrifice themselves. And in war, those who possess courage also possess kindness and do not kill others, because there is no barbarism in courage. Such people do not shoot at the enemy, but around him, forcing him to surrender. A kind person would rather be killed than kill. A person with this mindset embraces divine powers. Evil people, on the other hand, are cowardly and fainthearted; they mask their fear with arrogance, fearing both themselves and others, and so, out of fear, they shoot without stopping. When I was serving in the military during the civil war, we once entered a village. "There aren't any bandits here," the locals told us, "they've all left. Only one crazy woman is left." One of our men spotted this woman from a distance and fired two bursts at her from a submachine gun. "What have I done to you?" the poor woman cried out and fell to the ground.

— Did he do it out of fear?

"Yes, out of fear. People of that sort look for easy solutions for themselves. 'It's better to finish off the enemy,' they say, so they won't have any doubts. A less cowardly person would be less cruel. He would try to incapacitate the enemy—for example, by injuring his arm or leg—but he wouldn't kill him.

Courage and bravery are one thing, but malice and criminality are quite another. Taking enemies prisoner just to slit their throats is not courage. True courage would be to capture the enemy, break his rifle, and set him free. That's exactly what my father did. When he caught the Chets—¹⁶⁸—who were raiding Farasy, he took their rifles, broke them, and said, "You're women, not men." After that, he set them free. And once, he dressed up as a wealthy Turkish woman, went to their camp, and asked for the leader. He had arranged in advance with his men for them to launch an attack as soon as they heard the signal. When the bandits led him to the leader, my father said to him, "Have your men leave and leave us alone." As soon as they were alone, my father snatched the rifle from the leader, snapped it in half, and said to the bandit, "Now you're a woman, and I'm Eznépidis!"¹⁶⁹ Then he gave the signal, his men rushed in, and drove the bandits out of the village.

To succeed, one must have a wild streak—in the best sense of the word. Depending on how a person uses that wild streak, he becomes either a saint or a hero. However, if such a person strays from the path and gets carried away by evil, he can become a criminal. Someone who lacks that reckless streak can become neither a saint nor a hero. And that is why our inner motor must be ignited; our heart and courage must kick into gear.

¹⁶⁸ Turkish bandits. See also in the book: *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos*. Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1997. pp. 22, 74

¹⁶⁹ The Elder's surname.

The heart must become reckless. I know many retired officers who, out of frustration, can't find their place in life. Some of them want a war to break out so they can be in the thick of things—that's how fiercely they burn inside. Others, as soon as they receive a draft notice, start trembling all over, while still others pretend to be crazy to avoid being drafted. How many retirees have told me they want to go to Bosnia and fight! Having failed to apply their courage to the spiritual life, they rejoice at the prospect of fighting when they hear of war. Do you know what feats, what spiritual struggles these mighty men would have undertaken had they known the spiritual life? They would have become saints.

What courage there was in the old days

— Geronda, you once told us something about your grandmother...

— My grandmother was a very brave woman. Just in case, for safety's sake, she always carried a yatagan with her.¹⁷⁰ There you go—a widow with two children, surrounded by Turks, but she had to go on living... Those were hard times... Everyone was afraid of her. She was a real heroine! Once, a bandit snuck into a vineyard near the cemetery. To scare people, he put on a long, white shirt that reached down to his heels. Then, after leaving the vineyard, he walked into the cemetery still wearing the white shirt and started wandering around there. It so happened that my grandmother was passing through the cemetery at that very moment. When the bandit saw her, he flopped down on the ground and pretended to be dead, hoping she'd mistake him for a ghoul and be frightened. However, my grandmother walked up to him and said, "If you were a decent person, the earth would have swallowed you up long ago!" And with that, she began beating the villain with the blunt side of her yatagan! She maimed him. She didn't even know who he was. Only later, back in the village, did she hear that so-and-so had been maimed, and that's how she found out who it was.

In our time, courage is a rarity. People are weak-willed. Therefore, if—God forbid—a war were to break out, some would die of fear, while others would lose heart even at the slightest trial, because they've grown accustomed to a comfortable life. But in the old days, what courage there was! At the Flavian Monastery in Asia Minor, the Turks captured and killed a Christian man. Then they told his wife, "Either you renounce Christ, or we'll slaughter your children too." —"Christ has taken my husband," she replied, "I entrust my children to Christ, and I myself will not renounce Christ!" What courage! If Christ does not live within a person, how can courage live within them? But today, people without Christ build their entire lives on rubbish.

In those days, the mothers were brave, and so were the children. I remember how, in Konitsa, our neighbor—who was pregnant—went alone to the field to hill the corn, even though it was an hour and a half's walk. There she gave birth to a baby, wrapped him in her skirt, and returned to the village. "I have a baby!" she boasted as she walked past our door. It was the occupation—those were hard times. But now there are women who, out of fear, spend six or seven months in bed just to give birth to a single child. I'm [of course] not talking about those who do so because of illness.

¹⁷⁰ A large, curved Turkish dagger. — *Translator's note.*

Natural fear is a hindrance

— Geronda, I'm very timid. I don't know what I'll do if I find myself in a difficult situation. Where does fear come from?

— Perhaps something happened to someone in childhood, and that is why they are afraid. Often, fear can be natural, but it can also stem from a lack of faith, from a lack of trust in God. However, fear is also a [necessary] brake, because it helps a person turn to God. In fear— —in the search for something to cling to, a person is forced to cling to God. Take, for example, hot countries where savages live; there are also wild animals there—large beasts, anacondas, and so on. This is so that people are compelled to seek help from God, to turn to God, in order to find their bearings. If this were not the case, what could possibly restrain these people in any way? There is a purpose in everything God has arranged.

— And those who, not knowing the true God, ask for help out of fear—do they receive it?

— Look: they lift their heads upward, and that already means something. And for small children, fear acts as a brake. There are children who, if you don't scare them a little, won't listen to anyone—neither their mother nor their father. And when I was little, they used to tell me, "The bogeyman is coming!" It's natural for little ones to be afraid. But as the child grows up and matures—and so does his mind—the fear recedes. Natural fear helps only in childhood. If a person, having become an adult, is afraid of an empty space, then he is to be pitied. Some spiritual people come to me in my kaliva and say: "Someone close to us has died, and because of that, we're constantly afraid." And they ask me to pray that this fear will leave them. "But here," I reply, "people try to keep death in mind, and someone close to you has died, and you want to drive this fear away?!"

Women tend to have a slightly greater natural fear. There are few women who aren't afraid. However, such women can cause problems in the family because they don't submit. A man, too, can become bold if he isn't a coward by nature and has courage in his heart. And some women are terrible cowards. It's a great achievement if a woman who is naturally fearful begins to strive and gains courage. A woman possesses self-sacrifice by nature and is therefore capable of great self-denial, which a man, despite all his natural courage, lacks.

Death fears the one who does not fear death

— Geronda, how is fear cast out?

— By courage. The more a person fears, the more the enemy tempts him. One who harbors cowardice must strive to cast it out. When I was little, I was afraid to walk past the cemetery in Konitsa. So I slept in the cemetery for three nights, and the fear went away. I would cross myself and go in there; I didn't even turn on my flashlight so as not to scare anyone. If a person does not strive to become courageous and does not attain true love, then when a difficult situation arises, even the chickens will weep for him.

— So, Geronda, is it possible to perform a heroic deed and rid oneself of fear?

— You should rejoice that you are dying so that others may live. If you set your mind in this way, nothing is frightening. Courage is born of great kindness, love, and self-sacrifice. But today, people don't even want to hear about death. I've learned that those who work in the funeral business write "Funeral Services" on their signs instead of "Funeral Home" so as not to remind people of death. However, if people do not remember death, they live outside of reality. Those who fear death and love a vain life are afraid even of germs; they are constantly overcome by fear, which keeps them in spiritual stagnation. Bold people, on the other hand, are never afraid of death and therefore strive with zeal and self-sacrifice. By keeping death before their eyes and thinking about it

daily, they prepare for it more spiritually and strive with greater boldness. Thus, they overcome vanity and begin to live in eternity and heavenly joy even here on earth. And let the one who fights in war for his ideals, for the Faith and the Fatherland, make the sign of the cross and not be afraid, for he has God as his helper! If a person makes the sign of the cross and entrusts his life into God's hands, then God Himself will judge whether that person was meant to live or die.

— But is it possible for a person not to feel fear due to recklessness?

— That is much worse, because in a dangerous situation such a person may find themselves in serious trouble and pay dearly for all their recklessness. Therefore, those who fear even a little are cautious and will not recklessly rush into danger. One must compel oneself to do good,¹⁷¹ but place one's trust in God, not in oneself.

The importance of boldness is great

In an extreme situation, the greatest harm comes from the panic that sets in. When in danger, the most important thing is not to lose your composure. Just look at how a chicken takes on an eagle and charges right at it! And look at how a cat fights a dog to protect its kittens! It raises its tail high and starts hissing menacingly! An animal goes all in, while a person turns out to be a coward!

Don't give in to panic. Women are especially prone to panic. I remember how, during the occupation, we happened to go to a place about a two-hour walk from Konitsa. The boys went [a little] ahead, found some Greek soldiers' helmets and uniforms there, put them on, and went to the chapel of Saint Constantine. I went there too, to venerate the icons. I was fifteen years old at the time. As soon as the mothers saw the children in military uniforms from a distance, they started shouting, "The Italians are coming!"—and got ready to run. They didn't even look to see who it was! The pranksters had put on Greek helmets, and the frightened mothers, mistaking them for Italians, ran away from their own children!

The importance of boldness is great. If you tell a physically healthy but cowardly person, "Oh, you look so pale! What's wrong with you?"—he'll go to the doctor, even though he might be pale because he didn't get enough sleep, or because he had a toothache, or something like that. A Greek will either charge forward or start to panic. Cowards are good for nothing. In war, no one needs cowards; they aren't trusted. They aren't sent on missions or to the front lines so they won't cause problems. A single cowardly soldier, if he doesn't know the battle plan, can stir up such panic that he'll throw an entire division into disarray! Fear stirs a coward's imagination, and he might start shouting: "There they are! Oh no, they're coming—they're already here—they're killing us! Oh, where can we run?! There are so many enemies! They'll swallow us whole!" Such a person will cause a great deal of harm, because people are easily swayed by others. A brave man, however, upon seeing the enemies, will simply spit and say, "Pah, are these even people? They're just ants!"—and the rest [hearing these words] will also boldly rush into the attack. That is why they say in the army that a difficult task is better carried out with a cool head by five brave men than by twenty cowards.

— So, Geronda, in a difficult and dangerous situation, external dangers are not as frightening as internal ones.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Matt. 11:12.

— Yes, that’s exactly right. And the Turks wouldn’t have taken Souli¹⁷² if Pili Yus, who was himself from Souli, hadn’t betrayed it. He led the Turks along a secret path. Take this example: five villages were united, and by joining forces, they managed to stand up to Ali Pasha himself,¹⁷³ who was so powerful that he even defied the sultan.¹⁷⁴ The people of Souli were right under Ali Pasha’s nose, yet they gave him a real run for his money. And just how brave and united the women there were! They took up carbines, too.

Discipline

— Geronda, if a lack of discipline is the norm in a group, will its members be able to show discipline when a difficult situation arises?

— During a fire, no one does whatever comes to mind; on the contrary, everyone acts on command. The person in charge monitors the situation and tells others what to do. Otherwise, people might cause a panic and, instead of putting out the fire, fan the flames even more. Once, I was returning to the Holy Mountain. When our little boat was between the Vatopedi and Pantokrator monasteries, a northeasterly wind blew up and a storm arose. The boatman steered the little vessel against the waves, because otherwise we would have sunk. One coward from Ierissos,¹⁷⁵ who knew nothing about ships or seafaring—he kept mules—began to shout: “What are you doing, huh? You’ll sink us! Can’t you see? He’s going to take us to Kavala¹⁷⁶ like that!” Then all the passengers jumped up and swarmed around the boatman, and he, poor fellow, kept saying, “Leave me alone, I know what I’m doing!” Fortunately, one of the passengers was a sailor and calmed the others down: “Leave him alone—he knows what he’s doing! We need to steer so we cut across the waves.” If that sailor hadn’t been there, the ship would have sunk, because the passengers wouldn’t have let the helmsman do his job. You see how it went: one guy turned out to be a coward, panic broke out, everyone on board jumped up and could have sent the ship to the bottom. But then, for situations like that, there’s always a second engineer who’ll take the helm if the captain is [truly] unable to steer the ship.

Greeks are generally not easy to command. Roman Catholics believe in papal infallibility, but we Greeks believe in our own judgment, and so it turns out that we all possess... infallibility! Why is it considered that the Turks pursue good policies? Because there are few intelligent people among the Turks; most of them are not particularly quick-witted. Therefore, among the Turks, the few who are intelligent rise to become leaders, and the rest obey them naturally. The Greeks, on the other hand, being very intelligent in the overwhelming majority, all without exception want to rule and give orders, and they obey with great difficulty.

¹⁷² Suli—a confederation of several villages in Epirus (a region of Greece) that enjoyed independence during Turkish rule and waged an armed struggle against the conquerors from 1790 to 1893. — *Translator’s note*.

¹⁷³ Ali Pasha (Tepelenli), 1714–1820—the famous pasha of Ioannina, son of the bandit chieftain Velis, who waged brutal wars against the Souliotes, came into conflict with the sultan, and was killed in 1820. — *Translator’s note*.

¹⁷⁴ Sultan – ruler of Turkey – originally the title of the leaders of the Ottoman Empire and later of the heads of any Muslim state.

¹⁷⁵ Ierissos—a port on the eastern coast of the Chalkidiki Peninsula, to which a passenger boat operating along the northeastern coast of Mount Athos is assigned. — *Translator’s note*.

¹⁷⁶ Kavala—a city and port in Northern Greece, within sight of Mount Athos. — *Translator’s note*

And the Italians used to say, “Out of ten Greeks, five want to be commanders!” Suppose we’re planning to go somewhere. One might know a shorter path, another a different one from the opposite side, a third yet another... “No, let’s go this way—it’s better,” one will insist. “No, let’s go that way,” another will object. Ultimately, if no one gives the order, hours or even days may pass, and the travelers will never set out on their journey and will remain in the very same place. However, if one person who knows the way takes charge, then even if the route he suggests is slightly longer, they will eventually reach their destination. Of course, it is best if the one in charge knows the shortest route. But even if the route he knows is the longest, by obeying his command, the travelers will still reach their destination.

God looks at a person’s disposition and helps them

— If time presents us with serious difficulties, and we lack spiritual fortitude, will you be able to stand firm with nothing but a good disposition?

— Of course you can! God looks at a person’s disposition and helps him. Moreover, even those who, at first glance, seem to lack courage often display great bravery in difficult moments. I remember there was a young lieutenant in our army who never showed any self-sacrifice or courage. But once, when the rebels were about to take us prisoner, he took cover behind a chapel and, armed with a single automatic rifle, held them off until we retreated. That’s how we were saved. From there, he fired bursts—up and down, left and right—and prevented the mutineers from advancing. And then he ran off so we wouldn’t see him.

And afterward, he didn’t even say, “I held them off, and that’s why you were able to escape...,” to boast about his heroism. We all said back then, “One machine gun saved us!” And he kept repeating, “One machine gun saved us.” He said exactly what everyone else was saying. But then we figured him out: we started recalling that so-and-so had been there with everyone else, and so-and-so too, and realized that only that lieutenant hadn’t been there. That’s how we figured out it was him. And do you know what would have happened to him if he’d been captured by the rebels? They wouldn’t have spared him; they would have taken out all their anger on him, saying, “You’ve caused us so much harm—come here, and we’ll pull out your fingernails with pliers!” A man of the world, and yet he made such a sacrifice! He made that sacrifice because he put himself in greater danger than any of us. But are you ready to make such a sacrifice? This lieutenant hadn’t read the Holy Fathers, nor did he know anything about the spiritual life. I knew him; there was simplicity and honesty in him. And there were others: those who, upon finding a slain rebel, would cut off his head and parade it through the village, pretending to be heroes! That is why courage alone is not enough; a person must also possess a spirit of self-sacrifice so that courage may have a firm foundation in the soul.

Let us face dangers with spiritual strength

Resourcefulness and courage are always needed in critical moments. During the occupation, the Italians would take five or six mules, come to our field, and load their mules with melons. Once I told them, “We’ve set these melons aside for seeds; you’d better take those ones over there.” Then one Italian raised his whip and asked me, “Do you see this?” I touched the whip with my hand, looked at it, and said, “Bone!”—as if to say, “What a fine whip!” It was as if he were showing it to me so I could see what a beautiful thing it was! The Italian’s anger vanished immediately; he laughed and walked away. I remember another incident from the Civil War. Two [of our] soldiers came to the melon patch to ask the owner for a melon and some tomatoes. They left

their rifles aside and went deeper into the garden. As soon as the owner spotted them from a distance, he grabbed his rifle and started aiming at them. Then one of the soldiers grabbed a red tomato and shouted, “Drop your weapon, or I’ll throw a grenade at you right now!” The man dropped his weapon, jumped up, and ran away.

— What resourcefulness and courage!...

— And another soldier hung his burka on a wild pear tree. Soon a rebel came down from the mountains and tried to capture that soldier. Then the soldier turned toward where the burka was hanging in the distance and shouted, “Commander, what should I do with him?” And then, as if receiving a signal from his commander, he barked at the bandit, “Surrender your weapon!” He snatched the rifle from the bandit and disarmed him.

— Was the burqa the commander, Geronda?

“Yes, the burqa! You see: there was only one soldier, and he had only one burqa, yet he took the rifle from an armed man! In this way, he collected a whole pile of rifles from the rebels. That takes courage! I also remember a Russian cell-dwelling monk on the Holy Mountain. Once, bandits came to rob him. As they were climbing over the wall, he leaped down on them from above and bellowed, “So, do you want a bullet from a Colt or a Nagant?!” They took off running. And another monk, when robbers came to his cell, grabbed a frying pan and pretended to be calling someone, as if on the phone: “Hello, I’m being attacked by robbers!”—and things like that. They thought he was calling the police and ran away. And here’s another story: a burly brute, a real giant, grabbed a shepherd by the throat to choke him. The poor shepherd’s eyes bulged so wide with fear that the brute even asked, “Why are you staring at me so wildly?” “I’m looking to see which tree to throw you into,” the shepherd croaked. The villain got scared and let him go!...

That’s why I say you shouldn’t panic. You have to keep your cool and use your head. Because if you don’t use your head, you might even commit treason out of sheer stupidity. No matter what happens, you have to pray, think, and act. The best thing is to always try to face a difficult situation with spiritual strength. However, today there is a lack of courage in both its forms. There is neither spiritual courage—which arises from holiness and boldness before God and helps one overcome difficulties spiritually—nor natural courage, which is needed to keep from cowering in a dangerous situation. In order to hold back some great evil, one must possess great holiness; otherwise, there will be no foundation for overcoming evil. If someone in the monastic community possesses spiritual courage, you will see how that monk will pin down anyone who comes with evil intent: one foot in the monastery courtyard, the other outside its walls! He will “shoot” the evildoer in the head spiritually: not with a pistol, but with his prayer beads; he will pray just a little, and the villain will remain motionless. He will freeze like a sentry!¹⁷⁷ If there is someone in the brotherhood who is in a spiritual state, then he will halt evil, help people, and serve as a guardian for the monastery. The Myrrh-Bearers paid no heed to anything, because they were in a spiritual state and trusted in Christ. After all, if they had not been in a spiritual state, would they have trusted Him, and would they have done what they did?

In the spiritual life, even the greatest coward can gain great courage if he entrusts himself to Christ and to divine help. He will be able to go to the front lines, fight the enemy, and win. As for those unfortunate people who want to do evil, they are afraid, even if they have courage. Because they feel guilty and rely solely on their own barbarity. A man of God, however, has divine strength, and justice is on his side as well. There—a little dog barks just a little, and the wolf already runs away, because he feels guilty. God has arranged it so that even

¹⁷⁷ See *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos*. The Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1997. p. 72.

a wolf fears a little mutt, because in the master's house, truth is on the dog's side. How much more does a person who wants to do evil fear one who has Christ within him! Let us therefore fear God alone, and not people, no matter how evil they may be. The fear of God turns even the greatest coward into a hero. The more a person is united with God, the less he fears anything.

God will help in times of trouble. But in order for God to grant divine strength, a person must also give the little that he or she is able to give.

Chapter 4.

On the fact that for a believer, martyrdom is a triumph

For the situation to improve, some will have to fall in battle

Hard times are ahead!... A shake-up awaits us. Do you know what a shake-up is? If you aren't at least a little spiritually grounded, you won't be able to withstand it. Preserve us, Lord, but we will even reach the point where people begin to renounce their faith. Try to unite as brothers, begin to live spiritually, and unite with Christ. If you unite with Christ, you will fear neither the devil nor torment. In the world, people are oppressed and intimidated from all sides. But what is there to fear when you are close to Christ? Do you remember Saint Cyriacus?¹⁷⁸ He was only three years old, yet he kicked the tyrant who wanted to "enlighten" him. Read the lives of the saints; they are a great help to the soul, because as you read them, you connect with the saints, and a sense of reverence and a willingness to make sacrifices are kindled within you.

This life isn't meant for us to just settle into a comfortable existence. If we're going to die anyway, let's at least die as we ought to! Since we're not doing anything else anyway, if God deems us worthy of martyrdom, would that really be so bad? Once, a mule driver came to my hut, in tears, and said to me, "Don't stay alone tonight. They're planning to kill you." "Who?" I asked. "Those guys," he said, "five or six of them." He was accompanying five or six godless men. Who knows what their plans were for their stay on the Holy Mountain. They took him for a fool and carried on their conversations in his presence, but as soon as he heard about it, he came and warned me. In the evening, as soon as I lay down, I heard a dog's bell.¹⁷⁹ I looked out the window and saw three young men. "Come on," they shouted, "old man, open up!" I said, "Guys, what do you want? Why are you wandering around at a time like this? Don't you have any sense? Suspicion will fall on you! They've already arrested the others over there. And I don't feel like talking."—"So," they ask, "should we come tomorrow? Tell us, what time should we come?"—"Come tomorrow whenever you want, and I'll meet with you if I can." I sent them away. I looked, and the light from the flashlight wasn't getting any farther away. They'd

¹⁷⁸ The feast day of the Holy Martyr Cyriacus is celebrated on July 15.

¹⁷⁹ A small bell hung on a hunting dog's collar to scare away game. — *Translator's note.*

stopped a little further up the hill.¹⁸⁰ I got up, got dressed, put on my monastic habit, and waited for them. I felt at peace inside. The next day, three groups of three people each came, but none of those from the night before showed up. And they, of course, know they won't find any money with me, because I don't have any. They come to me solely for spiritual reasons.

Another time, a burly man—as strong as a gorilla—came to my cell and sat off to the side. At that very moment, I was talking with a group and told them: “You’re only good for parades, not for battles! Christ offered Himself as a Sacrifice! We have Orthodoxy! The saints endured martyrdom and help us as well. And if they hadn’t suffered, who knows what would have become of us.” All these words enraged the man who had come. People came and went, but he was deep in thought and remained seated in the same spot. A chill emanated from him. Finally, the last ones left. “Well, come on,” I said to him, “it’s already dark—where are you planning to go?” “That question,” he replied, “doesn’t interest me.” “It,” I said, “interests me. Come on, let’s go!” Then he lunged at me and grabbed me by the throat. “Well then,” he hissed, “you, with your gods!” That “with your gods” stung me as if he had blasphemed against God. Am I some kind of idolater? “What ‘gods’ are you talking about,” I said, “you godless wretch? I serve the One God in the Trinity! Now get the hell out of here!” I shoved him; he fell to the ground and curled up. And I didn’t even realize how he ended up outside the door. “If they hang me upside down,” I thought then, “at least my hernia¹⁸¹ will go back into place.” That godless man stayed until the very end and, apparently, wanted to finish me off, since he grabbed me by the throat and started choking me.

He who is resolved to die fears nothing

Today, in order to withstand hardships, a person must have Christ within them. From Christ, they will receive divine consolation to enable self-sacrifice. But if this is lacking, what will happen in a moment of difficulty? I read somewhere that Abdul Pasha¹⁸² took five hundred young men from the Holy Mountain. Some of them were novices, while others were hiding on the Holy Mountain from the Turks. Apparently, back then, during the years of the Greek uprising, young men came to the Holy Mountain to seek refuge, because the Turks were taking young boys and turning them into Janissaries.¹⁸³ If the young men did not renounce Christ, Abdul Pasha would hang them in the tower in Uranopolis. He captured so many young people on the Holy Mountain, and only five of them chose martyrdom! The rest renounced Christ and became Janissaries. Courage is essential: this is no joke. If a person feels unjustly wronged, if there is pride within him, then he lacks divine strength. How will such a person behave when faced with such a difficult situation?

¹⁸⁰ The cell of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, “Panaguda,” where the Blessed Elder Paisios lived during the last years of his life, is located in a secluded, wooded area. There are no other cells or dwellings in the immediate vicinity. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁸¹ The incident in question occurred in 1987, when the Elder was suffering from a hernia.

¹⁸² Mehmet Emin Abdullah Pasha governed Thessaloniki from 1821 to 1823.

¹⁸³ The Janissaries were the punitive troops of the Ottoman Empire, typically recruited from young men among the Christian peoples conquered by the Turks. Having undergone special training and indoctrination, the Janissaries were known for their exceptional fanaticism and cruelty. — *Translator’s note.*

I was deeply impressed by the story told by a bishop from the Patriarchate. At first, I said to him, “What on earth is going on? On the one hand, ecumenism is looming; on the other, Zionism and Satanism. Soon, instead of the double-headed eagle, we’ll be paying homage to the two-horned devil!”—“Today,” he replied, “it’s not easy to find a bishop like Paisius II, Bishop of Caesarea.”¹⁸⁴ What, then, did Paisius II do? When he went to the sultan with petitions, he would tie a rope around his waist—that is, he had already resolved that the Turks would hang him. It was as if he were saying to the sultan: “Don’t bother looking for a rope and don’t waste your time. If you want to hang me, the rope is ready.” He was sent to the sultan on difficult missions, and often in challenging situations he saved the Patriarchate. When he grew old but had to travel to the sultan again, they would drape two large baskets, tied together, over the horse’s saddle. One was loaded with supplies, and he was seated in the other; that is how he traveled to Constantinople. Once, the Turks issued a firman¹⁸⁵ conscripting Greeks into the Turkish army. It was difficult for Christians to serve alongside the Turks, because they could not fulfill their necessary religious obligations. Moreover, Russia had recently demanded that the Turks not prevent the Greeks from performing their Christian duties. The Patriarch then summoned Metropolitan Paissios and sent him to the sultan. The metropolitan, with a rope tied around his waist, once again appeared before the sultan. The sultan said to him, “The Greeks must join the army to serve their homeland.”—“Yes,” replied Metropolitan Paissios, “I, too, agree that the Greeks should serve in the army, for these lands have long belonged to the Greeks. However, we have different faiths, so a separate Greek army must be stationed in a separate military camp, have its own officers, and so on. This is necessary so that the Greeks may also fulfill their religious duties. They cannot pray together with you: you are observing Ramadan,¹⁸⁶ while we are celebrating Epiphany.” “Give weapons to Christians?” the sultan thought. “That’s dangerous!” “No, no,” he replied to the metropolitan, “it’s better if they don’t join the army.” On another occasion, the Armenians submitted a petition to the sultan asking that Balukli be given to them,¹⁸⁷ and received a favorable response. After that, Metropolitan Paisius went to discuss the matter with the sultan. “Balukli,” the sultan told him, “must be taken by the Armenians, because this place belongs to their ancestors.” — “Yes,” Paisius replied, “they must take it, for knowing that a certain place belongs to our forefathers, we must claim it for ourselves. Give me the document transferring Balukli, and I will sign it as well, because I have come here as a representative of the Patriarchate.” He signed the document, then took out a gold Constantine ducat¹⁸⁸ and said, “So, let the Armenians take Balukli, but then we must take Hagia Sophia for ourselves, because it is ours. It belonged to our forefathers, and you must return it to us.” Having said this, he showed the sultan the gold coin bearing the image of Saint Constantine. The metropolitan took one of the Russian officers who had arrived in Constantinople by ship at that time as a witness to the audience with the sultan. Thus, the sultan found himself in a difficult situation and revoked his decision

¹⁸⁴ Paissios II—Metropolitan of Caesarea. He was born in the village of Farasy in Cappadocia. He studied at the theological school attached to the Flavian Monastery of the Holy Forerunner, and then in Constantinople, where he was ordained a deacon and a priest. In 1832, he was consecrated as Metropolitan of Caesarea. He was a fearless champion of preserving Hellenism in his diocese.

¹⁸⁵ Firman – a decree of the sultan. – *Translator’s note.*

¹⁸⁶ Ramadan—the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, during which Muslims observe a strict fast (complete abstinence from food, drink, smoking, etc.) daily from morning until evening. From sunset to sunrise, the restrictions of Ramadan are lifted.

¹⁸⁷ Balukli—a neighborhood in Constantinople where the “Life-Giving Spring” monastery is located.—*Translator’s note.*

¹⁸⁸ A gold coin bearing the image of Saints Constantine and Helena, which was worn as an ornament or talisman.

regarding Balukli. “No, no,” the sultan told him, “Balukli remains yours.” Because he had to either reverse his decision or hand Hagia Sophia over to the Greeks. See how it went? Metropolitan Paisius had the Turks dancing to his tune! That’s because he was prepared to die. And if you’re not prepared to die, you’ll achieve nothing. It all starts there.

A departure from the faith is washed away by martyrdom

Today, most people want others to pull the snake out of the hole. If they don’t pull it out themselves, then let them at least warn others: “Be careful! Is there a snake in there?”—so that others might think twice. However, they don’t even do that. If we lived in the time of the martyrs, with our rationalism we would say: “I renounce God outwardly, but not inwardly. In this way, I will be appointed to such-and-such a position and will be able to help some poor person.” But in the days of the martyrs, the Church did not grant Communion to those who threw incense into the fire of idolatrous sacrifice; such people belonged to the order of the weeping.¹⁸⁹ Those who renounced Christ were required to atone for their apostasy through martyrdom. And during the era of iconoclasm, Christians were required to burn or throw icons to the ground, and they chose not to throw them away but to become martyrs instead. But if we were told to throw an icon away, we would say, “Fine, I’ll throw it away—it’s painted in the Renaissance style. Later on, I’ll order myself another one, a Byzantine one.”

— Geronda, what is the Church’s stance on secret Christians? Did they not renounce Christ?

— True secret Christians did not renounce their faith. For example, when the Turks burned twenty-seven villages in Cappadocia belonging to the Faras, some of the inhabitants fled far away to other regions where the local population did not even know they were Christians. They were considered Muslims. And not once did a situation arise in which any of them was directly asked, “Are you a Christian?”—forcing them to answer, “Yes, I am a Christian” or “No, I am a Muslim.” These people are secret Christians. However, the moment someone is captured and told, “We have learned that you are a Christian,” he must say, “Yes, I am a Christian.” In other words, they must never say that they are Muslim. And in the era of the early Church, there were believers who were secretly baptized, whom others thought were not Christians. Yet, when required, these secret Christians openly professed their faith. For example, Saint Sebastian was a military commander who was secretly baptized into the Christian faith. Others considered him an idolater, but he was a Christian. He secretly provided great assistance to Christians. However, when it became known that he was a Christian, he confessed his faith and was martyred.

In one Turkish village, there were many secret Christians, and the village headman was a priest. His name was Father George, but people called him Hasan. One day, the Turks came to him and reported that Christians were hiding in a certain place, in the catacombs: “Don’t worry,” he said, “I’ll go take a look.” He took his men, went to those catacombs, and found all the Christians gathered there. Then he went to the Royal Doors, took the epitrachelion off the hook, put it on, and celebrated Vespers for them! “Take the necessary measures,” he told them afterward, and reassured the Turks: “There’s no one there; these are false rumors.” Such people are not apostates. However, from the moment a Christian begins to be suspected and is told, “We saw you being baptized! You’re a Christian,” and he replies, “No, I’m a Muslim,” he becomes an apostate.

¹⁸⁹ The “Weepers” stood at the doors of the church and asked the faithful entering the church to pray to the Lord for them. See Rule 12 of St. Gregory of Neocaesarea. *The Book of Rules*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra. 1992. p. 294. — *Translator’s note*.

Martyrdom and Humility

Anyone who is deemed worthy of becoming a martyr must possess great humility and love Christ deeply. If a person approaches martyrdom out of selfishness, grace will abandon him. Remember Sapphirus,¹⁹⁰ who had already reached the place of execution and yet denied Christ? “Why have you brought me here?” he asked the executioners. “What do you mean,” they asked him, “aren’t you a Christian?” “No,” he replied. And he was a priest! My intuition tells me that he went to his martyrdom not with humility, but out of selfishness. He sought martyrdom not for the sake of faith, not for the sake of love for Christ, and that is why Grace abandoned him. For if a person behaves selfishly, he does not accept the Grace of God. Naturally, in a moment of difficulty, he will renounce Christ.

— Geronda, we often say that in times of trial, God will give us strength...

— God will give strength to a humble person who has a pure heart and a good disposition. If God sees true goodness of disposition and humility, then He will give great strength. So, whether God gives a person strength depends on that person’s own disposition.

— Geronda, you said that a person must have humility and a good disposition. Does that mean it’s possible to have pride and a good disposition?

— When we speak of humility, we mean that a person must possess it, at least in relation to martyrdom. One can be proud, but at the decisive moment say: “My God, I am proud; yet grant me a little strength now, so that in my suffering I may bear witness to my love for You and atone for my sins.” And then, if a person is humble in disposition and goes to martyrdom with repentance, God grants him abundant grace. One must not go to martyrdom with a proud disposition, thinking that you will become a martyr, that your life story will be written, and that a service and an icon with a halo will be created in your honor. One man asked me: “Pray for me, Father, that I may reach the fifth heaven.”—“All right,” I said to him, “the Apostle Paul reached the third heaven,¹⁹¹ and you want to reach the fifth?”—“Well, then, ” he replied, “isn’t it written that we should seek *‘greater’ things?*”¹⁹² Just listen to that! In that case, if a person goes to martyrdom in order to gain glory in Paradise, then he’d be better off not even thinking about martyrdom. A true, genuine Christian, even if he knew that in Paradise he would suffer and be tormented again, would still long to enter it. We must not think that if we endure some suffering here on earth, then there, in heaven, we will be better off. We must put aside these mercenary calculations. We want Christ. Let there be martyrdom; let us face it every day; let us be beaten daily—twice or three times a day—we do not care about any of that. We care about only one thing: to be with Christ.

— But Geronda, is it possible for a person to live in laziness and yet, when the time comes, boldly confess Christ?

— For such a person to do this, there must be kindness and a spirit of self-sacrifice in his heart. That is why I told you that you need to cultivate nobility and a spirit of self-sacrifice within yourselves. One must sacrifice oneself for the sake of another. Do you remember Saint Boniface and Saint Aglaida? There in Rome,

¹⁹⁰ On Sapphirus, see: *Lives of the Saints*. Vol. 6. Moscow, 1905. pp. 180–185.

¹⁹¹ See 2 Cor. 12:2.

¹⁹² See 1 Cor. 12:31.

they led a dissolute life, but when they sat down to dine, their minds turned to the poor. First they hurried to feed the hungry, and only then did they eat themselves. Even though they were enslaved by their passions, they possessed kindness and compassion for the poor. They possessed a spirit of self-sacrifice, and that is why God helped them. Aglaida, despite her sinful life, loved the holy martyrs and cared for their holy relics. She ordered Boniface, along with other servants from her household, to travel to Asia Minor in order to purchase, gather, and bring the holy relics of the martyrs back to Rome. And the future martyr, smiling, said to her, “If my relics are brought to you, will you accept them?” “Don’t joke about that,” Aglaida replied. Finally, Saint Boniface reached Tarsus and, wishing to redeem the martyrs’ relics, went to the amphitheater.

There, as he watched the Christians being tortured, he was deeply moved by their fortitude. Running up to them and kissing their bonds and wounds, Boniface asked them to pray that Christ would give him the strength to publicly confess himself a Christian. Thus, he bore witness to his faith through martyrdom; his companions redeemed his remains and transported them to Rome, where the Angel of the Lord had already informed Aglaida of what had happened. And so was fulfilled what Boniface had jokingly prophesied before his departure from Rome. After that, Aglaida, having distributed her wealth, lived another fifteen years in asceticism and poverty and attained holiness.¹⁹³ You see, their lives unfolded in such a way that at first they were carried away by their passions and strayed from the true path. However, they possessed a spirit of self-sacrifice, and God did not forsake them.

What courage the saints had!

— I think, Geronda, that if I saw Saint Catherine’s wheel, I would die of fear!

— If you had died before they even began to wheel you, that would have been good; it would have been a blessing from God. It would have been a torment if they had begun to wheel you and you hadn’t been able to endure it. The martyrs had a good disposition; Christ helped them, and that is why they endured the pain.

What love for Christ the holy martyrs had, what courage! Saint Solomonia and her seven children¹⁹⁴—one by one, they were all tortured to death. Saint Longinus¹⁹⁵ prepared a feast for the soldiers who came to capture him and welcomed them into his home. Those who had come urged him to show them Longinus so they could behead him, but he told them, “I will show him to you!” When he told them that he himself was Longinus, they hesitated, but the saint convinced them to carry out their orders. And so they cut off his head. And what self-control Saint Gedeon of Karakal displayed!¹⁹⁶ “Cut off my hand,” he said to the executioners, “cut off my leg, cut off my nose! To avoid further talk, cut off everything!” Astonishing! But to reach this level, a person must not love himself but love God. A mother, saving her child, walks into the fire. She feels no pain because her love is stronger than the burning of the flames. Her love for her child overcomes the pain. How much stronger than pain must love for Christ be!

¹⁹³ The feast day of Saints Boniface and Aglaida is celebrated on December 19.

¹⁹⁴ The feast day of the Holy Martyrs of the Maccabees is celebrated on August 1.

¹⁹⁵ The commemoration of the Holy Martyr Longinus the Centurion is observed on October 16.

¹⁹⁶ The commemoration of Saint Gedeon the Holy Mountain Martyr is observed on December 30.

For a saint facing martyrdom, his love for Christ surpasses the pain and neutralizes it. To the martyrs, the executioner's knife was gentler than a violin bow. When love for Christ flares up, martyrdom becomes a triumph: at that moment, fire cools better than a bath, because its burning is lost in the burning of Divine love. The flaying of the skin feels like a caress. Divine care seizes the heart, seizes the mind, and a person becomes "mad": he feels neither pain nor anything else, for his mind is in Christ and his heart overflows with joy. And how many saints went to their martyrdom and experienced such joy, as if they were going to a celebration! Saint Ignatius¹⁹⁷ ran to the place of his martyrdom and cried out: "Let me endure torture; let me be devoured by wild beasts!" Not even a young man in love, who says: "I want to marry her, and I care nothing for my mother or my father!" Saint Ignatius's "madness" was greater than the madness of a young man in love.

All the saints performed feats for the sake of their love for Christ. The holy martyrs shed their blood. The reverend fathers shed sweat and tears and, like skilled herbalists, conducted spiritual experiments on themselves; out of love for God and for man—the icon of God—they exhausted themselves in order to leave us their spiritual prescriptions. With their help, we ward off evil or heal our spiritual illness and become whole. And if we also strive with love to imitate them in their feats, we may even attain holiness.

But, of course, all the feats of the reverend ones—fasts, vigils, and the like—and even the sufferings of all the holy martyrs, are incomparable to the suffering of our Lord, because Christ divinely helped all who suffered for His sake, and the pain of each of them was sweetened by His great love. However, with regard to Himself, Christ did not use His divine power at all, and out of great love for His creation, He endured much pain in His sensitive Body. It is possible to become truly human—[not only outwardly, but] inwardly as well—only by experiencing this love of Christ for humanity. Otherwise, you will be even more insensitive than God's creatures, for when the Lord's suffering was felt, the sun grew dark, unable to bear the sight. And the earth, seeing this, was terrified, and the rocks crumbled into pieces. And the tombs shook so violently that they roused many who had long since died from their sleep and cast them out—to express their disapproval of how ungratefully people had treated God—their Benefactor and Savior.

The Monk and Martyrdom

— Geronda, if a person does not engage in spiritual practice as he ought, will he have enough faith during times of difficulty to believe that God will help him, so that he may call upon Him for help? Or do we reassure ourselves with the thought that during trials God will help us only to spare us the effort of preparation? — We must prepare. If you do not sow, how will God bless your fields with a harvest? A person must sow, and God will give him according to what he sows. And in the army they say, "Be prepared!"

— Geronda, how should we prepare?

— When is a person considered to be prepared for something? If troops are on combat alert, the soldiers are constantly ready: they're already in their boots, with their rifles and ammunition, waiting for orders.

— And how long can this state of combat readiness last?

— It varies. A monk must always be ready, and then he fears nothing. What is there for him to fear? Death? But it will open the gates of paradise for him, because the key to eternity is hidden beneath the tombstone.

¹⁹⁷ The commemoration of Saint Ignatius the God-Bearer, Priest and Martyr, is observed on December 20.

Moreover, a monk, whenever he may die, remains in repentance. His renunciation of the world and his monastic vows bear witness to this. A monk repents and then moves on to subtle spiritual work. As the monk's love for God and his neighbor increases, his love for himself diminishes. And then what the Apostle Paul writes comes into effect: "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ."¹⁹⁸

For worldly people, the thought of torment compels them, out of fear, to turn to God and cry out, "My Christ, Most Holy Mother of God!"—whereas a monk always desires to be with God because he loves Him. Many laypeople do good because they fear eternal torment. A monk, however, does good out of gratitude, to thank God, his Benefactor.

— Geronda, how can I come to understand what martyrdom and asceticism are?

— To understand even a little what martyrdom is, at least accept the contempt of others with joy. And if you want to grasp a little what asceticism is, then, if you cannot fast for forty days like Christ, at least fast on Wednesday, the day He was betrayed, and on Friday, the day He was crucified.¹⁹⁹ Those who wish to bear witness to their love for Christ through martyrdom may, in the absence of martyrdom, manifest this love—which consumes them—in the form of a physical act of devotion for the burning souls of the departed, so that they may find a little rest. Asceticism is just as much a triumph as martyrdom, because [in both cases] a person renounces all human comfort and finds divine consolation.

The holy martyrs felt great joy at being given the favorable opportunity to endure torment. Asceticism began in the spiritual life with martyrdom. When Constantine the Great came to power, he freed the Christians from the dungeons, where they (some of whom had been maimed) were awaiting death. The torments had ended. But those who were freed were deeply grieved, because while in prison they had been awaiting their turn to be martyred, and now Saint Constantine the Great had ruined everything for them. They had joyfully anticipated martyrdom, but instead received freedom. And then—out of love for God and the ardent desire burning within them to suffer for Christ—they departed from this world. And the very torments to which Diocletian and Maximilian would have subjected them, they inflicted upon themselves in their asceticism. One would go and hang himself by his hands with ropes from a tree: he prayed in pain, yet rejoiced divinely. Another, out of love for Christ, would bind himself. "This," he would say, "is how Diocletian would have bound me." And by tormenting themselves in this way, they experienced great joy. It was from this divine madness, from this divine folly, that the first ones began and, for the sake of their love for Christ, devoted themselves to asceticism. Then others began to imitate their feat. This is how asceticism entered our faith. And a third group, the most "eccentric," would say, "We are Christ's sheep!"—and subsisted only on grass from the ground. These were the so-called "voski."²⁰⁰ They felt God's blessings and their own insignificance so deeply that they said, "I, an ungrateful animal, will feed on grass for the rest of my life." And they did so. Their hearts soared with love for

¹⁹⁸ See Rom. 8:35.

¹⁹⁹ The Elder refers to abstaining from food and water throughout the entire day.

²⁰⁰ Voski (Greek) — literally, "those who graze." Archimandrite Cherubim (Karambelas) writes in his book that they, "according to the tradition of Mount Athos, are the holiest monks of the Mountain and live in complete seclusion, unknown to anyone... According to the same tradition, the last Liturgy on earth will be celebrated by these invisible twelve. Their number remains constant, because if one of them dies, his place is taken by one of the very best monks of the Holy Mountain." (Cherubim (Karambelas), Archimandrite. From the Domain of the Mother of God. Kyiv, 1998. p. 164.) — *Translator's note.*

Christ. “Am I not,” they said, “one of Christ’s sheep? Then I will feed on grass.”²⁰¹ But later this was forbidden by the Church, because hunters, mistaking these hermits for wild animals, killed many of them.

Today people cannot understand this; they consider it madness. “Why eat grass, like an animal?” they say. “What’s the point of hanging on ropes like that and torturing your body?” But remember what Abba Isaac says: “Oh, if only God would grant us to commit such follies.” May God grant us²⁰² to attain this spiritual folly as well.

Part 4.

Dependence on Heaven

“Neither people nor demons can hinder divine help. Nothing is difficult for God or for a holy person. The only obstacle is our human lack of faith. Through our lack of faith, we prevent the great divine powers from drawing near to us.”

Chapter 1.

On God’s Providence for Mankind

***“Seek first the Kingdom of God...”*²⁰³**

— Geronda, Abba Macarius says that God will grant us heavenly blessings,²⁰⁴ and we believe this. Should we also believe that He will grant us earthly blessings, which are not so essential?

— What earthly blessings?

— The things we need.

— That’s exactly right. God loves His creation, His image, and cares for what it needs.

— Should we believe this and not worry?

²⁰¹ See Sozomen, PG 67, 1395 ff.; Evagrius, PG 86, 2480; Moschus, PG 87, 2868B; and Leontius, PG 93, 1688.

²⁰² *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. Homily 73. p. 370.

²⁰³ Matt. 6:33.

²⁰⁴ See: *St. Macarius of Egypt*. Spiritual Conversations. STSL, 1904.

— If a person doesn't believe this and struggles on their own to acquire these blessings, they will suffer. But a person who lives spiritually will not be upset even if God does not give them earthly and material things. If we seek first the Kingdom of God, if the search for this Kingdom is our only concern, then all the rest will be given to us. Would God really abandon His creation to the whims of fate? If the Israelites left the manna that God gave them in the wilderness until the next day, it would begin to rot.²⁰⁵ God arranged it this way so that they would rely on His divine providence.

We have not even yet understood the words "*Seek first the Kingdom of God...*" Either we believe [and entrust ourselves to God], or we do not believe [and therefore must provide for our own needs]. When I went to live on Mount Sinai, I had nothing with me. However, I didn't think at all about what would become of me in the desert among strangers, what I would eat, or how I would live. The cell of Saint Epistimia, where I was to settle, had long been abandoned by people. I asked nothing of the monastery, not wishing to be a burden to it. Once, someone brought me bread from the monastery, and I sent it back. Why should I have worried, when Christ said, "*Seek first the Kingdom of God*"? There was barely any water, either. I knew nothing about handicrafts. So ask me now how I lived and how I earned my bread. The only tool I had was a pair of scissors. I split them into two halves, sharpened them on a stone, took a small board, and began carving icons. I worked and recited the Jesus Prayer. I quickly learned the art of carving; I carved the same design over and over and finished five days' worth of work in eleven hours. Not only did I not suffer any hardships, but I even helped the Bedouin children. For a while, I spent many hours a day doing this, but then I reached a point where I didn't want to do the handicrafts anymore, yet at the same time I saw the hardship the Bedouin children were enduring. For them, receiving a hat and a pair of sandals as a gift was a great blessing. And a thought occurred to me: "Did I come here to help the Bedouins, or to pray for the whole world?" So I decided to cut back on my needlework so that I would be less distracted and could pray more. Do you think I was expecting someone to help me? From where? The Bedouins themselves had nothing to eat. The monastery was far away, and on the other side lay uninhabited lands. But on that very day, when I had cut back on my work to devote more time to prayer, a man came to me. I was standing near my cell at the time; he saw me and said, "Here, take these one hundred gold coins. You'll be able to help the little Bedouins, follow your routine, and pray." I couldn't help myself; I left him alone for a quarter of an hour and went into my cell. God's providence and love brought me to such a state that I couldn't hold back my tears. Do you see how God arranges everything when a person has a good disposition? Because how much could I have given to these unfortunate people? I would give to one, and immediately another would come: "My father didn't give me anything!"—then a third: "My father didn't give me anything!.."

— Geronda, why is it that, having experienced God's omnipotence many times, we do not see His providence toward us?

— That's a trap set by the devil. The devil throws ashes in a person's eyes so that they cannot see God's providence. For if a person sees God's providence, their heart of stone will soften, become sensitive, and overflow with praise. And that doesn't suit the devil.

²⁰⁵ See Exodus 16:19–20.

People often try to manage everything without God

One man took up fish farming and would say all day long, “Glory to You, God!”—because he constantly saw God’s providence at work. He told me that from the moment a fish is fertilized—when it’s still as tiny as a pinhead—it has a sac filled with fluid that nourishes it until it grows and becomes able to feed on aquatic microorganisms on its own. In other words, the fish receives a “dry ration” from God! If God provides even for little fish, how much more does He provide for human beings! But often people arrange and decide everything without God. “I’ll have,” they say, “two children [and that’s enough].” They do not take God into account. That is why so many tragedies occur and so many children perish. In most families, two children are born. But one child is hit by a car, the other falls ill and dies, and the parents are left childless.

When parents—God’s co-creators—find it difficult to provide for their children despite their best efforts, they should raise their hands to heaven and humbly seek help from the Great Creator. Then both God, who helps, and the person who accepts His help rejoice. While at the Stomion Monastery, I met a father with many children. He was a field guard in a village in Epirus, and his family lived in Konitsa—a four-and-a-half-hour walk away. He had nine children. The path to that village passed through the monastery. On his way to the service and back home, the guard would stop by the monastery. On his way back, he would ask my permission to light the oil lamps himself. Even though he spilled oil on the floor while lighting them, I let him do it; I preferred to wipe the floor up afterward rather than upset him. Every time he left the monastery and had walked about three hundred meters, he would fire a single shot from his rifle. Unable to explain this, I decided the next time to watch him from the moment he entered the church until he reached the Konitsa road. That’s how I learned that first he would light the oil lamps in the church, then go out into the narthex²⁰⁶ and light the oil lamp in front of the icon of the Mother of God above the entrance. Then he would dip his finger in the oil from the lamp, kneel down, stretch out his hands toward the icon, and say, “Mother of God, I have nine children. Send them a little meat!” Having said this, he would smear the oil from his finger onto the front sight of his rifle barrel and leave. Three hundred meters from the monastery, near a mulberry tree, a wild goat was waiting for him. As I have already said, he would shoot it, kill it, carry it to a cave a little further away, gut it there, and bring the meat to his children. This happened every time he returned home. I was amazed by the field guard’s faith and the providence of the Mother of God. Twenty-five years later, he came to the Holy Mountain and sought me out. During our conversation, I involuntarily asked him, “How are your children? Where are they?” In response, he first pointed north and said, “Some are in Germany,” and then, stretching his hand toward the south, added, “And the others are in Australia. Thank God, they’re healthy.” This man kept both his faith and himself pure from godless ideologies, and so God did not forsake him.

The Blessings of God’s Miraculous Providence

— Sometimes, Geronda, I have a certain desire, and God fulfills it without my asking Him. How does this happen?

— God cares for us. He sees our needs, our desires, and when something is for our good, He grants it to us. If a person needs help with something, then Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos help him. When Elder

²⁰⁶ Narthex—the western part of the church, the porch. —*Translator’s note.*

Filaret²⁰⁷ was asked, “How can I help you, Geronda? What do you need?”—he would reply, “Whatever I need, the Mother of God will send to me.” And that is exactly what happened.

When we entrust ourselves to the Lord, He, our Good God, watches over us and cares for us. As a good Steward, He gives each of us what we need. He even attends to the details of our material needs. And so that we may understand His care, His providence, He gives us exactly as much as we need. Do not wait, however, for God to give you something first; no, first give yourself entirely to God. For if you constantly ask God for something but do not trustingly give yourself to Him, it is evident that you have your own home and are alien to the eternal heavenly dwellings. Those who give everything to God and surrender themselves wholly to Him are sheltered by God’s great dome and protected by His divine providence. Trust in God is an unceasing, mysterious prayer that, at the necessary moment, silently draws divine powers to where they are needed. And then His beloved children praise Him endlessly, with great thanksgiving. When Father Tikhon settled in the hermitage of the Holy Cross, there was no church there, which he needed. He did not even have the money to build one—nothing but great faith in God. Once, after praying, he set out for Karyes, trusting that God would provide him with the funds necessary to build a church. On the way to Karyes, the abbot of the Ilyinsky Skete called out to him from a distance. When Father Tikhon approached him, the abbot said, “A kind Christian from America sent these dollars so that I might give them to some ascetic who does not have a church. You don’t have a church, so take this money and build one.” Father Tikhon was moved to tears by gratitude toward God, the Knower of Hearts, who had provided for the church even before Father Tikhon had asked Him—so that when he prayed for it, the money was already ready.

If a person entrusts himself to God, God does not forsake him. And indeed: if tomorrow at ten o’clock you need something, then (provided this need does not exceed reasonable limits and the item is truly necessary) at a quarter to ten or half past nine, God will have it ready to give to you. For example, tomorrow at nine you’ll need a mug. By five to nine, you’ll already have it. You need five hundred drachmas. At the very moment you need them, exactly five hundred drachmas will appear—not five hundred and ten, and not four hundred and ninety. I’ve noticed that if, for example, I need something tomorrow, God has already taken care of it today. That is, even before I think about it, God has thought about it; He has provided what is necessary in advance and gives it at the very moment it is needed. I realized this when I saw how much time it takes for something to come to me from somewhere at the very moment I need it. Consequently, God takes care of it in advance.

When we please God with our lives out of love for Him, He bestows incomparable blessings upon His loving children at the very moment they need them. Then our whole life unfolds amid the blessings of Divine Providence. I could spend hours giving you examples of God’s miraculous providence.

When I was at war, participating in combat operations, I had a Gospel, and I gave it to someone. Later, I said, “Oh, if only I had that Gospel—how it would have helped me!” At Christmas, our unit—which was stationed in the mountains at the time—received two hundred care packages from Mesolongi.²⁰⁸ Of the two hundred packages, the only one that contained a Gospel was the one that went to me! It was an old edition of

²⁰⁷ See *Elder Paisios*. The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories from the Holy Mountain. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 62–65.

²⁰⁸ A city in Central Greece. – *Translator’s note*.

the Gospel, with a map of Palestine. The package also contained a note: “If you need other books, write to us, and we’ll send them to you.”

On another occasion, when I was already at the Stomion Monastery, I needed an oil lamp for the church. One morning, at dawn, I went down to Konitsa. As I was passing by a house, I heard a young woman say to her father, “Dad, a monk is coming!” He came out to meet me and said, “Father, I made a vow to donate an oil lamp to the Mother of God. Take this money and buy it yourself.” And he gave me five hundred drachmas—exactly what the lamp cost in 1958.

And even now, whenever I have some need, God immediately provides for it. For example, if I want to chop some firewood but can’t, the firewood arrives on its own in no time. Before coming to see you, I received a package containing fifty thousand drachmas—exactly what I needed. Here’s another example: I gave someone the “It Is Truly Meet” icon as a blessing. The very next day, someone brought me the “Iveron” icon! And this past summer,²⁰⁹ before the rain came, I had absolutely no water. Now it’s rained a little, and in a day I collect [at most] one and a half cans of water. There’s still water left in the cistern from last year, but it’s gone bad. How wonderfully, however, God arranges everything! I have a barrel of water. So many people come every day—they drink, they wash their faces; after all, they arrive sweaty—and the water level drops by only four or five fingers! One barrel for one hundred fifty to two hundred people—and it never runs out! Even though some people sometimes turn the faucet on too far, and others forget to turn it off, and water flows out, it still doesn’t run out!

Entrusting Oneself to Divine Providence

A person who observes God’s blessings learns to place himself in dependence on Divine Providence. And then he feels like a baby in a cradle who, as soon as his mother leaves him, begins to cry and does not stop until she comes running back to him. It is a great thing to entrust oneself to God! When I first arrived at the Stomion Monastery, I had nowhere to live. The entire monastery was littered with construction debris. I found a corner near the fence, covered it a little from above, and spent my nights sitting there, because I wouldn’t have fit if I’d lain down. Once, a monk I knew came to me and asked, “Listen, how on earth do you live here?”—“Well,” I asked him in reply, “did the people of the world have more than we do? When Kanaris²¹⁰ asked for a loan and was told, ‘You have no homeland,’ he replied, ‘We will win back our homeland.’” If a layperson had such faith, how can we not trust in God? Since the Mother of God brought me here, will She not, when the time comes, take care of Her monastery?” And indeed, little by little—just look how the Most Holy Theotokos arranged everything! I remember when the workers were pouring concrete for the ceiling slab in the burned-out cells, and the cement was running out. There was still a third of the slab left to pour. The workers came up to me and said, “We’re running out of cement. We need to add more sand and less cement to the mix so we can finish pouring everything.” “No,” I told them, “don’t dilute it; keep going as you started.” It was impossible to bring in more

²⁰⁹ Delivered in the summer of 1990.

²¹⁰ Konstantinos Kanaris (c. 1795–1877). A national hero of Hellas, a legendary sailor, and a fearless fighter against the Turks during the Greek Revolution (1821–1830). On June 7, 1822, a group of daredevils in fishing boats, led by K. Kanaris, carried out a daring raid on a Turkish squadron near the island of Chios, resulting in the destruction of the Turkish fleet’s flagship and the death of Turkish Admiral Kara Ali. Later, K. Kanaris became an admiral, Minister of the Navy, and Prime Minister of Greece. — *Translator’s note.*

cement because all the mules were out in the field. The workers would have had to walk two hours to Konitsa, then another two hours to the field, to look for the mules out there in the pasture. Think of how much time they would have wasted... And besides, the men had their own affairs to attend to; they wouldn't have been able to come back another day. I looked: they had poured two-thirds of the floor slab. I went into the little church and said, "My Lady, what are we to do now?! I beg You, help us!" Then I came out of the church...

— And what happened next, Geronda?

— They finished the ceiling, and there was even some cement left over!

— Did the workers realize that?

— Of course they did! How great, at times, is the help of God and the Most Holy Theotokos!

God uses everything for the good

— Geronda, sometimes we start a project, and a whole bunch of obstacles pop up. How can we tell if they're from God?

— Let's consider whether we are at fault here. If we are not at fault, then the obstacle comes from God and serves our good. Therefore, there's no need to be upset that the task hasn't been completed or that its completion is being delayed. Once, in a hurry to attend to some urgent matter, I was descending from the Stomion Monastery to Konitsa. On a particularly difficult stretch of the road (I called that place Golgotha), I met an acquaintance from the monastery, Uncle Anastasius, with three heavily laden mules. On a steep incline, the packsaddles had slipped to one side, and one animal was right on the edge of the cliff—about to plunge down. "God sent you, Father!" Uncle Anastasy exclaimed joyfully. I helped him re-saddle the mules, then we led them out onto the road. There I left him and continued on my way. I had already covered a good distance when the trail came to a dead end at a landslide. A large landslide, three hundred meters long, had just come down, burying the path. Trees, rocks—everything had been swept down into the river. If I hadn't been delayed with the mules, I would have been right there at the moment of the landslide. "Uncle Anastasy," I said, "you saved me; God sent you."

Christ sees from on high how each of us acts, and He knows when and how He Himself will act for our good. He knows how and where to lead us, as long as we ask Him for help, lay our desires before Him, and let Him arrange everything Himself. When I was at the Philotheou Monastery on Mount Athos, I wanted to go into the desert. I planned to retreat to a deserted island and had already made arrangements with a boatman for him to come and pick me up, but in the end, he didn't show up. God arranged it this way because I was still inexperienced and would have suffered greatly on a deserted island; I would have fallen prey to demons there. Then, having failed in my attempt to go to the island, I was filled with a burning desire to go to Katounaki. The Katounaki Desert appealed to me; I prayed to be there and prepared myself for it. I wanted to settle down and practice asceticism alongside Elder Peter—a man of high spiritual life. However, an event occurred that forced me to go not to Katounaki, but to Konitsa. One evening after Vespers, I retired to my cell and prayed late into the night. Around eleven o'clock, I lay down to rest. At half past one in the morning, I was awakened by the sound of the monastery bell summoning the brethren to the church for the Midnight Office. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. An invisible force had bound me, and I was unable to move. I realized that something extraordinary was happening. I remained confined to my bed until noon. I could pray and think, but I could not move at all. While in this state, I saw, as if on television, Katounaki on one side and the Stomion Monastery in Konitsa on the other. With a strong desire, I fixed my gaze toward Katounaki, and then a voice clearly said to me: "You will not

go to Katunaki, but to the Stomion Monastery.” It was the voice of the Most Holy Theotokos. “Mother of God,” I said, “I asked You for the desert, but You are sending me into the world?” And I heard that same voice again, speaking sternly to me: “You will go and meet such-and-such a person. He will help you greatly.” I was immediately freed from those invisible bonds, and my heart was filled with Divine Grace. Then I went and told my spiritual father what had happened. “This is God’s will,” my spiritual father told me. “However, don’t tell anyone about this. Say that for health reasons (and I was suffering from bleeding at the time) you need to leave Mount Athos, and go.”

I wanted one thing, but God had His own plan. I thought at the time that God’s will was for me to revive the monastery in Konitsa. In this way, I was also fulfilling the vow I had made to the Mother of God while I was at war. “Mother of God,” I had asked Her then, “help me become a monk, and I will work for three years to restore Your burned-down monastery.” But, as became clear later, the main reason the Most Holy Mother of God sent me there was the need to help eighty-seven families who had strayed into Protestantism return to Orthodoxy.

God often allows something to happen for the benefit of many people. He never does just one good thing, but three or four good things at once. And He never allows evil to happen unless much good will come of it. Everything—both mistakes and dangers—He uses for our benefit. Good and evil are intertwined. It would be good if they were separate, but personal human interests intervene and confuse them.

However, God derives benefit even from this confusion. Therefore, we should believe that God allows only that which can lead to good to happen, because He loves His creation. For example, He may allow some small temptation in order to protect us from a greater one. Once, a layman attended a patronal feast at a monastery on Holy Mountain. There, he drank and became intoxicated. On his way back from the monastery, he fell on the road. It began to snow, and he was buried in a snowdrift, but the fumes from the wine caused a hole to form in the snowdrift above him. A passerby was walking by that spot. Seeing the hole in the snow, he exclaimed in surprise, “What on earth is this? Could it be a spring?”—and struck the hole with a stick. “Ouch!” cried the drunkard. Thus, God saved him from perishing.

God’s blessings break through the barriers in our hearts

— Geronda, what does God want from us?

— God wants our free will, our good disposition, manifested—even if only a little—through a loving deed. He also wants us to be aware of our sinfulness. He provides everything else. The spiritual life doesn’t require biceps. Let us strive humbly, ask for God’s mercy, and thank Him for everything. God’s plan is fulfilled in a person who, without any plan of their own, surrenders themselves into God’s hands. The more a person clings to their “self,” the further behind they fall. They do not prosper spiritually because they stand in the way of God’s grace. To prosper, one must have great trust in God.

At every moment, God caresses the hearts of all people with His love, but we do not feel it because our hearts are covered with a layer of scale. Having purified his heart, a person is moved to tenderness, melts, and is overwhelmed with joy upon seeing the blessings and kindness of God, who loves all people equally. Such a person feels pain for those who are suffering and joy for those who lead a spiritual life. If a loving soul reflects on God’s blessings alone, they can lift it skyward—how much more so if it reflects on the multitude of its sins and the abundance of God’s mercy! If a person’s spiritual eyes have been cleansed, then, seeing God’s care [for

himself and others], he feels and experiences the entirety of Divine Providence with his sensitive, unveiled heart; he melts with gratitude; he becomes “crazy”—in the best sense of the word. For when a person senses God’s gifts, they break through a breach in the heart, tearing it open. And then, when God’s hand, caressing the loving heart, touches this breach, the person is inwardly lifted up, and their gratitude to God grows greater. Those who strive, feeling both their own sinfulness and God’s blessings, and entrust themselves to His great mercy, lift their souls to Paradise with greater certainty and less physical toil.

Gratitude to God for Both Little and Much

“I believe that God will help me,” some say, yet at the same time they try to save money so as not to experience any deprivation. Such people mock God because they entrust themselves not to Him, but to money. If they do not stop loving money and placing their hope in it, they will not be able to place their hope in God. I’m not saying that people shouldn’t have some savings in case of need—no. But you shouldn’t place your hope in money; you shouldn’t give your heart to money, because by doing so, people forget God. A person who, not trusting in God, makes his own plans and then says that this is what God wants, “blesses” his work in a devilish way and is constantly tormented. We have not realized how powerful and good God is. We do not let Him be the master; we do not let Him rule over us, and that is why we suffer.

On Mount Sinai, in the cell of Saint Epistimia, where I lived, there was very little water. In a cave about twenty meters from the cell, water dripped drop by drop from a crevice in the rock. I made a small water collector and gathered three liters of water a day. When I went to get water, I would hold out an iron can, and while it was filling, I would read the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos. I would lightly wet my head—just my forehead—which helped me, as a doctor had advised; I would collect a little water to drink; and I would pour a small amount into a separate jar for the mice and birds that lived near my cell. For washing clothes and other needs, I used this very same water from the cave. What joy, what gratitude I felt for that little water I had! I glorified God for the fact that I had water.

Later, when I arrived at the Holy Mountain and settled for a short time at the Iveron Skete, there was no shortage of water there, since it was on the sunny side. There was a cistern there, and water was overflowing from it. Oh! I washed both my head and my feet, but... I forgot my old ways. On Mount Sinai, tears welled up in my eyes out of gratitude for the little water I had, but here, in the skete, the abundance of water made me forgetful. So I left that cell and settled farther away, about eighty meters away, where there was a small cistern. How easily a person loses his way and forgets himself in the midst of abundance!...

We must entrust ourselves completely and unconditionally to Divine Providence, to God’s will, and God will take care of us. One evening, a monk went to the top of a mountain to celebrate Vespers there. On the way, he found a white mushroom and gave thanks to God for this rare find. On the way back, he wanted to pick the mushroom and cook it for his supper. “If laypeople ask me whether I eat meat,” the monk reasoned to himself, “I can tell them that I do—every fall!” Returning to his hermitage, the monk saw that while he had been reading Vespers, some animal had stepped on the mushroom, and only half of it remained intact. “Apparently,” said the monk, “that’s all I’m meant to eat.” He gathered what was left and thanked God for His providence, for the half of the mushroom. A little further down, he found another half-mushroom; he bent down to cut it off and make up for what was missing for supper, but saw that the mushroom was rotten (perhaps it was poisonous). The monk left it there and once again gave thanks to God for protecting him from poisoning. Returning to his cell, the monk had the half of the mushroom for dinner. The next day, when he stepped outside, a wondrous sight met

his eyes. Beautiful mushrooms had sprung up all around the hermitage, and upon seeing them, the monk once again gave thanks to God. You see, he gave thanks to God for the whole mushroom and for the half, for the good and for the bad, for one and for many. He was grateful for everything.

The good Lord bestows generous blessings upon us, and His actions are directed for our benefit. All the blessings we have are gifts from God. He has placed everything at the service of His creation—man—and He has arranged it so that everything—animals, birds, the small and the great, even plants—sacrifices itself for his sake. And God Himself offered Himself as a sacrifice in order to save humanity. Let us not be indifferent to all this; let us not wound Him with our great ingratitude and callousness, but let us give thanks and praise to Him.

Chapter 2.

On Faith in God and Trust in Him

We must believe in God with all our hearts

— Geronda, I get upset because of the thoughts of unbelief that come to me.

— The fact that you're troubled by them and don't accept them means that these thoughts come from the evil one. Sometimes God allows us to have thoughts of doubt or unbelief to test our disposition and devotion. But our God is not a myth, like the myths about Zeus, Apollo, and other such gods. Our faith is true and alive. We have a "cloud of witnesses," as the Apostle Paul writes.²¹¹ These people came to know Christ, had personal experiences of communion with Him, and sacrificed themselves for His sake. And in our time, there are people who have dedicated themselves to God and are experiencing heavenly states. They maintain a connection with the angels, the saints, and even with Christ and the Mother of God. I'll tell you a little about myself, too, to help you. You see, I, too, "give blood"—I share certain experiences in order to help others. Seeing how the knowledge a person accumulates can supplant their faith, I, wishing to strengthen that faith, share certain experiences from the realm of faith.

When I was a child, we lived in Konitsa. I read many lives of the saints, and I would let other children read them too, or I'd gather the kids, and we'd read them together. I marveled at the great asceticism of the saints, the fasts they observed, and I tried to imitate them. From fasting, my neck became as thin as a cherry stem. The kids teased me: "Your head's going to fall off!" What I went through back then!... Well, never mind. Besides, my older brother, seeing that I was getting sick from fasting and fearing that I wouldn't finish school, would take away the booklets with the lives of the saints that I was reading. Then I hid them in the woods, in the chapel of Saint Barbara, and would sneak in there to read them. Once, a neighbor of ours named Kostas told my brother, "I'll set him straight; I'll make sure he throws away the books he's reading and gives up his fasts and prayers too." Well, he tracked me down (I was about fifteen at the time) and began explaining Darwin's theory to me. He talked and talked until he had completely confused me. With my mind in a daze, I immediately headed into the woods, to the chapel of Saint Barbara. Once inside, I began to plead with Christ: "My Christ, if You exist,

²¹¹ See Hebrews 12:1.

reveal Yourself to me!” I repeated this for a long time and bowed without stopping. It was summer. Sweat was pouring off me in streams; I was soaked through and completely exhausted. But I saw and heard nothing. So it turns out that even God didn’t help me—not even with the slightest sign, not even a knock or a shadow—after all, I was just a child. Looking at what happened from a human perspective or through the lens of logic, someone might exclaim: “My God, how pitiful he is, that poor wretch! Since he was eleven, he’d been climbing the cliffs, he’d been so dedicated, and now he’s going through a crisis. They’ve filled his head with silly theories, his brother was putting obstacles in his way at home, so he ran off into the woods to ask You for help!” But there was no answer: nothing, nothing, nothing!!! Exhausted from all the bows, I sat down. “All right,” I thought then, “and what did Kostas answer when I asked him what he thought of Christ?” “He was the kindest, most just Man,” he replied. “With His teaching on justice, He threatened the interests of the Pharisees, and out of envy they crucified Him.” And then I decided: “Since Christ was such a kind and just Man, since there has never been anyone like Him, since evil people put Him to death out of envy and malice, then for the sake of this Man it is worth doing more than I have done. It is even worth dying for Him.” No sooner had I made this decision than Christ appeared. He appeared amid a great light; the little chapel was filled with radiance, and He said to me: *“I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, even if he dies, will live.”*²¹² In one hand He held an open Gospel, in which I read those very same words. Such an inner transformation took place within me that I kept repeating without stopping: “Come on, Kostas, come here right now, let’s talk—is there a God or isn’t there!” You see, Christ, in order to reveal Himself to me, was waiting for my own sincere decision. If He wants a sincere decision from a child, how much more does He want it from an adult?

— Some people, Geronda, cast doubt on the whole of Divine Providence.

— But how can anyone take this whole story about Christ as a fairy tale? And doesn’t the fact that the prophets—who lived seven hundred years before Him and spoke of Him in such detail—wrote about Christ make these people pause and reflect? The Old Testament even specifies exactly how much Christ would be betrayed for,²¹³ and that the Jews would not place this money in the temple treasury—since it would be the price of blood—but would use it to buy a plot of land for the burial of strangers.²¹⁴ What Zechariah and the other prophets foretold has been fulfilled. It’s all so clear! The details are so precise! Scripture even speaks of what will be done with Christ’s garments.²¹⁵ And all this was foretold many years before His birth. How, then, [after all this], can I entertain a thought of unbelief? And then we see the Apostle Paul. He was a persecutor of Christians and was on his way to Damascus for that very purpose. On the road, the Lord appeared to him and said, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”*²¹⁶ — “Who are You, Lord?” — Saul asked. “I am Christ, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied. Then Christ instructed Ananias, and he baptized the former persecutor! And how much suffering did the Apostle Paul endure after that, how many feats did he accomplish, preaching to all the nations! Then there were the martyrs. Eleven million martyrs! What, were they all out of their minds?

²¹² Isa. 11:25–26.

²¹³ See Zech. 11:1–13.

²¹⁴ See Jer. 18:2; 32:9; Matt. 27:7–9.

²¹⁵ See Ps. 21:19.

²¹⁶ See Acts 9:1–18.

How can anyone forget all this? Can a person who has read even a little of the Gospel fail to believe? If the Gospel contained even more details, it would greatly help all people to believe. But God deliberately did not allow this, so that people might be sifted, so that it would become clear who loves Him, who sacrifices themselves for His sake without expecting miracles or anything of the sort. I think that no matter what blasphemies a devout person hears, they do not touch him or influence him.

One must believe in God with a sincere heart, not demand a miracle to do so. Do you know how upset I get when grown adults come to me and say they want to see some kind of miracle in order to believe? If they were children, they might have some excuse because of their age.

But to say, “In order to believe, I need to see something,” without having done anything yourself for Christ’s sake—that’s just so cheap! Even if they did see a miracle, would it do them any good? They’d explain it away as witchcraft or something like that.

“Increase our faith”²¹⁷

— Geronda, why did some saints, both ancient and modern, know when their final hour would come or when a certain event would occur?

— They were distinguished by great love, profound simplicity, humility, and faith. They did not allow logic—which undermines faith—to intrude into their lives. Faith is a great thing! You see, even the Apostle Peter walked on the waves by faith,²¹⁸ but as soon as logic intervened, he began to sink. Have I told you about Father Charalampios,²¹⁹ who lived at the Kutlumush Monastery not so long ago? He was a very simple, hardworking, and spiritual monk. When he grew old, a severe case of the flu confined him to bed. The doctor told the monastic community not to leave his side, because he had very little time left to live. Father Charalampios, hearing this from under his blankets, replied, “What nonsense are you spouting? I won’t die until Easter comes and I say, ‘Christ is Risen.’” And indeed, nearly two months passed, Easter arrived, he said, “Christ is Risen,” received Holy Communion, and passed away peacefully. This simple, God-loving elder became a true child of God and, together with God, determined the day of his own death!

— Geronda, how is faith strengthened?

— Faith is strengthened by prayer. A person who has not cultivated faith within himself from childhood, but who is inclined toward it, can cultivate it through prayer, asking Christ to increase his faith. Let us ask Christ to increase our faith and multiply it. What did the apostles ask of Christ? “*Increase our faith.*” If you say “*grant us,*” it means you are entrusting yourself to God. After all, if a person does not entrust himself to God, what can He grant that person? We ask God to increase our faith not so that we may perform miracles, but so that we may love Him more.

Everything contributes to the growth of faith in God: flowers, locusts, stars, and lightning. We see all of this, but it does no one any good, because we receive “messages”—thoughts brought to us by the enemy. For example, if there were no salt, the sea would rot. However, if a person without faith were to analyze seawater in

²¹⁷ Luke 17:5.

²¹⁸ See Matt. 14:30.

²¹⁹ See *Elder Paisios*, *The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories from the Holy Mountain*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001, p. 9

his laboratory, he would gain no benefit from it, because he has not cleansed his own heart of its salts. But if a person works diligently with love and good intentions, he will see even the greatest absurdities in a different light, through divine enlightenment. And he will glorify God.

Everything must lead us to God

— Geronda, you told us that everything should lead us upward, toward God. How can we achieve this?

— You will achieve this by deriving benefit from everything you encounter [on your life's journey]. Do you know what spiritual benefit and spiritual experience a person gains by finding spiritual meaning in everything? For example, while working with cement, you can find God; by touching a brick, you can touch God. You take one thing, then another, then a third—and you touch God! Yes, touch God in everything! If a person does not act in this way, if he does not see God in everything, then even in church—if he is brought there—he will remain far from Him. Put him to sing in the choir, and he will remain far from God. Give him a spiritual book to read, and he will again remain far from Him. No matter what spiritual task you entrust to him, it will not draw him closer to God.

Every person, from everything they see, whatever they do—whether sewing or embroidering—must derive spiritual benefit. Did you see flowers? You saw God! Did you see pigs? Yes, my brother, you saw God again! You might ask, “So does that mean I can see God even through a pig?” Yes, through a pig. Look how God created it! He gave it a snout—to dig the earth and find plant bulbs by touch. Its snout is such that sharp shards of iron, glass, thorns, and the like are no match for it. It's not just when you see a beautiful, fragrant flower that you should say, “How wisely God has created this!” When you see a pig, you should see God there, too! And even better, reflect on the fact that God could have created me as a pig, but instead created me as a human! Does that seem strange to you? What, couldn't God have made us pigs? Hunters wound wild boars and often fail to find the wounded animals. Then predators come and devour the unfortunate boar alive. Without medical care, the boar suffers, even though it has done nothing to offend its Creator. Whereas man has wounded—and continues to wound—his Creator, and often behaves ungratefully. That is why I am telling you to have the right spiritual practice. How well God has arranged everything! And look at the animals: what strength He gives them! Doctors say that to have strong muscles, you need to eat meat. But look at the oxen: those poor creatures eat grass, yet what massive muscles they have! Don't you see God in this? That is, God gives them strength through nothing but the grass they eat. How much more does He give to man! Do you understand this?

If a person works on himself in this way, he reaches a state where he benefits not only from the saints but also from sinners. A saint strengthens us with his holy example. A sinner restrains, curbs, and holds us back with the example of his fall [and we avoid sin], not so that we won't fall in the eyes of others, but so that we won't grieve God.

The Power of Faith

— Geronda, what is the seal of the Lamb?

— Who is the Lamb?

— Christ.

— Well, what kind of seal does Christ have? At Baptism, the priest anoints the Christian's forehead with holy chrism in the shape of a cross, saying, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Subsequently, every time a

Christian makes the sign of the cross, he venerates the Lord's saving Passion and invokes the power of the cross, which is the power of the crucifixion of our Christ. By saying, "*Cross of Christ, save us by Your power,*" we invoke the power of the Lord's sacrifice on the cross. That is why the cross possesses great power. For example, a thunderstorm has begun. Lightning flashes, and a large iron cross on the bell tower may also be struck by lightning. However, if a Christian standing beneath this iron cross is wearing a small cross like this one and says, "Cross of Christ, save me by your power," then the lightning will not harm him. In the first case, the laws of nature take effect: the lightning strikes the cross and knocks it to the ground. In the second case, this tiny little cross protects the believer who has called upon the power of the Cross for help.

— Geronda, why, even though I ask for something with faith, does God not grant it to me?

— You believe and ask, but if you lack humility or have a tendency toward pride, then God does not grant what you ask for. One can have faith not only with "*a grain of mustard seed,*"²²⁰ but even with a kilogram of mustard seed; yet if there is no humility corresponding to that faith, God will not act, because it will not be for the person's benefit. If there is pride, faith does not work.

If a person walks through life with faith, without doubt, and asks for God's help, then [miraculous] events begin to happen to him little by little: first small ones, then larger ones, and he becomes a person of greater faith. By experiencing the Divine mysteries firsthand, a person becomes a theologian, because he does not approach them with his mind but experiences them in reality. His faith constantly grows, since he moves in a different realm—the realm of divine events. However, in order to experience God's mysteries firsthand, one must shed the old self and, in a sense, return to the state before the Fall. One must possess gentleness and simplicity—so that one's faith may be unshakable. You must believe unconditionally that there is nothing that God cannot do. And do you know how you will suffer then, hearing that someone does not believe or doubts something related to God's help?

— Geronda, if a person has faith, can he change the course of certain events through prayer?

— If one has great faith, one can change many things. Even if one were to build a house in the middle of a mountain riverbed and a raging torrent were to rush down upon it, that torrent would turn back if the person had great faith and fervently asked God for it. However, they must have such faith that, upon hearing about some miracle—such as that the sea has dried up, tractors are plowing it, and fish are being hauled away in trucks—they would believe it. He wouldn't even go to see if it were true. Even if he lived a hundred meters from the sea and couldn't see from his house what was happening, he wouldn't go to check if it were true, because he has no doubts. He knows that everything is possible for God, that divine power is limited by nothing, and therefore nothing beyond that interests him. Such is his faith. Only a true believer truly lives and is truly a child of God.

Faith is the foundation of trust in God

— Geronda, what should I do? I don't feel safe; I'm worried.

— Find your safety in God, my child. Or do you only know about car seat belts? Is God's safety unknown to you? Cross yourself and, before doing anything, say: "My Christ, my Most Holy Theotokos, help me." Is there any greater safety than trust in God? By entrusting oneself to God, a person is constantly refueling with

²²⁰ Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6.

“premium” gasoline from Him, and their spiritual vehicle never stops: it races on and on. Be as attentive as possible, pray, entrust yourself to God, and in any difficulty He will help you. To get rid of anxiety and worry, simplify your life through unconditional trust in God.

— Geronda, I always start doing what I’m told with fear and hesitation, and out of fear I might not do it the way I should.

— Make the sign of the cross, my dear child, and do as you’re told. If you say, “Through the prayers of our holy fathers...”—will none of so many saints help you? Never lose your trust in God. Don’t limit yourself with narrow human logic: that way, you torment yourself and hinder divine help. If, after taking your sensible human actions, you entrust to God both yourself and everything you do, this will be of great help not only to you but also to others. Trusting in God is a great thing. Once, four female doctors were drawing blood from me. The first one came—she tormented me but couldn’t find a vein. The second one—same thing. The third one—a specialist in this field—tried to no avail. Just then, the fourth one walked by; seeing how they were tormenting me, she decided to give it a try as well. After first making the sign of the cross, she immediately found the vein because she had asked for God’s help. The others, however, relied solely on themselves in one way or another.

It is a great thing to entrust oneself to God’s hands. People set goals for themselves and strive to achieve them without heeding God’s will or seeking to align their actions with it. We must entrust the course of events to God and, for our own sake, diligently fulfill our duty. A person will suffer if he does not trust God to the point of completely surrendering himself into His hands. Usually, people first turn to human comfort and turn to God only after they have become disillusioned with people. However, if we do not want to suffer, let us seek divine comfort, for it is the only true comfort. Faith in God is not enough:²²¹ we must also trust Him. Trust in God draws His help. A Christian believes and entrusts himself to God until death. And then he clearly sees God’s hand saving him.

The Apostle Paul says that faith means believing in the unseen, not just in the seen.²²² By entrusting our future to God, we oblige Him to help us. Faith is the foundation of unconditional trust in God. With such faith and through secret prayer, a person reaps the fruits of hope. Trust in God is constant prayer, and at the right moment it leads to divine results. And then it is only natural that a person lives an angelic life and bursts forth in praise: “*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.*”²²³ Because, by trusting in God, a person can make their life a paradise. He glorifies Him for everything and, as from a good father, accepts His guidance. Otherwise, a person turns his life into hellish torment. It is a great thing to experience, even in this life, a taste of heavenly joy.

— Geronda, when it comes to physical or mental health, to what extent should one entrust oneself to God’s hands?

— First, we must trust in God, and after God—in a person who is able to help us.

Faith and Love

— Geronda, what is the connection between faith and love?

²²¹ In this case, “faith” refers to a simple acceptance of God’s existence, which is insufficient for life in Christ.

²²² See Heb. 11:1.

²²³ Isa. 6:3.

— First comes faith, and then love follows. In order to love, one must believe. A person cannot love what he does not believe in. Therefore, in order to love God, one must believe in Him. In accordance with one's faith will come hope, love, and sacrifice for the sake of God and one's neighbor. A fervent faith in God gives rise to a fervent love for Him and for His image—our fellow human beings. And even the unfortunate animals are nourished by the overflow of our love, a love that cannot be contained within the heart and spills over. The more we believe, the more we will love. If our faith is lukewarm, then our love will be lukewarm as well. But if our faith is fervent, then our love will also be fervent.

Our faith must be accompanied by love. A labor of love begins with this. The more a person labors in love, the more his faith and love multiply. Reflections on God's blessings greatly aid a person in this labor of love. Believing in God, a person does not wonder whether Heaven exists or not. They strive because they believe in God and love Him. A person without love will begin to think: "Why bother striving? It's still a question whether Heaven exists and whether there will be a Last Judgment..." If a person is ungrateful, no matter what you do for them, they will remain ungrateful. A person filled with love for God glorifies Him even in trials and gradually reaches the point where he constantly gives thanks to God, so that a divine transformation takes place in his soul, and he is constantly joyful and glad. But there are those who may face no trials at all—only blessings—yet they are never satisfied.

After love for God comes sacrifice. And when there is selfless sacrifice, divine events and miracles begin to happen to a person. One must make sacrifices not for any other reason, but only for the sake of God, who created this universe and bestows so many blessings upon us. Look at the idolaters: they deified nature, worshiped the sun and rivers, and went so far as to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their faith. And if they sacrificed themselves for the sake of a creature, how much more should we sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the Creator!

People do not believe, and that is why they do not sacrifice themselves. All indifference begins with this. One blasphemes, another believes only half-heartedly and suffers. In order to truly rejoice, one must believe and love.

***"Without Me, you can do nothing."*²²⁴**

If a person wants to live without anguish, he must believe what Christ said: "*Without Me you can do nothing.*" That is, in the positive sense of the word, one must give up on oneself and put faith in God's power. By giving up on oneself—in the best sense of the word—a person finds God. "I have set my hope entirely on You."²²⁵ Even the most spiritual people cannot be certain of their own lives, which is why they never stray beyond the bounds of their trust in God. They place their hope in God and despair only of their "self," because the "self" brings a person all spiritual misfortune.

Self-confidence is our greatest and most vicious enemy, because when we least expect it, it mercilessly shatters what we have built into pieces and leaves us, wretched as we are, out in the open. When a person is self-confident, they become paralyzed and unable to act, or they struggle alone. After that, it is only natural that they

²²⁴ John 15:5.

²²⁵ The Theotokos Hymn at Great Compline, Tone 6.

are defeated by the enemy or suffer failure and shatter their “self.” Often, the good Lord very wisely allows us to see both His divine intervention and the failure we have suffered because of our self-confidence. By observing and experiencing every event that happens to us in life, we gain experience, become more attentive, and thus succeed.

Christ first sought faith in God’s power and only then performed a miracle. “If you believe in God’s power,” He said, “you will be healed.”²²⁶ Not as some mistakenly claim today: “A person has inner strength, and by believing in it, he can do anything.” Doesn’t the Gospel say the same thing: ‘Believe’? Therefore, our words are in accordance with the Gospel.” Yes, Christ asked, “Do you believe?”—but in asking this, He meant the following: “Do you believe in God? Do you believe that God can do this?” He wanted a person to confirm that he believes in God, and then He would help him. Nowhere in the Gospel does it say that one must believe in one’s own selfishness. It calls on us to believe in God—that God can help me, can heal me. But these people distort the meaning of the Gospel’s words and say, “A person has strength, and he must believe in himself.” But if someone believes in himself, then there is either selfishness or demon possession involved.

— Geronda, when a miracle happens, these people say that the person believed it would happen, and that is why it did.

— Behind such a self-centered way of framing the question lies the work of the devil. They confuse Christ’s words, “Do you believe?” with their own “I believe.” This is where all this madness taking place in the world begins. And then they tell you: “You must respect neither the great nor the small in order to become a person.” That is why you hear such calls: “Crush them, destroy them, to achieve your goal!” Respect is considered outdated, and the devil triumphs. Meanwhile, even if a child dares to speak even slightly disrespectfully to his parents or elders, God’s grace leaves him, and he falls prey to demonic influences! What then can be said if a person makes insolence his way of life!

— And what if, Geronda, a person claims to believe in God but does not believe that God protects us?

— Then he makes himself a god. How can he believe in God?

— Every morning he makes the sign of the cross.

— He says, “I believe in God, but God gave us reason so that we could do whatever we want.” Or like this: “I am a god. Does not Scripture say, *‘You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High’*?²²⁷ But in order to be a god by grace, one must have the grace of God, and such a person does not think about that. He makes himself a god by his own mind. To have the grace of God and become a god by grace is one thing, but to make oneself a god is quite another. The confusion lies here: a person makes himself a god, and in the end, he ends up becoming an atheist.

The time will come when everyone will believe

— Geronda, how does it happen that believers end up becoming godless?

— There are two possibilities. In the first case, a person may have been very devout; Divine power acted many times in his life, and he experienced many obvious miraculous events, but later he reached the point where

²²⁶ See Matt. 9:29; Mark 9:23.

²²⁷ Ps. 81:6.

his faith became clouded. This happens if, for example, a person recklessly throws himself into self-centered asceticism—that is, he approaches the spiritual life coldly and says, “How did such-and-such a saint struggle? I will do the same.” And so he begins his reckless endeavor. But little by little—without even realizing it—a false sense begins to take root within him that even if he has not reached the level of such-and-such a saint, he must at least be somewhere close to it. And he continues to strive in his endeavor. But whereas Grace had helped him up to that point, from then on it begins to abandon him. For what does the Grace of God have in common with pride? Therefore, the person can no longer strive as before and begins to force himself. However, this self-coercion breeds anxiety within him. The fog of pride also sets in, leading him into confusion. And despite all he has accomplished, despite the workings of Divine Grace and miraculous events, thoughts of unbelief gradually begin to creep in, and he doubts the existence of God.

The second scenario is when someone uneducated decides to delve into dogmatics. Oh, he’s clearly out of his mind! I’m not talking about briefly familiarizing oneself with a particular dogma. But even if an educated person wants to delve into dogmatics out of pride, God’s grace will abandon him because of that pride, and doubts will begin to arise in him. Of course, I’m not talking about those who possess reverence. A devout person may not be educated, yet with a little reasoning—to the extent that it is accessible to his understanding—after becoming acquainted with a certain dogma, he can comprehend it. But if a person who does not believe in the spiritual life enters the realm of dogmatics, then even if he previously had a little faith, he will subsequently lose it entirely.

— Geronda, unbelief has become extremely widespread in our time.

— Yes, but it’s often clear that even those who say they don’t believe in God harbor a hidden, small measure of faith. Once, a young boy said to me, “I don’t believe that God exists.” “Come a little closer,” I replied. “Do you hear the nightingale singing? From whom did it receive this gift?” The poor young man was immediately moved to tenderness. The harshness of his unbelief vanished, and his face changed. On another occasion, two visitors came to my hermitage. They were about forty-five years old, and the lives they led were very worldly. Just as we monks say, “Since this life is vain, we renounce everything,” so these two, while still young, had decided the exact opposite: that “there is no other life.” And so they abandoned their studies and threw themselves into worldly life. They had reached the point where they had become ruins, both in spirit and in body. The father of one of them died of grief. The other squandered his mother’s estate and drove her to heart disease. After we spoke with them, they began to see things differently and lamented, “We have become good for nothing.” I gave one of them an icon for his mother. I wanted to give an icon to the other one as well, but he wouldn’t take it. “Give me,” he said, “one of those little boards you’re sawing. I don’t believe in God, but I believe in the saints.” Then I replied, “Whether a person is a mirror or a can lid, if the sun’s rays don’t fall on him, he won’t shine. The saints shone with the rays of God’s grace, just as the stars reflect the sunlight.”

Unfortunate young people are being brainwashed by various theories. When receiving visitors at my kaliva, I noticed that usually a couple of Marxists in their fifties join groups of young people and brainwash them. Marxists do not believe, and if you try to prove God’s existence to them, they begin to judge Him and bombard you with questions: “Why is this so, and why is that so?” The prophet Isaiah says that those who do not want to be saved do not understand.²²⁸ Once I said to them: “Do you see the stars? They aren’t bolted to the sky with

²²⁸ Cf. Isaiah 6:9–10.

nuts; someone is holding them in the firmament. What the prophets foretold about Christ has been fulfilled. We have so many saints who were once terrible unbelievers, executioners, and idolaters, but who later believed in Christ and bore witness to their faith through martyrdom. Some of them had their tongues cut out so they could not speak of Christ, but even with their tongues cut out, they spoke even better! Every day the Church commemorates so many saints! Their presence is alive. And even if we do not seek them out, they find us themselves. Many ascetics in the desert, having no calendar and not knowing which saint the Church is commemorating, say in prayer: “Saints of the day, pray to God for us.” And the saints appear to them and reveal their names—and these saints’ names are difficult ones, too. Later, the ascetics look in the calendar and confirm that the saints who appeared to them were being celebrated on that very day.²²⁹ “How do you explain that?” After that, they asked me, “Why do the saints go to the monks instead of helping people in need?” “Guys,” I asked them in reply, “did you fly here on a plane?” “No,” they said, “we drove here.” — “All right, but on your way here, how many chapels did you see along the road?”²³⁰ They didn’t just spring up on their own, like mushrooms after rain. The saints helped the people, and out of reverence, the people built these little chapels and light lamps in them. Spiritual people rise as high as they cast aside the material.” Materialists, too, don’t come away empty-handed—they get at least some profit: for example, they’ll make a certain number of mugs and earn a certain amount of money; if they make more, they’ll earn more. But you’re engaged solely in propaganda and stop there: you have no profit to look forward to. You are the unhappiest of all, because if you achieve what you want, your entire ideal will consist of the torment of Marxist slavery.” In the end, they told me, “You are a very good person, wise, just...”

In any case, whether people want it or not, the time will come when they will all come to believe, because they will reach a dead end. And then Christ will intervene.

Chapter 3.

On the fact that God helps where where human strength falls short

God helps with what cannot be done by human means

- What’s that smoke over there?
- We’re burning what we don’t need, Geronda.
- What are you doing, lighting a fire in a wind like this?

²²⁹ On June 3, 1979, Elder Paisios was praying with his rosary, saying, “Holy ones of the day, pray to God for us”: He did not remember which saint’s feast day it was that day, and he could not find his glasses to look it up in the monthly calendar (just a few days earlier, the Elder had moved into the “Panaguda” cell and had not yet unpacked his belongings). Then the holy martyr Lucillian, whose feast day is celebrated on June 3, appeared to him and repeated his difficult name three times.

²³⁰ Among devout Christians in Greece, there is a widespread tradition of erecting tiny chapels along the roads, usually in gratitude to God, the Most Holy Theotokos, or the saints, or in memory of loved ones who have died in car accidents. — *Translator’s note.*

— Geronda, it rained this morning...

— Even if it rained and flooded, once the wind picks up, everything will dry out like gunpowder! What a line: “It rained!” Have you already forgotten how a fire started down there because of your foolishness? If someone has stepped in a puddle once, they should be very careful from then on. God helps where His help is needed, where people can do nothing on their own. But He will not help our foolishness. That’s how we make even the saints a laughingstock to the world.

— Geronda, is it always clear up to what point one should act in a human way?

— Let’s start with the fact that this is obvious. But even if a person was willing to do what he could and didn’t do it because something prevented him from doing so, God will help him in a time of need. However, if he had the strength but wasn’t willing, God will not help him. For example, you’re told to bolt the door at night, but you’re too lazy, you don’t lock it, and you say that God will protect you. You don’t lock it not because you rely on God, but because you’re lazy. But how, then, will God help you? Will He help a lazy person? If someone is told to bolt the door and fails to do so, they deserve to be punished for that disobedience alone.

We must do what is humanly possible and leave to God what is beyond human ability. And if you do a little more than you are capable of—not out of selfishness, but out of love for Him, recognizing that you have not yet exhausted all your human strength—then God will see that as well. Such love will be pleasing to Him, and He will hasten to help. In order to help us, God also wants us to make our own efforts. Take Noah, for example: he toiled for a hundred years building the ark. They cut the wood with wooden saws: they found trees that were harder than others and made saws out of them. Well then, couldn’t God have done something to speed up the construction of the ark? [He could have—but] after telling Noah and those with him how to build the ark, He then gave them the strength to do it.²³¹ Therefore, let us do what we can, so that God may do what we cannot.

Once, a man came to me in the kaliva and asked, “Why do the monks sit here instead of going out into the world to help the people?”—“If they went out into the world and helped the people,” I replied, “then you would be asking why the monks are wandering about the world. Now they don’t go out into the world, and you’re asking why they don’t.” Then he said to me, “Why do monks go to doctors? Why aren’t they healed by Christ and the Mother of God?” “A Jewish doctor once asked me the very same question,” I replied. —“He’s not Jewish,” one of the men who had come with him interjected in defense of my interlocutor. “It doesn’t matter that he’s not Jewish,” I replied, “the question itself is purely Jewish. And I’ll repeat to you the answer I gave that Jew, since the situations are similar.” “You,” I told him then, “being a Jew, must know the Old Testament by heart. The prophet Isaiah speaks of how God granted King Hezekiah—who was a very good man—fifteen more years of life. God sent the prophet Isaiah to the king, who told him: ‘God will grant you fifteen more years of life because you have destroyed the groves where idolatrous sacrifices were made. And regarding your sore (the king had a sore), God says that you should apply a bundle of dried figs to it, and you will be healed!’ Since God granted him fifteen more years of life, could He not have healed this sore as well? [Of course, He could have], but this sore could also have been healed by a bundle of figs.”²³² Let us not ask God for what can be done through people. Let us humble ourselves before people and ask for their help.

²³¹ See Gen. 6:13 ff.

²³² See Isaiah 38:4 and following.

A person should act humanly up to a certain point, and then leave everything to God. Trying to help with what cannot be done humanly is selfish. I often see that such stubbornness is the work of the devil, intended to put that person out of commission. I have a rough idea of how far one can go in helping through human means and at what point one must entrust everything to God. Therefore, when I see that the situation cannot be resolved through human means, I raise my hands in sorrow, light a couple of candles, entrust the difficulty to God, and it is resolved immediately. God knows that I do this not because I am too lazy to act on my own.

Therefore, when we are asked for help, we must act judiciously and help as much as we can. And in matters beyond our ability, we will help at least with a single prayer or by entrusting everything solely to God, which is also a kind of mysterious prayer.

God cares for everything for our good

God is good by nature, and He cares for everything for our good. If we ask Him for something, He will give it to us if it serves our good. God generously grants us what is necessary for the salvation of our souls and the maintenance of our physical health, and His blessing will remain upon us. And if He does not give us something—whether to test us or to protect us—then let us not only accept this with joy but also reflect on it so that we may benefit from it. He knows when and how to help His creation; He helps in the way known to Him at the right time. However, His frail creation often lacks patience; it wants to receive what it asks for right this very moment, like a small child who asks his mother for a bagel that isn't quite done and cannot wait until it is ready. Our task is to ask and to be patient, and our good Mother, the Most Holy Theotokos, will give us what we ask for when it is ready.

— Geronda, in what situations do the saints help?

— They help when there is a genuine need, not when we merely think there is one. That is, they help when it is for our own good. Do you understand? For example, a child asks his father for a moped, but the father won't buy it. "I need a moped," the child whines, "I'm tired of walking; it's a struggle." However, the father doesn't buy him a moped because he's afraid his son will get hurt. "I'll buy you a car later," he tells his son, puts the money in the bank, and when he's saved up enough, he buys a car. It's the same with the saints: they know when we need help.

— Geronda, how do we experience God's mercy?

— God's mercy is divine consolation, which we feel within ourselves. God arranges things this way so that we do not find rest in human consolation and turn to divine consolation instead. For example, the Greeks in Australia, finding themselves completely alone, drew closer to God than those who left for other countries—say, Germany—where Greeks are closer to their homeland and surrounded by fellow countrymen. For those who went to Australia, their hardships greatly helped them cling to God. They all left with just one suitcase, found themselves far from their homeland and far from their families, and had to find work, teachers for their children, and much more. There was nowhere to turn for help. Therefore, they turned to God and held fast to their faith. In Europe, however, Greeks did not face such hardships and therefore do not cling so strongly to God.

“Ask, and it will be given to you”²³³

— Geronda, why should we ask God for help if He already knows our needs?

— Because there is freedom. And besides, when we feel pain for our neighbor and ask God to help him, it deeply moves Him, because then He intervenes without violating the freedom of the human will. God is entirely willing to help people who are suffering. However, in order for Him to help them, someone must ask Him to do so. Because if God were to help someone without anyone asking Him to do so, the devil would object and say, “Why are You helping him and violating the freedom of the human will? He is a sinner and, therefore, belongs to me.” This reveals the great spiritual nobility of God, Who does not even grant the devil the right to object. Therefore, in order to intervene, He wants us to ask Him for it. He is eager to come to our aid immediately, if it is for our good. He wants to help His creatures in accordance with their needs. He acts individually toward each person—in the way that is most beneficial to each one.

So, in order for both God and the saints to help, a person must want it and ask for it himself. Otherwise, they will not help. *“Do you want to be healed?”*²³⁴ — Christ asked the paralytic. If a person does not want it, God respects that. And if someone does not want to go to Paradise, God does not force him there, except in cases where a person who was in [spiritual] ignorance was unjustly wronged; then he is entitled to Divine help. In other cases, however, God does not wish to intervene. Does a person ask for help? God and the saints provide it. Before you can even blink, they’ve already helped. And sometimes you don’t even have time to blink—that’s how quickly God is by your side.

“Ask, and it will be given to you...,” says Holy Scripture. Without asking God for help, we suffer complete failure. But if we ask for divine help, Christ ties us to His Grace with a string and holds us fast. The wind blows from one side and then the other, but we are tied down and out of danger. But when a person does not understand who is holding him, he unties the string, separates himself from Christ, the winds begin to buffet him from all sides, and he suffers.

Know that only our passions and sins belong to us. Whatever good we do comes from God; whatever foolishness we commit is our own doing.

The moment Divine Grace leaves us, that’s it—we can no longer do anything. In natural life, as soon as God deprives us of oxygen, we die immediately. So it is in the spiritual life: the moment He withdraws Divine Grace from us even slightly, that’s it—we are lost. Once, while praying, I felt joy. I stood on my feet for several hours and didn’t feel the slightest bit of fatigue. The whole time I was praying, I felt a kind of sweet repose, something indescribable in words. But after a while, a human thought crossed my mind: “I’m missing two ribs, and I catch a cold easily. To keep this state and experience it for as long as it lasts, I need to go get a warm scarf and wrap myself up; otherwise, I might catch a cold.” As soon as I accepted that thought, I collapsed onto the floor. I lay there for about half an hour, then managed to get up, go to my cell, and lie down. Before that, as I delved deeper into prayer, I felt a kind of airiness, lightness, and joy that cannot be expressed in words. But as soon as I entertained that thought, I fell to the floor. If I had entertained a proud thought and, for example, thought: “Here’s the question: are there even two or three other people in the same state as I am?”—then I would

²³³ Matthew 7:7.

²³⁴ John 5:6.

have suffered great harm. My thought was not demonic. I thought as a human being does, just as a lame person thinks about taking up his crutches. This thought was natural, but look what happened to me even because of it!

The only thing a person has is a disposition, and God helps him in accordance with that disposition. That is why I say that all the blessings we have are God's gifts. Our deeds are nothing, and our virtues are nothing but a continuous string of zeros. Let us, then, strive constantly to add zeros to zeros and ask Christ to place a one at the beginning of this string. That is how we will become rich. But if Christ does not place a one at the beginning, then all our labor will be in vain.

God's grace is drawn by humility

— Geronda, I'm having a hard time in my spiritual struggle.

— Do you ask Christ for help, or are you struggling on your own? Have you told Christ about your weakness? You do not humble yourself, you do not ask Christ for help, and then you say, "I'm having a hard time with my spiritual struggle." If you humble yourself and ask Christ for a little help, He will help you. Often, the effort a person makes is selfish, which is why Christ does not help. Cast aside your "self," do not take it into account, and God's grace will dwell within you. We want to attain holiness by some magical means [without effort], but God does not help a person who is in the wrong [spiritual] state. If even a little self-interest is mixed in, it hinders Divine help.

— But if I am willing to improve myself, won't God help me realize my weakness, which I myself have not seen?

— For God to help, you must have a willingness to make an effort. By "willingness to make an effort," we mean that a person should make a small effort to overcome their weakness. Upon seeing even a little pure willingness, God generously helps the person and generously sends them His Grace. A person enters God's current.

— Geronda, to what extent does God help us in our spiritual struggle?

— As long as we ourselves help Him to help us. When you ask God for something over a long period of time and He does not grant you His help, know that the reason for this is your pride. If we have passions—for example, gluttony, loose tongue, anger, envy, and so on—and at the same time we also have pride, then God does not help us get rid of them, because we are hindering Divine Grace. And even if we have only a predisposition toward pride, we still prevent God from helping us, even if we strive and pray more than is necessary. It is impossible for God not to help if there is no fear that a person will take credit for it. As soon as the predisposition to pride disappears and a person becomes spiritually healthy, God will immediately deliver that person from the passion tormenting them and reward them for the "extraordinary" effort they have made. Therefore, in order to receive help, we must assist God with our humble reflection. Let us say: "My God, I am such a worthless person! I beg You, forgive me and help me." Then God helps, because the soul that has entrusted itself into His hands with a good and humble disposition is entitled to Divine help.

We must believe that Christ and the Most Holy Mother of God always protect and help us, as long as we have a humble attitude. Our God is not deaf, so He hears us, nor is He blind, so He sees us; He is not like Baal.²³⁵

²³⁵ See 3 Kings 18:26.

Help at the Beginning of the Spiritual Struggle

— Geronda, is it true that God helps a person most of all at the beginning of their spiritual struggle?

— Yes, God helps a person greatly when they take their first steps in their spiritual life, just as parents protect their children more when they are still young. When the children grow up, however, the parents no longer worry about them as much, because the children begin to use their own reason. At the beginning of the spiritual struggle, a person clearly feels God's Grace, but then God withdraws slightly so that the person may undertake a feat and grow in strength. I remember planting several tomato plants in my garden. At first, I watered them every day, but then I stopped and watered them only when their leaves began to turn yellow. Without water, the tomatoes struggled, and in order to find moisture, they were forced to send their roots deep into the ground. Their fruits also began to form. But if I had watered them constantly, they would have grown only upward, and their roots would have remained on the surface.

— Geronda, you said that at the beginning of his spiritual struggle, a person feels God's Grace, and then the Grace withdraws slightly from him.

— Yes. God withdraws His Grace so that a person may humble himself and realize His help.

— Isn't such a change painful?

— No, because God doesn't abandon a person entirely. When a person begins to work spiritually, God gives them, well, let's say... a piece of chocolate. Little by little, the person gets used to working and eating chocolate. But if God stops giving a person sweets and that person stops working and starts lamenting, "At first I was eating chocolate bars, but now—not a single one!... Oh, what a misfortune has befallen me!..."—then such a person does not succeed. In other words, a person [on the contrary] should rejoice in this. We shouldn't want easy help from Christ; we shouldn't ask for leniency, because then we'll remain untested and untrained. And in the army, those who train well are the ones who survive. If a person receives endless help, they ultimately remain helpless. The fact that Christ doesn't help constantly moves me deeply. I feel like a student under demanding teachers. Passing spiritual exams is difficult: it requires constant self-discipline and effort, but in this way a person prospers spiritually. Is it difficult for God to constantly help every person? Of course not, but that kind of help alone will not benefit a person. If parents endlessly feed their spoiled child chocolate, and the child himself wants to be fed over and over again, then such a person will grow up to be lazy, stubborn, and pitiful. The same is true in the spiritual life—if someone constantly accepts God's help and does not make an effort on their own, they will never attain spiritual maturity. Therefore, God, after helping a person at the beginning of their spiritual life, gradually steps aside so that the person may understand that they, too, must do what is within their power. For example, when a toddler is learning to walk, parents don't hold his hand constantly, but let him try to walk on his own. And as soon as he's about to fall, they—whoosh!—catch him! Then the child realizes that his own strength is only enough to walk while holding onto something else. But if a child walks only when held by the hand, and when left on their own doesn't hold onto anything to learn to walk independently and gradually build up their strength—but instead sits down on the floor—then they'll never learn to walk, because they didn't do what they were capable of doing.

— Does a person feel that at first they had Divine help, and then lost it?

— If a person does not pay attention to himself, he feels nothing.

Divine powers are almighty

— Geronda, many people are worried: “How will these various [difficulties and temptations] happening in the world end?”

— Listen to what I’m going to tell you: right now, even if God wanted to abandon us, He couldn’t do it.

— What do you mean, Geronda?

— Here’s what: parents, having given life to a child, the more they struggle to raise him, the more they love him and care for him. So it is with God—He gave us life; in a way, He suffered to raise us; He, so to speak, grew weary doing everything He did for us. And now He cannot abandon us, even if He wanted to, because He feels pain for us—as long as we ourselves have even a tiny bit of love. If we have even a little love, then we will not be left out of Paradise.

— You said, Geronda, that the good God will not abandon us...

— Yes. God never abandons us; it is we who abandon Him. If a person does not live spiritually, then he has no right to Divine help. He has a right to it by living spiritually and remaining close to God. And then, should something happen and such a person die, he is ready for the next life, so that he gains in both this life and the next.

Neither people nor demons can hinder God’s help. Nothing is difficult for God or for a holy person. The only obstacle is our human lack of faith. Through our lack of faith, we prevent the great divine powers from drawing near to us. There is such great power near us, but the human element is so strong within us that we cannot comprehend the divine element, which surpasses all the human powers of the entire world, for God’s powers are almighty.

We often sit idly for hours on end, trying to find a way out of a situation on our own and applying all our inexperience to the task. Our heads throb and our eyes burn; we cannot fall asleep because a tangalashka has settled upon us with obsessive thoughts. And in the end, we find a solution, but afterward God finds a different, better solution for us—one we hadn’t even thought of—while we are left with nothing but a headache and sleepless nights. If God is not before us, our heads grow weary and ache, no matter how sound our thoughts may be. But prayer, with trust in God, restores a person’s strength. Therefore, let us entrust to God with confidence what is difficult to accomplish by human means. Let us not rely on our own human efforts; He will do what is most beneficial.

Whenever you plan to do anything, always say, “If it pleases God,” so that what happened to a certain self-assured man does not happen to you. He was planning to go work in the vineyard and said to his wife, “Early tomorrow morning I will go to the vineyard.” “If it pleases God, you’ll go,” she told him. “Whether it pleases God or not,” he replied, “I’m going.” The next morning, while it was still dark, he left the house, but on the way a downpour began so heavy that he had to turn back. It wasn’t dawn yet. He knocked on the door. “Who’s there?” his wife asked. “If it pleases God,” he replied, “it’s me, your husband!”

A Good Disposition

— Geronda, what will happen to those who have kindness but no faith?

— Do you think they have no faith? All right, let’s assume that’s the case. But when they were little, didn’t their mother give them Holy Communion? And even if she didn’t, weren’t they baptized, weren’t they anointed with holy oil? Weren’t they born to Orthodox, baptized mothers? You’ll see how God will help these kind-

hearted people: through trials or illness, disasters or earthquakes, lightning, thunder, floods, a single word, or anything else. And in the end, He will lead them to Paradise. Often, a saint or an angel may even appear to such a person, even though he does not deserve such a great blessing. Christ, having first exhausted all other means, may do this as well. But often the following happens to these people: the devil intervenes, deceives them, and many of these unfortunate souls are led astray, because the devil begins to say to them: “Ah, you see, God has shown you such a great miracle because you can save the world!” And the unfortunate person, instead of being contrite, instead of saying, “My God, how can I thank You? I was not worthy of such great grace,” instead accepts the thoughts the devil brings him and becomes proud. Then the devil comes to him again and puts on a “show”: he shows him angels and saints and tells him, “You will save the universe.” But if such a person comes to his senses, God will help him again.

In any case, let us not forget that we all have an inheritance, a gift from God. That is why there is goodness deep within all people. However, the devil corrupts everything. And some people today, even having strayed from the Church, have preserved this inheritance, this goodness. Well then, God will help them. Therefore, when you meet a person who has been drawn into a life of sin but is still compassionate—someone who, for example, sees a sick person and feels compassion in their heart, or sees a poor person and helps them—know that God will not abandon this person; He will help them. But if you see that someone who has turned away from God is cruel, unmerciful, and has other passions, then you must pray for him day and night, so that God may send a “landing party” into his heart and this person may be converted.

God’s judgments are unfathomable. I know one thing: people who live worldly lives—those who have not had the opportunity to come to know God, those who have been led astray by evil, those who have been pushed toward it—all these people, if they possess a good disposition, move God to compassion, and He will help them. He will set various means in motion so that such people may find their way; He will not abandon them. He will arrange things so that even at the hour of death, they will be in a good state.

Part 5.

On Spiritual Weapons

“If someone is pained by the current state of the world, if someone prays about it, then people receive help, and at the same time their free will remains intact”

Chapter 1.

On Prayer, a Powerful Weapon

Much prayer is necessary

In the past, a worldly person would think things through before doing anything. If a spiritual person wanted to do something, however, they would both think it through and pray. In our time, even “spiritual” people not only fail to pray but also fail to think. The matter often concerns serious issues, yet they conduct experiments—and on whom? On people! In all cases, before undertaking anything, let us ask ourselves: “Have I thought this through? Have I prayed about this?” By undertaking something without thinking or praying, a person acts in a satanic manner. Often, many Christians hinder God’s intervention through their actions. They believe they can handle the task on their own, and even though non-believers say, “With God’s help,” these people do not speak that way. For example, someone is fighting against the carnival,²³⁶ whereas they could pray, and God would send such a hailstorm that the whole crowd would scatter and all the performances would be canceled. Or, suppose some people accuse a certain bishop of something; others appeal these accusations to the State Council, but they don’t stop there: demonstrations, commotion, newspaper articles... Human efforts are endless—these people do not allow God to act; they do not turn to prayer so that He might respond through it. Everything that is uncorrected and incorrigible is corrected through humility and prayer.

Today we are living in the times of the Apocalypse, and one does not need to be a prophet to understand this. Everything is happening one thing after another. We do not know what awaits us; this is evident from the state of the world. Therefore, now more than ever, we need to rely more strongly on prayer and fight evil with prayer. This is the only way out. Let us ask God to have mercy on His creation, even though we are not worthy of His mercy. People will be unable to reach mutual understanding. Everyone will do whatever comes to mind. What Saint Cosmas of Aetolia prophesied will come to pass:²³⁷ “One will have to walk a long way to meet another person, and those who survive will eat with golden spoons.” Of course, some may think: “What good is prayer if the prophecies are going to come true anyway?” Yes, God knows that events will unfold exactly this way, but we pray so that evil will be less painful and will not spread. That is why the Gospel says that for the sake of the elect, the days will be cut short.²³⁸ For example, in war, the power of prayer works a miracle: more people survive, and there are, on the contrary, fewer casualties. People derive spiritual benefit from all this; they become believers and change for the better.

This is no laughing matter. It’s a miracle in itself that the world hasn’t blown up yet. May God stretch out His hand—the whole world depends on three or four people; its fate lies in the hands of a few madmen. Just as the proverb says: “When horses fight, the chickens get trampled.” That’s exactly how it is. When turmoil breaks out between the great powers, injustices rain down on the heads of the unfortunate little ones. The big ones kick about, and the little ones crumble. We need a great deal of prayer for God to enlighten those in power, because

²³⁶ This refers to the non-Christian tradition in Greece of holding an annual Shrovetide carnival, accompanied by boisterous spectacles and folk festivities. — *Translator’s note.*

²³⁷ Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, the Holy Martyr and Equal-to-the-Apostles († 1779; commemoration of his martyrdom on August 24). He lived in the 18th century. He spent a significant portion of his life as a monk on Mount Athos. After his divine calling, he went out into the world and traveled through the towns and villages of Turkish-occupied Greece, preaching the Gospel. He taught the Gospel, opened schools, and opposed the Islamization of the Greeks. He performed many miracles and left behind numerous prophecies about the future of all humanity. He is rightly considered a great prophet of the modern era. In 2007, the “Holy Mountain” Publishing House released Athanasios Zoitakis’s book **The Life and Prophecies of Cosmas of Aetolia**. — *Translator’s note.*

²³⁸ See Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20.

if they so choose, they can destroy the world. But God can very easily enlighten them a little as well. And if He enlightens even one person, all it takes is for that person to issue the appropriate order, and everything will change.

Petitions in Prayer

— Geronda, could you, if possible, tell us something we should pray for in particular?

— First of all, let us ask that, through our prayer, those who are alive and those who will live may come to revere God. When I say in my prayer, “Grant Your mercy to those who know You,” I add: “...and those who do not know You.” And I even pray this way: “Lord, save the ungodly.” (The Church, of course, has rightly established the invocation: “Lord, save the godly,” because otherwise the ungodly might take offense upon hearing that prayers are being offered for them.) Then, when the priest says, “For those who have commanded us, unworthy as we are, to pray for them,” I add: “...and for those who have not commanded us,” since we must pray both for those who have asked us to do so and for those who have not, for those we know and those we do not know. How many thousands of people have needs far greater and problems far more serious than those who have asked for our prayers! Let us also pray for those who have been treated unjustly, that the truth may come to light; that those in prison may be pardoned, that the suffering they have endured may work for their good, and that they may be reformed.

As I add wood to the fire, I pray: “Warm, my God, those who are deprived of warmth.” As I burn the letters sent to me (after reading them, I burn them because they contain things others should not know, particularly confessions of sins), I say: “May God burn away all their shortcomings. May He help them live spiritually and sanctify them.” I also have a habit of asking the saints to intercede for people who bear their names, and I ask all the saints to intercede for those who do not have a patron saint.²³⁹

— Geronda, which is better: to ask for God’s mercy in general, or—in accordance with the Savior’s commandment, “*Ask, and it will be given to you*” (²⁴⁰)—to ask in prayer for something specific?

— Pray in general and say: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on those who suffer in body and soul.” This prayer also includes the departed. If a loved one comes to mind, say a prayer for them: “Have mercy on Your servant (name),” and then immediately move on to the general prayer for the whole world: “Have mercy on Your whole world.” You can think of a specific person in need, pray briefly for them, and then say the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us”—with a sense of sorrow for everyone, so that... the train doesn’t leave with only one passenger. We shouldn’t get stuck on just one person, or else we won’t be able to help either ourselves or others through prayer. When you pray, for example, for someone who has cancer, pray for everyone who has cancer, and add a prayer for the departed. Or, if you see someone in distress, let your mind immediately turn to all those in distress, and pray for them. I remember as a child seeing a beggar who had died on the threshold of a Turkish house, ten meters from ours. His name was Peter. A Turkish woman found him in the morning lying near their porch, and when she tried to nudge him, she realized he was dead. I still remember him

²³⁹ The Greek Church does not consider it unacceptable to baptize people with non-Christian names. According to established custom, such people celebrate their name day on All Saints’ Sunday. — *Translator’s note.*

²⁴⁰ Matthew 7:7.

to this day. And how many such “Peters” are there in the world! It is helpful for the one who prays to ask for something specific and to think about the suffering of our neighbors, because this stirs up pain in his heart. And then, with pain in his heart, a person returns in prayer from the specific to the general and, through heartfelt prayer, helps people even more.

It is good for a monk to divide his prayer into three parts: for himself, for the whole world, and for the departed. But even with this division—despite the fact that it seems equal—the monk’s greatest concern is for himself, because he has only one soul, whereas there are billions of living people and the departed.

— Geronda, when I’m on obedience, I usually pray only for myself.

— That’s wrong. If you pray only for yourself in your cell, if you pray only for yourself while performing your duties, how will your heart be touched by sorrow? When love, sorrow, and self-sacrifice arise in a person, a certain higher concern for others also arises, and the heart finds sweetness in this.

In this way, a person does not forget to pray while working. Then people receive real help, but the one who prays and experiences spiritual joy also receives help. Carry out your duty and pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us,” so that your prayer may help all people. This “have mercy on us” encompasses all people, even those five or six—however many there may be—of the “great ones” upon whom the fate of the whole world depends. Work and pray for those who labor. This prayer helps both those who labor physically and those who labor spiritually. For many are laboring, and moreover, they labor diligently. Some—for the good of the Church and the state. Others—for evil: they sit up all night, devising ways to destroy the world. Still others gather at conferences and try to find a way to prevent the former from doing evil. Yet others also work day and night, without sleep, striving to find solutions to universal human problems. Pray that God may enlighten the wicked so that they do less evil, or that God may completely eliminate evil. Pray that He may enlighten the good so that they may help others. Pray for those who want to work but, because they are sick, cannot; pray also for those who are healthy but cannot find work, even as they are in need. Think of various situations and pray for them. When your mind turns to all these people, your heart is pierced with sorrow, and your prayer becomes heartfelt. How many people need prayer throughout the day! Do not waste your time. Having begun to pray for someone who asked for it (it does not matter that, though not in great need of prayer, they believe they need it), the person praying goes further and thinks of all those who are in even greater need. And then even the one who thought he needed prayer receives help, because he served as the occasion for someone else’s prayer on behalf of many.

Help Provided Through Prayer

— Geronda, the Holy Apostle James says: “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*” What does “powerful and effective” mean?

— It is necessary for the one who asks for someone else’s prayers to also want to help himself and to want to be saved. He must make an effort. In other words, in order to receive help from the prayer of a righteous person, one must have a good disposition oneself. God hears the prayer offered from the heart, but the one for whom the prayer is offered must also be willing to accept the help. If he is not willing, then the one praying must

possess the holiness of St. Paisios the Great in order to be able to deliver his soul from hell.²⁴¹ Therefore, pray first for those who are willing to be saved.

When I ask God for various needs, I say: “My God, may Your help be evident, so that people may derive spiritual benefit from it. But if it is not evident, then there is no need for us to be helped.” Many do not even understand what storms God delivers us from; they do not think about it at all and do not glorify Him. Therefore, let us ask that Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints help the people, but let their help be tangible, so that it may be of benefit to people. Suppose someone slips on scaffolding, but God arranges things so that he catches hold of something where there was nothing to grab onto, and survives. Or someone falls and suffers no injuries, or is in a car accident and emerges unharmed. In all these cases, we must pray that the person will realize they were saved because God helped them, and that, by understanding this, they may gain spiritual benefit. An acquaintance of mine fell off a bridge into a river and survived. “Well,” I asked him, “did you jump off to test the depth?” The saints are holding us in their hands. I gave a young man a cross as a blessing. He was speeding on his motorcycle and flew over a taxi along with it, flipped in the air, and continued down the road—not a scratch on him. Many are saved from certain death, but few realize it and change their ways.

— If I pray for someone, but he himself does not ask for help, will he receive it?

— It depends on many things. First of all, if this person had good intentions but didn’t have a favorable opportunity to act on them, then he is entitled to Divine help. Even if others don’t pray for him, time will pass, and God will give him a favorable opportunity to make amends. But if they ask for help from the very beginning, God will intervene, and they will mend their ways sooner. Otherwise, they will mend their ways later. Through prayer, we give God the right to intervene. There is no doubt: if a person asks for help from the heart and humbly says, “Pray for me too, Father,” he touches your heart deeply, and you cannot forget him. But if he speaks in a completely superficial way: “Pray, pray, tie a little knot,” as if saying to you, “Hello!”—how can you remember him then?

When a heartfelt, pain-filled prayer is offered for the needs of the world, people who are asking God for help at that very moment receive it immediately. I can cite quite a few very clear examples. Many years ago, a man, in deep despair and with his mind clouded, crossed the border and found himself in one of the communist countries. There, he was mistaken for a spy, arrested, beaten, and sent to prison. In prison, he prayed. A monk I knew learned of his misfortune and prayed: “My God, I beg You, set him free! It is easy for You to do this.” From prison, he was taken for interrogation, and after the interrogation, he... found himself on Greek territory. When our investigators questioned him, he replied: “They beat me, put me in prison, and demanded a confession. But I don’t remember what happened after that. I didn’t even realize how I ended up at the Greek border post; I don’t know how it happened.” Such is the power of prayer. Prayer moves God to mercy.

It’s good when our “radio” is constantly in use so we can keep up with everyone who asks for help. In the army, in the signals company, we not only monitored enemy radio stations but also helped our own. We would activate a relay station for those who were far from the command center and lacked sufficient transmission

²⁴¹ The life of St. Paisios the Great describes the following incident: a negligent novice fell into a certain sin through disobedience and died before he could repent. After his elder’s persistent prayers, God revealed to him that the novice’s soul would remain in hell until the Day of Judgment, when it would receive its final, fitting retribution. The elder then turned to the Venerable Paissius and asked him to pray to God for the salvation of the deceased. After the venerable one’s fervent prayer, Christ freed the soul of the unrepentant novice from hell.

power; we would receive their messages and relay them onward. There were always two of us, and we worked in two shifts manning the radio around the clock, because if there were only one radio operator, he would have to take breaks, and then the person who needed help wouldn't receive it—his messages wouldn't reach their destination. A single radio like this, if it operates constantly, can help those whose messages don't reach headquarters. Likewise, the one who has boldness before God and prays for his neighbor activates his own intermediary “radio station” between the person asking for help and God. But if one person asks for help while the other turns off his “radio station,” what will come of it?..

The worth of prayer lies in its quality

— Geronda, when we ask for something serious, shouldn't prayer be accompanied by fasting?

— There's no need to even mention it; it's essential. Fasting and asceticism are prerequisites for prayer. But for prayer to be genuine, one must feel pain for others. After all, for many Christians of our time, the desire not to worry has already become the norm, the standard. Even retirees who sit around all day doing nothing don't want to take in an abandoned child, because it would cause them trouble. They'd rather have a bite to eat, drink a cup of coffee, go for a walk, visit a sick person in the hospital with the nurses and orderlies—go where everything is in order—because that's easier. In other words, all of this will be a pleasure for them, and at the same time, they'll soothe their conscience by telling themselves they've fulfilled their duty. How many people have I asked to help abandoned children! But it's all been in vain.

Once on the Holy Mountain, they went on a procession to pray for rain, and instead of rain, a fire broke out! You can't go on a procession as if it were a walk in the park. There must be suffering. Surely no temptation or difficulty will remain unresolved if the monks pray from the heart? But I see what spirit reigns in the monasteries, despite all these difficult years. “Let us rejoice!” But the world is on fire! We're asked to hold a vigil—let's say, for someone who's sick. We sing, “*I lift up my hands to You,*” and rejoice. A person is dying, and we happily pass the time, saying, “We held a vigil for the sick person.” What kind of vigil is that?! You've arranged some entertainment for yourselves! Yes, it's spiritual entertainment. And sometimes we don't even pray for those who are sick, even when the priest proclaims, “For those lying in infirmity.” But our help would be more effective if we prayed a little with our rosary beads. I am not calling for the abolition of the festive vigils prescribed by church regulations, but in cases like the one just mentioned, we need to find a little time to say at least one or two sets of the rosary with the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Your servant.”

The whole foundation lies in the quality of prayer. Prayer must come from the heart and spring from sorrow. For God, it is not so much the quantity as the quality of prayer that matters. There is plenty of prayer in monasteries, but that is not enough; there must also be quality. So many people pray for so many hours! If only that prayer were heartfelt, the world would have changed long ago! And that is why the goal is for church services to be performed from the heart.

Heartfelt prayer helps not only others but also ourselves, since it fosters the development of inner goodness within us. When we put ourselves in another's shoes, love, compassion, humility, and gratitude to God—along with unceasing praise of Him—naturally arise within us. And then, having become pleasing to God, our prayer for our neighbor helps him.

“And His needy ones”²⁴²

— Geronda, what should I do? During prayer, my heart remains cold.

— That’s because the mind isn’t sending a message to the heart. Besides, prayer requires effort; it’s impossible to reach a state where the mind doesn’t wander at all in the blink of an eye. Patience is necessary. How does someone knock on a door? They knock once, then again, then wait—and the door opens. But you want to knock once and walk right in. It doesn’t work that way. When you begin to pray, do you not have a desire for it?

— I feel a need for help because I feel weak.

— Ah, that’s exactly where you start. Perseverance is essential in prayer. “*And they needed Him,*” says the Gospel about the two disciples who met the Lord on the road to Emmaus. Christ stayed with them because, being in [spiritual] communion with Him, they had the right to do so. They possessed humility, simplicity, kindness, and boldness—in the best sense of the word. They had all the prerequisites for Christ to stay with them, and that is why He did so.

We must pray with faith for everything we ask for; we must be patient, and God will speak. After all, by praying with faith, a person in a sense obliges God to grant what is asked for because of that faith. Therefore, when asking God for something, “*let us not doubt,*” and we will be heard. “Have faith and do not doubt,”²⁴³ — said the Lord. God knows when to give us what we ask for, so that it does not cause us spiritual harm. Sometimes we ask God for something, but we lack patience and become anxious. We would have reason to worry if our God were not strong, but since we have an Almighty God, whose love is so great that He nourishes us with His Blood, there is no excuse for our anxiety. Sometimes we do not entrust the resolution of a difficulty to God’s hands, but act in a human way. When we ask God for something but our faith wavers, and—without waiting for Him to answer our request—we try to achieve what is difficult to achieve in a human way, it is as if we are presenting a petition to God the King, but when He reaches out His hand to act, we take our petition back. Then we ask Him again, but our faith wavers once more; we get anxious again and repeat the same thing. Thus, our suffering drags on. In other words, we behave like a person who submits a petition to a government agency but soon changes his mind and takes it back. Then he changes his mind again and submits it once more; a little more time passes, and he takes it back again. However, the petition must remain in place for its turn to come.

Prayer with Pain

— Geronda, how do you pray for a specific need?

— The key to everything is that it must be painful. If it doesn’t hurt, you can keep running your rosary for hours, but your prayer will have no effect. If a person feels pain over what they are praying for, then even a single sigh constitutes a prayer from the heart. Many people, when asked to pray for others, don’t have the time and pray for those people’s needs with nothing more than a sigh. I’m not saying you shouldn’t pray, but if it so happens that you don’t have time, then a sigh over someone else’s pain is a prayer from the heart. In other words, in terms of its power, it is equal to hours of prayer. For example, you read a letter, see a need, sigh, and then

²⁴² Luke 24:29.

²⁴³ See Matt. 21:21.

pray. Oh, what a great thing this is! You haven't even picked up the phone yet, haven't even dialed the number, and God is already hearing you! And how well the one for whom such a prayer is offered understands this! Look how those possessed, wherever they may be, understand when I pray for them and cry out!

True prayer is not a pleasure, not "nirvana"; it begins with pain. What kind of pain is this? A person is in agony—in the best sense of the word. He is in pain, he groans, he suffers, no matter what he prays for. Do you know what it means to "suffer"? Yes, they suffer because they share in the collective human pain or in the pain of a specific person. For this sharing, for this pain, God rewards them with divine joy. Of course, a person does not ask for divine joy; it comes as a consequence of their sharing in another's pain.

— Where should one start?

— A person learns about something—for example, that an accident has occurred. "Oh!" he sighs, and God immediately gives him comfort for that small sigh. He sees someone in pain and immediately feels compassion for them, finding solace in God's divine comfort, and is not left with the bitterness of that pain. Then his neighbor receives help through his prayer. Or he reflects: "God has given us so much, but what have I done for Him?" One man said the following words to me, which made a deep impression on me: "When the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist is celebrated, the angels cover their faces, while we partake of the Body of Christ. And what have I done for Christ?" Thus, in a good sense, the soul suffers.

— Geronda, how can a person who prays know that his prayer has helped his neighbor?

— The person praying comes to know this through the divine consolation he feels within himself after offering a heartfelt prayer filled with sorrow. However, first one must make another person's pain one's own, and only then offer a heartfelt prayer. Love is a divine attribute; it touches the neighbor. The same is true in hospitals—if doctors and nurses truly suffer for the sick, this is the most effective medicine of all that they give them. The sick sense this compassion and feel confidence, security, and comfort. Those who are suffering need neither our many words nor our sermons. They understand that you feel their pain, and this helps them. Pain is everything. When we feel pain for others, we forget ourselves and our own needs.

Divine Comfort

— Geronda, when I suffer for others, anxiety takes hold of me and I cannot pray.

— This anxiety shows that the human nature within you is alive. The more pain I feel for others, the more I pray and rejoice spiritually, because I tell Christ everything, and He sets everything right. And I see that the more years go by, the more my physical vigor wanes, but my spiritual vigor multiplies, because love, self-sacrifice, and sorrow for my neighbor give me great spiritual strength. Just look: last night, when you were holding the vigil, I didn't have much energy myself, but I drew strength from the suffering of others. I stood on my feet all night until the Divine Liturgy, receiving the people.²⁴⁴ Then in the church I stood on my feet again, but despite this, I felt no fatigue, because I felt pain for the people, and that pain gave me strength. So you, too—pray and rejoice. God will take care of everything.

²⁴⁴ The elder is referring to the vigil held from November 9 to 10, 1993. He was suffering from cancer, but despite this, standing on his feet and leaning on a chair, he imparted his blessing to approximately thirty thousand believers who had come that day.

If a person approaches suffering from a spiritual perspective, then he has no sorrow. Take, for example, the people who came to me. How deeply I felt their pain! I didn't just listen to them halfheartedly, with one ear; I suffered, I sighed, but with every sigh I laid my burden on God, and He comforted me in the pain I felt for my neighbor. In other words, when I had a spiritual attitude toward another's pain, divine comfort came, because if there is hope in God within the pain, then there is also divine comfort within it. Otherwise, how could one endure all of this! If it weren't for this comfort, how could I possibly live with everything I have to hear? It pains me, but I also think of the divine retribution for those who are suffering. We are in God's hands. Since there is divine justice and divine recompense, nothing goes unrewarded. However much a person suffers, that is exactly what he will be recompensed for. God, seeing so much pain on earth—and even that which is beyond our perception—nevertheless does not fall into despair. “Are you suffering more? I will give you more in the life to come,” says God, and He rejoices in this. Otherwise, how could He, so to speak, endure so much injustice, so much evil? However, keeping in mind the reward for those who suffer, He—if I may put it this way—is able to endure this great pain. And to us, who do not see what glory our neighbor will receive, and who suffer on his behalf, God grants divine consolation.

— Geronda, doesn't this concern for one's neighbor wear a person down?

— No. If one approaches every problem spiritually, there will be no exhaustion. At first, upon hearing that someone is suffering, a person feels bitterness, but then, as a reward, divine consolation comes, and his body is not destroyed. Bitterness from worldly troubles leads to illnesses—such as stomach bleeding and others—but bitterness from feeling others' pain contains a divine balm and does not harm the body.

The Danger of Indifference

— Geronda, sometimes laypeople ask me to pray for the resolution of their problems. I pray, but I feel no pain.

— There could be two reasons for this. The first involves a danger, while the second represents a spiritual approach to the problem. The first case is when a monk forgets about his loved ones but also does not think about others—that is, he does not pray for people. This is very bad. In other words, we leave our loved ones behind, come to the monastery, and over time forget about them. But it's much easier to forget other people in the process. Yes, we have begun our spiritual life, but we have not begun to spiritually share in the suffering of others. We are not developing spiritually in order to be able to feel their needs, and there is a danger of falling into insensitivity as a result. Little by little, the monk becomes indifferent, and his heart turns to stone. In the second case, the person praying feels pain for the whole world, but he also feels comfort, realizing that the one who suffers will receive a reward from God and will be a martyr. This thought brings him deep assurance, and he experiences inner joy. In this case, his heart is not of stone, but filled with divine love.

If monks are not careful, their hearts can become very callous. Laypeople see the troubles and misfortunes of their neighbors and feel for them. We do not see this and may reach the point where we ask only for ourselves. And if we do not engage in the subtle practice of empathizing with others' misfortunes and offering heartfelt prayers for them, we will become hard-hearted. We will reach the point where we seek only our own benefit, and our hearts will turn to stone through indifference. This is contrary to the Gospel. A monk must show compassion, feel the pain of others, and pray for all people. This does not distract him; on the contrary, through prayer he helps both himself and others.

— Geronda, even though I see all my wretchedness, I pray more for others. Perhaps it would be better for me to pray not for others, but only for myself?

— Is it out of [great] humility? If it is out of humility, then say to God with great humility: “My God, You should not hear me as I am. But wouldn’t it be unjust if others were to suffer because of me? After all, if I were in a spiritual state and had boldness in prayer, You would hear me and help them. I am partly to blame for someone’s suffering. But what has my neighbor done wrong? Why should he suffer because of me? I beg You, help him.”

In other words, everything depends on how we position ourselves in relation to others. You feel your own unworthiness, but when you see someone else’s suffering, you are moved, you sympathize, and you pray. For example, when I see a blind person, I feel guilty about it, because if I were in a spiritual state, I could heal him. God has given us the opportunity to become saints and to perform miracles, just as He does. And we, acknowledging our spiritual illness—whether great or small—humbly ask for physical healing for our neighbor, our fellow human being, since we are to blame for his illness. For if we were spiritually healthy, he would have been healed long ago and would not be suffering. By adopting the correct attitude toward others—considering ourselves guilty for everything that happens in the world—we pray: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us,” and the whole world receives help. And as for our own wretchedness—we must feel pain for it and seek God’s mercy. But, of course, if a person has attained a spiritual state, he asks for nothing for himself.

I see that we often misunderstand the words “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” and, out of false humility, fail to say, “Have mercy on us”; we do not pray for others, but only for ourselves. That is why laypeople sometimes misunderstand us monks and take offense, saying that we are selfish and care only about our own salvation. “Have mercy on me”—this is so that we do not fall into pride. A single prayer from a humble person who believes that he is worse than everyone else has greater value than an entire All-Night Vigil performed with a proud heart. When we pray with pride, we mock ourselves.

A State of Readiness

Do not forget that we are living in difficult times and that much prayer is needed. Remember the great need that people are experiencing right now; remember the great zeal for prayer that God demands of us. Pray for this collective madness that has gripped the entire world; pray that Christ will have mercy on His creation, for it is heading toward catastrophe. May He intervene in a divine way in this insane era we are living through, for the world is being led into turmoil, into madness, into a dead end.

God has called us to pray for the world—a world with so many problems! Poor people—they don’t even have time to cross themselves! If we monks do not pray, then who will we leave this to? During wartime, a soldier is on high alert: he’s already in his boots, just waiting for orders. A monk must be in the same state. Oh, if only I were a Maccabee!²⁴⁵ I would retreat to the mountains to pray constantly for people.

²⁴⁵ The nickname “Maccabee” (a word that most likely means “one who crushes enemies”) was given to Judas, the leader of the Jewish revolt of 166 B.C., and subsequently to his successors. The revolt was directed against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who stood at the head of the Seleucid dynasty. The Maccabees were selfless fighters for the faith of their forefathers and for Israel’s national independence. (See the Books of Maccabees.)

Through prayer, we must help the whole world so that the devil cannot do whatever he pleases. The devil has now gained certain rights. It's not that God allows him to do whatever he wants; it's just that He does not want to violate free will. That is why we need to help the world through prayer. If someone is pained by what is happening in the world right now, if someone prays about it, then people receive help, and at the same time their free will remains intact. If, by God's grace, you make a little more progress, then we will undertake something special regarding prayer; we will set this matter in order. You will become a "radar," for the events unfolding around us compel us to do so. We will organize a prayer brigade. You will fight with your prayer beads. Prayer must be offered with pain. Do you know how powerful it becomes then?

It pains me deeply when I see monks acting not through God, through prayer, but in a human way—in matters that are difficult to achieve by human means alone. God can set everything right. With the right spiritual practice, one can build monasteries, provide them with everything they need, and help the whole world through prayer alone. You don't even need to work: just pray. A monk must try not to worry about this or that difficulty—regardless of whether it pertains personally to him, to his neighbor, or to the general state of the world. He must turn to prayer and, through God, send many divine powers into the world. After all, one way or another, this is the monk's calling, and if he has not understood this, then his life has no meaning whatsoever. And therefore, a monk must know that every anxiety of his—which drives him to seek human solutions to various difficulties, torments him, and causes him headaches—comes from the evil one. If you find yourself troubled by questions that cannot be resolved by human means, and if you do not entrust them to God, then know that this is a ruse of the evil one designed to make you abandon prayer—through which God can send not merely Divine power, but many divine powers, and the help provided will then be not merely divine help, but a miracle of God. From the moment we begin to worry, we hinder God's intervention in what is happening. We give preference to logic rather than to God, rather than to God's will—by preferring which, we would be entitled to divine help. The devil, skillfully stealing the monk's love, tries to keep him bound to worldly love, to a worldly perception, and to worldly service to his neighbor, whereas the monk is capable of acting within his monastic sphere; he is able to work in his specialty—that of a "communications specialist"—because this is precisely the obedience that God has entrusted to him. Everything else, everything we accomplish through human effort, belongs to a lower order.

Furthermore, it is better for a monk to help others through prayer rather than through words. If he lacks the strength to restrain one who does evil, let him help him from afar through prayer, for otherwise he may harm himself. A single kind, heartfelt prayer possesses greater power than a thousand words when words fail to reach others. People say that I help those who come to me. But I consider my true offering to the world to be the hour and a half during which I read the Psalter. I view everything else as a pastime: the unfortunate ones come, pour out their pain to me, and well, I give them some sort of advice. That is why I do not consider helping others to be my own offering: it is prayer that helps people. If I could devote all my time to prayer, I would be helping the world more. Suppose I receive two hundred people a day with their sufferings. But are there really only two hundred people suffering in the world? By not meeting with even one person and [during that time] praying for the whole world, I meet with the whole world. And that is why I tell people: "I want to talk to God about you, not with you about God. It's better for you that way, but you don't understand me."

Let us not be negligent in our prayer during these difficult years. Prayer is safety; prayer is a connection with God. Remember what Abba Isaac writes? “God will hold us accountable not for failing to pray, but for failing to maintain a connection with Christ, and for having been deceived by the devil.”²⁴⁶

Chapter 2.

On the Fact That Monasteries Are the Fortresses of the Church

A monk is a lighthouse, firmly established on the rocks

— Geronda, what is the monk’s calling?

— The monk’s task is to become a vessel of the Holy Spirit. He must make his heart as sensitive as a leaf of gold leaf. All the monk’s deeds are love, and he also sets out on his path out of love for God, which encompasses love for one’s neighbor. A monk reflects on the misfortune of humanity; his heart is pierced with sorrow, and he prays ceaselessly and wholeheartedly for peace. Thus, a monk shows mercy to the world through prayer. There are monks who help people more than the whole world could ever help them. For example, a layperson might help a poor person with a kilogram of rice and a couple of oranges—and even then, often gives them only so that others will see him, while at the same time condemning those very people for their stinginess. But a monk offers up prayer and, through it, in silence, sends whole metric tons of aid to his neighbors.

A monk does not set his own course of action, nor does he devise worldly plans for missionary work; he moves forward without any plan of his own, and the good God incorporates him into His divine plan; and if necessary, God—in a way known only to Him—may even send him on an apostolic mission. God does not require monks to go out into the world and lead people by the hand. He wants monks, through the example of their own lives, to give people light and thus guide them toward eternal life. In other words, a monk’s ministry does not consist in helping the world while remaining in the world. A monk withdraws far from the world not because he hates the world, but because he loves it. By living apart from the world, a monk, through his prayer, will help it in ways that cannot be achieved by human means alone, but only through divine intervention. Therefore, a monk must remain in constant communion with God, receive guidance from Him, and show people the way to Him.

For a long time, I could not understand how Catholics justified certain things. But recently, two Catholic architects from Rome visited me in my cell, and my confusion was resolved. They did not understand what Orthodoxy was, but they were well-meaning. “Why,” they asked me, “do monks sit here? Why don’t they go out into the world to serve the public?” “Well,” I replied, “shouldn’t lighthouses stand on cliffs? What, would you tell them to move to the cities and join the streetlights in their work? Lighthouses have their own calling, and streetlights have theirs.” A monk is not a lightbulb hanging over a city sidewalk, shining for pedestrians so

²⁴⁶ “On that day, God will judge us for the psalms, not for neglecting prayer, but because this neglect gives demons an opening.” Cf. *Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Works. Sergiev Posad, 1911. Discourse 71. p. 362.

they don't stumble. A monk is a distant lighthouse, firmly established high upon the cliffs, illuminating the seas and oceans with its radiance so that ships may follow the right course and reach God—their final destination.

A Monk's Silent Sermon

...I'll just pray that you three novices never grow up!... That you remain just as you are forever: in these blue headscarves, this little stature, this age! Do you know what quiet benefit people derive from seeing you? After all, it's not easy to find a decent young woman in the world today. Most young women behave wildly: a cigarette in hand, strutting around like I don't know who... But here, people see virgins who have dedicated themselves to God singing in church, rejoicing... "What on earth is this?" people wonder. "There's something peculiar going on here. Can you say they're fools? No, you can't. Can you say they're lacking something? No, they have everything. It's clear there really is something higher!" Yes, yes, indeed—do you know what good comes from this?..

When worldly people—even nonbelievers—come to a monastery and see real monks, if they're open-minded, they become believers. Many godless scholars, having come to the Holy Mountain simply on a tour, have changed their lives. People, in a positive sense, begin to reflect and discover the spiritual life. They see joyful young people who, having had every opportunity in the world to succeed, have left behind wealth and positions and now live an ascetic life, filled with prayer and vigil. Seeing all this, people ask themselves: "So what, then? After all, if God truly exists, if there is another life, if there is torment in hell, then why am I living like this?" And they begin to lead a less sinful life or even completely turn their lives around. I know of one such case. A twenty-year-old girl attempted suicide: she cut her wrists, but she was saved in time. Then a monk took her and brought her to a convent. At first, the poor girl was furious about everything, but later, after getting to know the nuns there, she came to her senses and said, "Here I see a different world. May I stay with you?"

Such is the monk's silent sermon. Many preach, but few inspire trust in others, since their lives do not match their words. But the monk does not deliver loud sermons designed to be heard by others. He silently preaches Christ through his life and helps his neighbor through his prayer. He lives out the Gospel through experience, and God's grace reveals him. Thus, the monk preaches the Gospel in the most authentic way, and this is precisely what the world craves, especially today. When a monk speaks, he expresses not merely a thought, but an experience. Yet even a thought expressed by a monk carries light within it.

— But some people, Geronda, say that young men or women enter the monastery either out of disappointment, or because they have some kind of physical disability, or because they are mentally deficient.

— Apparently, these people have remembered one or two such cases, and now, out of malice or envy, they slander the rest of the monks—who make up 90 percent of the total. However, once they look into the matter and see that this is not the case, they will say that there is something higher—there is God.

Therefore, a monk must always be a good example to the world: *"Let your light so shine before men."*²⁴⁷ A true monk is a light to the world. Remember what St. John Climacus writes? "The light of the monks is the angels, and the light of the laity is the monks."²⁴⁸ A monk's help is effective when he is distinct from worldly

²⁴⁷ Matt. 5:16.

²⁴⁸ St. John Climacus. *The Ladder*. Sergiev Posad, 1908. Discourses 26 and 31. p. 181

people. For what helps worldly people, who are tormented by vain things, is holiness. Through its simplicity, it teaches them to comprehend the deepest meaning of life, so that the heavy burden weighing down their hearts may disappear.

Monks and the Renewal of the World

Monks are the regular army of Christ; that is why they do not receive money for their service. Look, many people cannot forget Mount Athos. Anywhere else they might go, they would be asked for money and the like, but on Mount Athos, they only need to obtain permission to visit; after that, they can walk wherever they wish on the mountain for free. They are not charged for food or lodging. People find something completely different on the Holy Mountain and benefit from it. Once, when I was living in the kaliva of the Holy Cross,²⁴⁹ a man came to me to seek advice about his difficulties. We talked for about an hour and a half. As he was getting ready to leave, he took out a 500-drachma note. “What’s this?” I asked. “That’s how much,” he replied, “we pay a doctor for a single routine appointment. I’m sorry—maybe I should add more?”

After the latest fire on the Holy Mountain, several high-ranking officials from the EEC came there to assess the needs and allocate aid. They also visited me in my cell. During our conversation, I told them the following: “We came here to give, not to take.” “That’s the first time we’ve heard that,” they admitted, and immediately jotted down what they’d heard in a notebook.²⁵⁰ Did we become monks in order to receive material goods? We became monks in order to give spiritual guidance without receiving material things in return. We must be free from worldly concerns so that we may devote ourselves to the spiritual. Out of love for Christ, we fled to the mountains to free ourselves from the bondage of our passions and to free others from it as well.

Our mission is to help people find solace and experience spiritual rebirth through our prayers and example. By leaving the world and entering a monastery, a person becomes a “father” or “mother”—that is, a spiritual father or spiritual mother. When a young woman becomes a nun, she is betrothed to Christ, becomes His bride, and helps people experience spiritual renewal as a spiritual mother. Through her prayer, she contributes, for example, to the formation of strong Christian families. But in addition to prayer, there are times when people need human assistance. Every true nun, in addition to praying for the world, helps it through her conduct, the way she approaches various problems, and the few words she might say in the reception hall to a pilgrim so that he may grasp the deepest meaning of life, or to a mother to offer her support. But, of course, if a nun herself seeks out interaction with laypeople and the like, that is completely unacceptable, because worldly inclinations clash with spiritual laws, and this leads us, as monks, to anguish. Try, as much as possible, to remain unnoticed by others. Some monks strive to attend feast days, pay visits to one another, and make spiritual friends. But I, when forced to go somewhere for spiritual matters, feel as if I am going to my martyrdom; I consider it a waste of time. I compare these two realities, and my soul aches.

— Geronda, what is the reason if a nun who is no longer young is spiritually immature?

— She does not watch over herself and does not engage in proper spiritual practice. Evil begins with this. Suppose that Christ had not called any of you to monastic life. The young woman would have remained in the

²⁴⁹ Elder Paisios lived at the Holy Cross Hermitage from 1969 to 1978.

²⁵⁰ Delivered in May 1991.

world, gotten married, and become a mother. Then it wouldn't be she who would have expectations of others, but others who would have expectations of her. She would sacrifice herself and, in doing so, give much and receive much. In the monastery, however, she must become a spiritual mother; her calling is higher than that of a mother. But what is happening now? She enters the convent as a young woman and, failing to engage in proper spiritual practice, harbors the thought that she is still a child. However, she needs to understand that she is not a child, so she cannot think like one: "We have a mother, we have a home, I have no worries, and I don't care about anything." She must give of herself; through her conduct, she must contribute to the spiritual rebirth of the younger sisters. Through her obedience—in the archondarion and in the church—she must assist the laypeople who come to the monastery. In everything, she must sacrifice herself, and in doing so, she will receive without asking for it. If a nun has not adopted this attitude, then everything goes to waste. She remains in a state of underdevelopment and wants only to take from both her younger and older sisters, giving nothing of herself. She cultivates a corrupt spirit within herself and fails to mature because she does not give of herself to others.

I see that the state of some monks is no different at all from that of a certain Bedouin I met on Mount Sinai. He was sixty-five years old, yet he said, "But I have no father: I am a [complete] orphan!" People at sixty-five already have grandchildren. Two or three generations have already passed, and [how can one] say, "I have no father"—that is, seek a father's love! And we monks, being inattentive, remain children—and that is the evil in it. However, upon reflecting on what they would be doing in the world at such an age, a nun or monk should say: "Now I must not seek human comfort. I must sacrifice myself, not make demands on others." Most come to monasteries when they are young, find spiritual parents there, and may remain in a childlike state, with childish demands, whereas, had they remained in the world, they would already be parents themselves. In other words, they never really grow out of childhood—not in a positive sense, but in a childish, infantile way. You can even see this: a person has grown old, but if he hasn't started using his head, he's delighted by a piece of candy or a T-shirt. "And my father bought me a little jacket," boasted an elderly Mount Athos monk, showing off the warm sweater his elder had given him. Just like a little boy whose mom bought him a jacket with epaulets!...

Let us be like infants in the face of evil, but not in our minds.²⁵¹ Otherwise, how will courage enter our lives? How will courage come to us? A monk, in order to succeed, must soften the hardness within him—that is, he must make his heart a little more motherly. A nun, on the other hand, in order to succeed, needs to acquire a little courage.

Our spiritual humility transforms others

— Geronda, when someone enters a monastery but their mindset is still worldly—with worldly thoughts still swirling in their head—how can they free themselves from this?

— Once you enter the monastery, you must forget the world, and then not forget that you are in the monastery. At home, all right, there you might not find a favorable opportunity to begin a spiritual life or receive the proper upbringing. But now you need to be very attentive: what kind of upbringing will you receive here, in the monastery? A monastic upbringing. The monastery is a sacred place. The world is a different matter. If you reflect on the fact that you are in a sacred place, modesty will come naturally. But how can it come if a person

²⁵¹ See 1 Cor. 14:20.

loses sight of this and assumes she is in the secular world? A nun should behave naturally, with simplicity and humility, rather than portraying herself as the embodiment of “misfortune.” This is repulsive and off-putting.

I see that some novice sisters behave in a worldly manner. They strut like peacocks, like brides in the world, and not like the brides of Christ. Others, however, walk with modesty, and I see that there is something sacred within them. How different one is from the other! And it becomes immediately clear what monasticism is. If you look at ears of wheat, you will see that there is nothing in the ear that stands tall and straight. But the ear filled with grain bends downward.

A monk who possesses reverence transforms those who see him. Just today, a hieromonk came to visit; I’ve known him for a long time. He is not handsome—that is, he lacks outward beauty—but despite this, every time he received Communion, I saw his face radiant. And even when he wasn’t receiving Communion, I saw a radiance on his face—a spiritual radiance. It’s like asphalt—essentially just tar—but when you look at it from a distance in the summer, it often glistens. It’s the same here: you see a radiance on the face of an unattractive person. Of course, the example with the asphalt isn’t very apt, but what other comparison could one find here? What I mean is that a person’s spiritual state gives them an outward radiance as well. This is spiritual beauty, Grace—Divine Grace. But how repulsive are other bearers of holy orders: outwardly beautiful, yet possessing a worldly spirit within, swayed by the winds of the world! You see before you a completely worldly person.

Apart from the sacred office, nothing spiritual is visible! A person’s face reflects their spiritual state. This is what Christ said: “*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.*”²⁵² If a person possesses simplicity and humility, then he possesses divine enlightenment, and he shines. That is how it is. This is precisely what a monk must attain.

— Geronda, Saint Nilus of Calabria says that, upon becoming a monk, a person becomes either an angel or a devil.²⁵³ So, is there no middle ground?

— The saint means that a monk’s work on himself must be done correctly. That is why God allows severe punishments to befall a monk in the great schema who has fallen into mortal sin, so that he may atone for his guilt through them. We sometimes think that we will receive Grace through something external, by artificial or magical means. But this brings no satisfaction to God, to the person himself, or to others. For example, some monks sew themselves wide and long skimas that reach all the way to the ground, embroidering red crosses, roses, crimson branches, and a whole bunch of letters on them... They even open their cassocks wide so that all this “beauty” is visible, just like the Pharisees who widened the hems of their garments,²⁵⁴ wishing to show how much they pray! In the old days, a monk’s skhim was barely visible beneath his cassock, and even then only when walking. Many even wore the small schema under their cassock and went about in it so that nothing would be noticeable at all. But now they are all empty shells. Will they really receive Grace from the schema in this way? The schema abhors them, and Grace departs. The goal is for a monk to become a great schema-bearer from within. And whoever becomes a great schema-bearer from within hides his schema. The external does not lead

²⁵² Matt. 6:22.

²⁵³ See The Venerable Nilus of Calabria. Published by the Holy Monastery of the Annunciation of the Theotokos, Ormylia, 1991. p. 252

²⁵⁴ See Matt. 23:5.

to internal change. Thus, people remain superficial, and in the end, they will hear from Christ: “I do not know you.”²⁵⁵

Monasteries have a spiritual purpose

A monk cares for his own salvation and for the salvation of all the living and all the departed. For a monk, true, divine love lies in the anguish for the salvation of his own soul and in the anguish for the salvation of the whole world. A monk’s soul, consecrated to God, contributes to the salvation not only of his relatives but also of his fellow countrymen. Therefore, in Asia Minor, it was a time-honored custom to have at least one monk from every family, so that he might intercede for everyone. In Faras, when someone became a monk, the entire village would celebrate. “He,” people would say, “will now help our village as well.”

Of course, a monk never says, “I will save the world.” He prays for the salvation of the world alongside his prayer for his own salvation. And when the good Lord, having heard his prayer, helps the world, the monk does not say, “I saved the world,” but rather, “God saved the world.” A monk must reach a state where he prays: “My God, do not look upon me, do not have mercy on me. Take care of the world; have mercy on it.” A monk prays this way not because he himself does not need God’s mercy, but because he has great love for the world.

— Geronda, to what extent should a monk forget himself while helping people?

— To the extent that he sees it is beneficial to people. But if I completely put myself in the hands of laypeople, then I myself will become a worldly person. When a monk, supposedly in order to help worldly people, does things that are unbecoming of monastic life, it does not help people. For example, a monk might make an excellent taxi driver. He wouldn’t charge for the ride, and he’d have spiritual conversations with his passengers... But that’s not a monastic calling. Sometimes you find a worldly spirit in monks, and a monastic spirit in laypeople. And that is why Christ will say in the life to come: “You, take off your monastic robe; and you, put it on.” A layperson who desires the monastic life is sanctified. But if a monk desires a worldly life, he is headed for eternal torment.

— And if a monk has placed himself on the wrong path, does he realize it?

— Even if he doesn’t realize it: if a mistake has been made in some way, he will not have complete peace and tranquility within himself. In matters unbecoming of monastic life, the monk’s soul will find no peace. And from the moment his soul loses its peace, he must seek out and find the cause of it.

An acquaintance of mine visited a certain monastery and later said: “It’s a real workshop in there! And the mother superior—what a character! If she were selling buttons in Monastiraki²⁵⁶ in Athens, she’d be right at home! She really has a knack for these things!” In other words, the monastery is a workshop. Then it turns into a factory, then a supermarket, and then a fair! Poor worldly people want something higher from us monks. But in order to attain the highest, we must avoid all worldly comforts.

Monasteries have a spiritual purpose. There should be no worldly element in them, only the spiritual, so that they may fill human souls with the sweetness of paradise. Why should we compete with laypeople in worldly matters? After all, no matter how you look at it, they still have more opportunities than we do. But when a

²⁵⁵ Matt. 25:12.

²⁵⁶ A neighborhood in Athens.

monastic community lives a spiritual life, you know how it makes the world pause and reflect! When there is reverence, the fear of God, when there is neither worldly logic nor a mercantile spirit, it touches the hearts of laypeople. But, unfortunately, the mercantile spirit is quietly seeping into monastic life, right down to the very marrow of the bones. A monk once came to visit me in my cell. I was braiding rosary beads. “You,” he said to me, “give away rosaries with thirty-three knots as a blessing. But I can sell a single rosary like that for as much as five hundred drachmas! And I don’t waste any material with them, just like you: as soon as I finish the knots, I trim the ends and tie them together a little so as not to waste the wool. And I put the cord left over from the crosses to good use, too—I sew that in as well. And I don’t use any beads. My profit ends up being greater than yours!”—“Listen,” I replied, “how can you not be ashamed! Don’t you realize that the spirit of a haggler has taken hold of you? I’ve been a monk since 1950, but this is the first time I’ve heard anything like this!”

— Geronda, there are so few spiritually mature people capable of helping the world!

— Yes, unfortunately, there are few of them! And what will become of the world after this? Do you know how often I ask God to reveal true people who are capable of helping the world? It’s enough for these unfortunate souls that you feel a little compassion for them and that you don’t exploit them for your own gain—they want nothing more than that! In the world, they are in constant strife and do not feel safe. When they come to a monastery that lives according to the right way, they receive help because they feel a sense of security, and this gives them the strength to continue the struggle.

In these difficult years, people need spiritual nourishment more than physical sustenance. That is, they do not need bread (although, unfortunately, soon it will not even be possible to help people with bread), but spiritual help.

Let us strive, then, to help the whole world through prayer. Let us help, for example, a family to stay together and avoid breaking apart; let us help a mother to raise her unfortunate children properly; let us do our best to support those who possess a sense of reverence.

Spiritual Condition—Spiritual Strength

It is time to prepare our souls today, because if something serious were to happen, I do not know where it would lead. Oh, if only God would not allow difficult days to come! But if they do come, then a single small earthquake, a single shock, will destroy entire brotherhoods, entire monasteries, because everyone will strive to save themselves, everyone will run off in their own direction.

So that God does not forsake us, we must be extremely vigilant. There must be something spiritual present in our souls. If it is there, it does you credit. The shaking will be severe. How often have I told you this—what harsh words you have heard from me! If someone had said something like that to me, I would have given it serious thought, racking my brains: “Why was this said to me? What did they want from me?” I wouldn’t have slept for a night—or perhaps many nights. If I didn’t see that difficult years are coming, I wouldn’t take this so much to heart. But I can see that a time is coming when things will be very difficult for you. You don’t understand me now, but you will understand me then.

— Geronda, what if a person finds himself alone during those difficult years? What should he do then?

— For now, first and foremost, become a person of obedience and acquire discernment; we’ll see what happens from there. That is why we said that, above all, we must cut off our shortcomings. If a monk has shortcomings, what is happening will prove too much for him to handle. If even now he is dissatisfied with

everything, if he considers himself an eagle and everyone else worms, then... Let's work on improving ourselves, improving ourselves, so that we may be worthy of God's help. Establish yourselves even more firmly in God. Harder times are coming. The fruits are still green, not yet ripe... Do you know what your monastery will become when you are spiritually mature? A fortress! And not just of local significance—your help will extend even further. Otherwise, you yourselves will be in need of human help and protection. And when a monastery with a whole host of sisters is in need of laypeople, do you know how bad that is?

Today, a monk must live a spiritual life in order to be ready to overcome difficulties. He must prepare himself so that hardships do not clip his wings; otherwise, he might even go so far as to renounce Christ. The time will come when the rivers will dry up, everyone will be tormented by thirst, and everyone will suffer. For us monks, this is not so frightening. To suffer from thirst? Well, we need to suffer from it, for we have set out on this path, striving for the suffering of the cross. "What I did not do willingly as a monk," I will say then, "I will do now unwillingly, so that I may understand what it means to be a monk. I thank You, my God!" But the world—this wretched world! What is there to say when they've gone so far as to invent bombs that kill people but don't destroy buildings! If Christ said that one soul is worth as much as the whole world—²⁵⁷—and yet for them buildings are more precious than the whole world, then that is terrifying!

— Geronda, I feel anxious and afraid of what lies ahead.

— This fear helps us cling to Christ. This does not mean that we should rejoice in everything that awaits us. We should rejoice that a heroic struggle for Christ lies ahead. In other words, we are not facing enslavement to some Hitler or Mussolini; we will be tested on our faithfulness to Christ. To win, we will have neither machine guns nor the most modern atomic bombs. Today, the struggle will be spiritual. We are about to face a battle with the devil himself. But the devil has no power unless we ourselves give it to him. What is there to fear? If it were Hitler or Mussolini, the situation would be different. There should be no fear. Let us rejoice that the battle will be spiritual.

If you live a monastic life, a fatherly life, if you are attentive, then with every attack by the enemy you are entitled to divine intervention. If there are people of prayer, humble people, filled with sorrow and love, then these are entire spiritual strongholds, spiritual strategic bases. If there are two— or three—souls in a monastery who think of others' pain and pray, they become a spiritual fortress. Such spiritually mature people bind all the enemy's forces.

Prayer, a righteous life, and personal example

— Geronda, what is the correct stance a monk should take and express regarding today's difficult situation?

— Prayer, a righteous life, and personal example must come first. And when and where necessary, let him speak and express his position.

— So when a reason arises, a monk should speak out?

— Of course! Who else will speak up if not a monk? A monk has nothing to fear. The rest are afraid of getting a slap on the wrist. Who will be the first to go into battle if not us—people who have dedicated ourselves to God?

²⁵⁷ See Matt. 16:26.

A thought tells me that God will not abandon us—He will not! The situation will become clear. Right now, it's as if a lot of fish have gotten caught in a large cast net. But the net is rotten. One fish wriggles this way, another that way, and eventually the net will tear. It will tear not because the fish are large, but because the net itself has already rotted.

— Geronda, are the fish Christians?

— Yes, Christians. Eels and snakes—those are the rest. But we, too, will have to answer to God for what is happening. I'm speaking plainly about all this now; I can no longer hold back.

— What, then, should we do, Geronda?

— First and foremost, we must work on ourselves. After all, as a monk, I face the following task: to eradicate my own human spirit, to put myself in order first, so that I may become a spiritual person, because otherwise my monastic life has no meaning. After that, if the need arises, we will speak out seriously, and God will help us bring the matter to a good conclusion.

— But some people, Geronda, say that silence and prayer are preferable.

— When everything around you is burning, you cannot remain indifferent! You must put out the fire. The pain won't let you stay silent. Of course, the main thing is to try to live as spiritually as possible. But if it becomes necessary to express your point of view on some serious matter, then you should say whatever God inspires you to say.

Live humbly, simply, and spiritually—so that in difficult times you won't be forced to compromise. And besides that, try to accept into the monastery young women who have the potential for monastic life, so that they may become true nuns. Once a person becomes a good monk, they know to what extent to devote themselves to a particular problem. He knows what to do and what not to do; he knows how to act. But if he has not become a good monk, then everything goes awry. Do you understand this? If you become true nuns, you will act with prudence. But if you do not become true nuns, then when sending one of you on some errand, we'll have to spell it out: "Look, don't say anything unnecessary about this, and don't blab about that," otherwise she might spout a lot of nonsense. But that state of being would be underdeveloped. How will you then cope with everything that lies ahead of us?

Therefore, those who have the potential for monastic life must make the effort to become true nuns and know the limits of what to say, what to speak about, and what to do in difficult moments. Then they will not stray beyond the bounds of obedience, because their spirit will be in harmony with the spirit of the Mother Superior. If necessary, the Mother Superior will simply give them a sign, and they will understand her, because they will be on the same wavelength as her. It cannot be any other way. After all, if you do not learn this, someone else might tune into that very same wavelength. He will tell you things you shouldn't hear; you won't recognize him, and he will cause no small amount of harm.

Monasticism Is in Danger

The world is ablaze today, and monasticism is losing its strength, falling into decline, and losing its dignity. If the spiritual element leaves monasticism, then nothing remains in it. On the Holy Mountain, a pilgrim asked a certain monk, "Listen, so is there no spirit of asceticism here?" "Now," the monk explained to him, "is a new era. The old ways have had their day." All right, let's assume he was out of his mind. Maybe there are five or ten others like him who are a few screws loose, but if they spout such nonsense, then let them be locked up in a

tower! They have no right to run their mouths, slander the monastic life of our time, and lead people astray! After all, some people are just looking for an excuse to do so.

You'll see: little by little, in some monasteries—so as not to be exposed—they'll do away with the reading of the Holy Fathers. They'll read sociological books, supposedly because they're beneficial in our era. Yes, yes, that's where we're headed! And the unfortunate laity come to the holy monasteries for help... Just as a devout person is held in contempt in the world, so too will a good monk soon be despised. And woe to us if we underestimate the danger of the worldly spirit; then, in the near future, when a young man comes to a monastery wishing to live righteously, in a monastic manner, the others will say to him, "What are you doing here?" Seeing monks who are no different from laypeople, people become disillusioned with monastic life. Many come to me and tell me how they are tempted by certain monasteries. How can I now set their thoughts aright?

The worldly spirit has deeply penetrated monastic life, and evil does not stand still. Monks must prove themselves to be monks, not laypeople. We have lost the simplicity that was characteristic of previous generations. Young monks today are driven by worldly logic and worldly upbringing: they strive not to lose their reputation and often orient themselves toward the laws of secular society. Yet just a few years ago, one could still observe in monastic communities the state of affairs described in "Lavsaiika."²⁵⁸ Some entered the monastery out of divine zeal, others out of repentance. The circumstances that led them to the monastery varied: one entered after his wife's death, another entered after repenting of his former, worldly life. One could also encounter the possessed in the monasteries: they came there seeking help, were healed by the fathers' prayers, remained there, and took monastic vows. And if they later committed some misdeed, an unclean spirit would enter them again. That is why there were also the possessed in the communal quarters. There were also those who had been led astray, those who were holy fools for Christ's sake, and monks who possessed the gift of clairvoyance and the gift of healing. There was great diversity! But today you will not find a clairvoyant, a miracle-worker, a person possessed by demons, or a holy fool for Christ's sake. We have a different kind of folly—the folly of this world. We have put our own minds first, and because of this, we have lost our sanity. Much worldly logic has entered into us, and this abundance of logic has destroyed everything. And the worst part is that we do not understand this.

Monks in some monasteries, having filled their lives today with a multitude of various comforts, make their lives burdensome. They are too distracted by things they do not need, while neglecting the spiritual matters they ought to be engaged in. If young people, upon entering a monastery, exchange worldly restlessness for the spirit of a secular institution, they will find no peace. Later, to amuse themselves, they will want to engage in "spiritual tourism" and go on excursions. There will even be those who say, "I want to go on vacation," whereas a monk ought to leave his cell only with a heavy heart.

I am outraged by many things, and that is why these bitter words pour forth from me. It pains me: after all, in the past, poor monks had neither spiritual books nor any concept of what monastic life was, and yet they thrived. Thirty percent of those who entered monasteries were natural-born monks, while the rest arrived uncultivated—like berries from different fields—and yet they thrived. A man could come to the monastery without any understanding of spiritual matters, live there for a month or two, and even the abbot wouldn't know

²⁵⁸ "Lavsaiik" — hagiographies of Egyptian and Palestinian ascetics. The book was likely compiled in the mid-5th century by Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis in Bithynia, who dedicated it to the Byzantine patrician Lavs. The work itself came to be known by the latter's name.

who he was. Then, having decided to become a monk, he would go to a spiritual father, confess, and remain in the monastery. No one even knew who he was, where he came from, or what had brought him to the monastery. But despite all the difficulties, he grew spiritually and prospered. And some were completely illiterate. They listened to the readings in the refectory, the Synaxarion in the church, and nothing else—and sometimes they didn't even understand that. And they didn't know how to sing either: during services, they would recite the Jesus Prayer, but their intentions were good. And despite all this, they attained spiritual maturity. They reached a spiritual state, whereas today we have Sunday schools, spiritual books, and so many favorable conditions, yet all this raw material goes to waste! It turns out that the uneducated had such strong spiritual development, while the educated and cultured have nothing! That is to say, there is, so to speak, a plowed field; it is sown, but not a single seed sprouts! Isn't that distressing? What do you think?

In any case, if we are inattentive, monastic life will not stand; it will go completely haywire. But the future, of course, lies in the hands of Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos. She, our Good Mistress, will take a broom, sweep the rubbish out of Her holy monasteries, and restore order to them once again. We need to understand that everything will pass without a trace; yet if we do not live correctly, in a monastic manner, we will stand before God as debtors. We became monks in order to save our souls, and also to help society through prayer. Therefore, do not forget what vows we made to Christ and what people in the world—who have not received this privilege—endure: the privilege of a calling to the angelic order.

We must leave a legacy behind us

— Geronda, many [now] place their hope in the monasteries. The responsibility for this weighs heavily upon me.

— Yes, many say that the only way out now is for there to be at least a few saints, like Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, and for them to go out to different lands to preach and enlighten the world. Monasteries are spiritual centers. If the monasteries had not helped the 1821 Uprising, there would not have been an Uprising at all. And during the German occupation, the monasteries did not surrender and contributed to the struggle for liberation. That is why the bandits²⁵⁹ destroyed them. Most of the monasteries were not burned by the Germans; they were ransacked by their own people—Greek bandits. The Germans declared: “If ammunition and weapons are found in a monastery, we will burn it down.” The bandits, wanting to appear innocent and to pin the blame for the destruction of the monasteries on the Nazis, would go into the monasteries, plant a few old ammunition clips and a broken rifle, and then report to the occupiers themselves that bandits were allegedly hiding in such-and-such a monastery. The fascists would stage a raid, find the ammunition, and set the monastery on fire. And in this way, the bandits managed to burn down quite a few monasteries, because they were afraid of them. “If the monasteries remain,” they said, “we won't achieve anything, even if we manage to establish an atheist regime. Let's just burn them down instead.” And so they burned them down.

Today, people go to monasteries in search of leaven. But what kind of leaven is there if the monasteries themselves are in such disarray? They won't even find any leaven there. Let us strive to preserve a little leaven for the difficult years ahead.

²⁵⁹ The term “bandits” refers to the armed units of the Communist Party of Greece during the years of fascist occupation. — *Translator's note.*

Right now, those who turn to sorcerers and similar evil spirits are coming to the monasteries for help. Later, people weary of sin will come. So weary, in fact, that if you were to send them out to get drunk or sin, they would not go. In these difficult years, God is calling people to monastic life through personal invitations. This generation begins its monastic journey with the very best prerequisites and ideals, but the devil renders all this raw material useless. The next generation will be different. Many people unsuited for monastic life will also come to the monasteries. They will reach a state where they will be forced to become monks. They will be exhausted and wounded by the world. Married couples will divorce (both with and without the Church's blessing) and enter monasteries. Young people who have grown weary of worldly life will also go to monasteries: some to save their souls, others to seek a little peace for them. Those who wish to marry but are afraid to commit their lives to another person will also become monks. In other words, in the coming years, both the mentally ill and those who simply lack the resolve to start a family may enter monastic life. "What will I find in marriage? How will I live?" they will reason. "I'd better become a monk." In other words, they will view monastic life as a pleasant pastime. How successful they will be is another matter. Those entering monasteries will not be repentant; their circumstances will force them to become monks. Their motives will not be pure. Therein lies the danger. When a person leaves the world for the sake of monastic life, the situation is different. These unfortunate souls will need a great deal of help; they will remember the taste of worldly pleasures, and therefore the devil will wage a fierce battle against them. He does not wage such a battle against us; he tries to hinder our spiritual work and cast us into despondency, so that those who come after us will not find a spiritual foundation.

By all this I wish to say that we must succeed now, so that we may be able to help these people. Let us leave them a fatherly legacy. We have "spiritual joys"—but we do not have heavenly joys. We rejoice in tonsure, ordination, the All-Night Vigil, singing "Rabi, Lord..." and the swaying of the candlestick... But these joys are not heavenly; they are the carnal joys of the heart—in the positive sense of the word. Heavenly joy is something higher, something inexpressible. When a person begins to taste a little of the heavenly, his heart leaps and rejoices. In order to pass on heavenly joys to future generations, we must experience them ourselves.

Chapter 3.

On the Deepest Meaning of Life

Let Us Prepare for the Life to Come

— Geronda, a young man disappeared, leaving his parents a note saying that he wanted to take his own life because he was unattractive, and that they were to blame for it...

— People have not yet grasped the deepest meaning of life. They do not believe in another life. All their suffering stems from this. "I have been wronged," a person says, "others are happy, but I am not." People are dissatisfied with what they have; selfishness creeps in, and they suffer. God loves all people. He has given each person what is beneficial to them: whether it be height, courage, beauty, or something else. He has given people what can help them be saved, if they use it wisely. Yet the world is tormented by the question: "Why am I like this, and he like that?" But you have one thing, and he has another. A certain Romanian holy fool, who lived on

the Holy Mountain for Christ's sake, told a story to someone tormented by such thoughts: "A frog saw a buffalo and said, 'I want to be a buffalo, too!' It puffed itself up, puffed itself up, and finally burst. After all, God made some into frogs and others into buffaloes. And what did the frog do? It wanted to become a buffalo! So it burst!" Let everyone rejoice in the way the Creator made them.

As soon as a person seizes the favorable opportunity given to him to believe in God and in eternal life to come—that is, when he comprehends the deepest meaning of life and, having repented, rebuilds his life—Divine consolation and God's Grace will come immediately, and Grace will transform him, banishing all his inherited shortcomings. Many repentant sinners humbly undertook a noble feat, received Grace, became saints, and now we reverently venerate them and ask for their prayers. Yet previously, they had many passions, including inherited ones. Take, for example, the Venerable Moses the Moor. Having been a bloodthirsty robber with an inherited malice, as soon as he believed in God, he immediately repented, began to strive in the way of God, all his passions left him, and the Grace of God came upon him. He was even granted the gift of prophecy, and his spiritual discernment surpassed even that of Arsenius the Great,²⁶⁰ who came from a high-society Roman family, possessed hereditary virtues, and was highly learned.

— So, Geronda, what exactly is the meaning of this life?

— What is it? It is to prepare oneself for our Fatherland, for heaven, for Paradise. The essence is for a person to grasp this deepest meaning of life, which is the salvation of the soul. By believing in God and the life to come, a person understands that this temporary life is fleeting and prepares their "passport" for the life to come. We forget that we will all have to leave this world someday. We won't put down roots here. This life is not meant to be lived in idleness, but to pass the tests and move on to another life. Therefore, we must set the following goal before us: to prepare ourselves so that, when God calls us, we may depart with a clear conscience, soar up to Christ, and be with Him forever. When Christ blessed the five loaves and fed so many thousands of people, the crowd immediately said: "He would make a fine king!" They ate the five loaves and two fish and were inspired. However, Christ told them not to worry about this food, because we will not remain here. In this life, each of us faces trials: whether we live up to what God requires.

— Geronda, what must a person always keep in mind in order to do God's will?

— He must keep his mind on God, thinking about the purpose for which he entered this life. We did not come here to be preoccupied with everything under the sun and to settle into comfortable little niches. We came to prepare for the life to come. Therefore, our mind must constantly be focused on that future life and on what can help us attain it. By approaching everything with love, striving with love and humility, a person comes to understand the meaning of the spiritual life. The spiritual life is unbridled courage, a spiritual feast. Do you know what a feast is? Come to know the deepest meaning of monasticism; acquire spiritual nobility and the sensitivity of the Holy Fathers. And all people are obliged to grasp the deepest meaning of life (not just monastic life, but life in general). If they did so, petty quibbles, squabbles, and other manifestations of self-centeredness would

²⁶⁰ The Venerable Arsenius the Great (354–447) was a native of Rome. He was renowned for his wisdom and virtue. He earned the title "Father of Kings" because Emperor Theodosius entrusted him with the upbringing of his two children. In 394, following a divine revelation, he left the world and withdrew to the Egyptian desert. Despite his former life in palaces, St. Arsenius pursued his monastic asceticism with great rigor and self-sacrifice.

disappear entirely. Since there is divine reward, let us think about how to earn a little “money” for the life to come, rather than how to conduct ourselves with dignity in this life and accept human glory from others.

When a person moves within the realm of real life, he rejoices in everything—in the fact that he is alive, and in the fact that he is about to die. He does not rejoice because he is tired of life; no, he rejoices because he will die and go to Christ.

— Geronda, does he rejoice because he does not resist what God allows?

— He rejoices because he sees that this life is fleeting, while another life is eternal. He is not weary of life, but, thinking, “What awaits us? Will we not depart?”—he prepares to go there, understanding that this is his destiny, the meaning of life.

Take, for example, the women who work in social services. They are kind-hearted: they run around, the poor things, working themselves to the bone for others. They are trained as psychologists, but there are times when the way they want to help others doesn’t work. For instance, she goes to comfort a man who has had his leg amputated, and he says to her: “You’ve come here on two legs and say to me, ‘Good afternoon,’ but I only have one leg.” What can she possibly say to him? How can she help him with psychology? If this person does not grasp the deepest meaning of life, then nothing can help him. He must understand that for this disability permitted by God, if he does not complain, he will receive in the next life the heavenly reward he has accumulated. Having understood this, he must rejoice. Even if everyone else were walking on four legs, he must say, “I thank You, my God, that I walk on one.” But, viewing life in a non-spiritual way, these poor souls go to comfort people and do not know what to say to them. Such a “social comforter,” for example, goes to ease the suffering of a thirty-five-year-old woman with cancer, who has three children. What will she say to her? If this mother fails to grasp the deepest meaning of life, she will despair, thinking about what will become of her children. And the psychologist herself, who came to comfort her, will fall into the same despair if she does not understand something higher, something spiritually deeper. After all, without first finding her own spiritual balance, she will not be able to properly help her neighbor in a way that brings divine comfort to them. So these poor psychologists not only become physically exhausted but also become discouraged, seeing that they cannot provide people with meaningful help. In other words, they become doubly exhausted.

We Must Recognize Good as a Necessity

A person must recognize goodness as a necessity; otherwise, they will suffer. And to say that not everyone can recognize goodness as a necessity would be untrue. I cannot justify such an opinion. Even a five-year-old child is capable of recognizing goodness as a necessity. Let’s say a little child has a fever. The parents call the doctor, who says: “Hold the child tight”—and—whoosh!—gives him a shot. After that, the little one, as soon as he sees the doctor, starts wailing and runs away. But if they tell him first: “Listen, you’re sick; you have a fever. You can’t go to school or play. Look, the other kids are playing over there. But if you let the doctor give you just a little shot, your fever will go down, and then you’ll be able to go play, too,” then the little one will immediately close his eyes and hold out his hand to the doctor for the shot. What I’m trying to say is that if even a little child can understand that good things are necessary, how much more accessible is that concept to an adult?

Once a person understands what’s right and what’s wrong—that’s it, the matter is settled. Let’s say I tell you, “I’m going to throw you out the window.” You understand what that means. Even someone with an

intellectual disability understands that if they fall out of a window on the top floor, they'll break their legs. They understand what a cliff is and what level ground is, what's good and what's bad. An adult who has read the Holy Fathers and the Gospel knows what's right and what's wrong. From that moment on, you have to change your behavior. But often, when you say to certain people, "Why are you doing this? Don't you understand that this is wrong?"—they start saying, "Well, unfortunately, that's just how I am. And why am I like this? After all, I've always been this way..."—"Forget about how you were before! Now that I'm telling you this, what are you doing to correct yourself?" If they can't think straight, that's a different matter; then they have an excuse. But only a baby would grab a piece of coal instead of a piece of candy simply because they can't think straight.

— Geronda, your mother was a very sensitive person; she loved you. How was she able to raise you with such strictness from the very cradle?

— From a very young age, a person can help themselves to grasp the deepest meaning of life and find true joy. When I was little and ran races with the other kids, I'd leave them in the dust. They wouldn't let me run; they'd chase me away and tease me, calling me an "immigrant" or a "refugee." I'd come to my mom in tears. "Why are you crying?" she'd ask me. "The kids won't let me run with them," I'd tell her. "Do you want to run? Here's the yard—go run. Why do you want to run outside? So people will look at you and say, 'Good job'? There's pride in that." Another time, I wanted to play ball, but the kids chased me away again. I cried again and went to Mom. "What happened? Why are you crying again?" she asked me. "The boys won't let me play ball!" I said. "We have a big yard, and you have a ball—play here. What, do you want people to look at you and admire you? There's pride in that." And then I thought that Mom was right. And little by little, I lost the desire to run around and play with the ball just to be seen, because I realized there's pride in that. "It's true," I thought, "what a load of nonsense this all is! Mom's right." And after that, when I saw other kids running around, hitting the ball, and bragging about it, I didn't really care. I laughed and said, "What are they up to?"—and I was just a kid back then: I was in third grade. After that, I lived a natural life. And now, if someone asks me: "What would you choose: to climb barefoot over the thorns to the summit of Mount Athos in August, or to go to some celebration where they'll dress you in a robe and shower you with honors?"—I'd say I'd rather climb Mount Athos barefoot. Not out of humility, but because that's what I enjoy.

People who are proud didn't receive support from their families as children. A person's worldly mindset torments them. If someone lets themselves go in this regard, if parents don't help their children when they're still young, then later on it becomes a fixed state of being. It's one thing to praise a child a little so they don't lose heart; it's another to inflate their ego. Let's say a child stumbled while reciting a poem and is now feeling down. His mother, seeing this, tells him, "It's okay, it's okay. You read it well." However, if he recited the poem well and his mother starts praising him in front of others: "You're so wonderful! You recited it better than all the other children! My child is the best!"—that's wrong. This is how parents often foster pride in their children. Or, for example, a child misbehaved at school and was scolded by the teacher for it. He comes home and complains to his father: "The teacher scolded me unfairly." If the father and mother take the child's side and, moreover, speak about the teacher in the child's presence—saying, "I'll show him! How dare he—my child, of all people!"—then the child will later consider his mischief to be justified and, as a result, suffer over trivial matters. The key to everything is for the child to grasp certain things while still in the parental home. If a person internalizes the deepest meaning of life from a young age, then everything falls into place. Otherwise, they derive pleasure from the transitory—from human praise that, in reality, brings them no peace—and remain a transitory person.

Let Us Help the World Through Repentance

— Geronda, what is most capable of helping the world today?

— If repentance were taught to the world today, that alone could help. To benefit from this, let us read as many lives of the saints as possible—those who place special emphasis on repentance. To ask God for repentance is to ask for enlightenment. By seeking repentance and repenting more earnestly, we will naturally attain greater humility. And then, as a matter of necessity, great Divine Grace will come—enlightenment from God. By remaining in repentance, a person preserves God’s Grace. People are good, after all. Look at the majority: they don’t go to confession, they don’t receive Communion, they are in great ignorance—but, on the other hand, they come to me and ask for help. There’s something to this.

— Geronda, could it be that trials serve as an opportunity for people to draw closer to God?

— For those who have a good disposition, trials are helpful. Those who lack such a disposition begin to blame God, blaspheme against Him, and make excuses for themselves. The problem is that people do not admit, “I have sinned,” yet they are tormented. The devil has great power in the world. We have given him too much power. What has become of people today! The problem is that, lacking repentance, he prevents God from intervening and helping him. If there were repentance, everything would be set right. Storms await us—storms! May God stretch out His hand! Let us pray for the repentance of the whole world. Let us also pray for those who deliberately harm the Church and have no intention of reforming, that God may grant them repentance and then take them to a better world.

Let us help the world, as much as possible, to repent, so that it may receive God’s blessings. Repentance and confession—that is what is needed today. My unwavering advice to people is this: repent and go to confession, so that the devil may be stripped of his power, and you may cease to be subjected to external demonic influences. For people to understand and repent, they need a wake-up call. For example, a person confesses to having committed adultery. The confessor reads a prayer of absolution over him, imposes a penance, and stops there. But the confessor must help him understand that the evil did not lie solely in the adultery. The penitent must realize that, by doing this, he became a criminal and destroyed two families. But some confessors neither dig deeper themselves nor compel people to reflect.

— Geronda, there are good people who, however, rarely attend church and do not regularly participate in the sacraments...

— There are cases when someone does not attend church often but possesses reverence and kindness, and therefore God finds a place for Himself and dwells within them. If these people participated in the sacramental life of the Church, they would thrive greatly in the spiritual life. Others, however, attend church, go to confession, receive Communion, and do everything that is required; yet God finds no place within them to dwell, because they lack humility, kindness, and true repentance. To attain the proper spiritual state, confession to a spiritual father alone is not enough. There must also be repentance. And every prayer must begin with a confession to God. Not, of course, by constantly whining, “I am this, that, such-and-such!”—and then continuing with the same old routine. That is not truly experiencing sin. By truly experiencing it, a person becomes, if only a little, a better person.

Do you remember how simply the Israelites prayed? *“Arise, O Lord; why do You sleep?”*²⁶¹ That is, “Awake, O Lord; why are You sleeping?” And the Lord replied, *“I will arise... strong and intoxicated with wine, and I will strike down My enemies...”*²⁶² With what simplicity, with what humility, yet also with what boldness did they say: “Lord, what shall we now say to the pagans? You saved us at the Red Sea, but what awaits us now? To die in the desert or to fall under the sword of foreign tribes? Don’t make us a laughingstock!”²⁶³ But let’s not even think of opening our mouths and blurting out something like, “Why are You sleeping, Lord, and not seeing?”—because for that we might get a slap on the head. That would be shameless. The Israelites said this with humility and simplicity. They did not shift the blame onto God; they did not say to Him, “Why did You do this?”—but they repented and pleaded: “We deserve far worse, but what will we now say to the pagans?” And do you see? They immediately moved God to mercy. Do you understand this? There was an acknowledgment of error, repentance, and God intervened and “struck down the enemies...” But if we, too, find ourselves in a difficult situation and fail to act in a spiritual manner, then the people of this world will say about us: “Well, where is your prayer? You say you pray. What about you, then?” That is how we become a laughingstock.

Repentance contributes to the disappearance of evil

When asking for repentance for the world, let us count ourselves among the guilty. In prayer, we should not say, “Help the world—the sinful world.” The three biblical youths were born in Babylonian captivity, yet they did not say, “What have we done wrong?” — But they confessed before God: “We got what we deserved; we were worthy of even more.” They spoke as if, before the Babylonian captivity, they had been among those who had transgressed God’s commandments, as if they, too, had participated in sin, even though in reality they were not involved in it, since they had not yet been born in those years. Their prayer in the Babylonian furnace touches my heart. *“You are righteous in all that You have done to us... For we have sinned and transgressed... And now we have no words to speak... Do not forsake us to the end... And do not withhold Your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, whom You love...”* That is to say: “You are punishing us justly, Lord, for we have sinned. But for the sake of Abraham alone—whom You love because he did not sin—do not forsake us.” They counted themselves among the sinners and believed what they said with their own lips. That is why the furnace became cool, while the pagans who came to watch it were scorched by the flames.²⁶⁴

Without doing this kind of work on oneself, a person begins to constantly find excuses for himself. “The devil pushed me into sin,” or “Adam is to blame,” or “Eve is to blame, not me.” A “professional theologian” once said to me: “Why should we have to suffer now because of Eve?”—“My good man,” I replied, “does that prevent you from being saved? Why are you harping on poor Adam and long-suffering Eve? One single transgression—and so many centuries of torment in hell! But Christ came to us and saved us.” — “If you sin

²⁶¹ Ps. 43:24.

²⁶² Ps. 77:65–66.

²⁶³ See Ex. 32:12; Deut. 9:28; Ps. 78:10.

²⁶⁴ See Dan. 3:1–100.

seventy times seven,” He said, “and repent, I will forgive you.”²⁶⁵ We sin thousands of times, but as long as we repent sincerely, Christ forgives us. And yet we go around saying that Adam and Eve are to blame? And look: after all, no one is given the name Eve. Let’s name some novice “Eve” at her tonsure, or at least “Zoe,”²⁶⁶ if the name Eve seems too heavy. After all, it’s very unfair to treat Eve this way! She is the mother of us all; she is the mother of the whole world, and yet we don’t even want to hear her name! And God, in essence, cursed the devil. “The serpent was crafty.”²⁶⁷ The devil entered the serpent to deceive man. Just look how they blame everything on Eve. They say that she’s the one who ruined us, that if it weren’t for her disobedience, we’d be living in Paradise right now— —and wouldn’t be suffering. But if we, too, had heard from Christ: “You made a single mistake—off to hell for so many centuries!”—well, then let them talk!... What an ungrateful world this is, after all!...

In any case, repentance is a great thing. We haven’t yet realized that through repentance, a person can change God’s decision. The fact that a person has such power is no joke. Do you do evil? God gives you a slap on the wrist. Do you say, “I have sinned”? God turns His wrath into mercy and bestows His blessings upon you. In other words, when a disobedient child comes to his senses, repents, and feels remorse, his Father lovingly caresses and comforts him. The Israelites, who had strayed from God’s commandments, lived in Babylonian captivity for seventy-five years. But in the end, when they repented, Cyrus became king—a man who, it can be said, behaved better than the sons of Israel who had desecrated the sacred places of sacrifice. God transformed Cyrus’s way of thinking and made him a believer in the God of Heaven. And so Cyrus granted the Israelites their freedom, gave them money and timber for the construction of the temple, built walls around Jerusalem for them, and showed such kindness and reverence that, if I may say so, even the Israelites themselves had not shown.²⁶⁸ And all because the people repented and changed.²⁶⁹ See how repentance contributes to the disappearance of evil!

You absolutely must read all the Books of Maccabees. They are exceptionally powerful books. What a royal decree it was! To trample the Jews underfoot with elephants! They appointed those in charge, prepared everything for the execution—to enrage five hundred elephants—fed them strong wine mixed with frankincense, and waited for the king to begin the execution. But the king had forgotten the order he had given them. The chief of the elephants approached him and said, “King, we’re waiting for you. The elephants, the Jews—everything is ready. And the guests are getting impatient.”—“And who told you to do all this?” the king replied. Shouts, threats!... And this happened not just once, but three times.²⁷⁰ For the king to forget the order he himself had given? This is no laughing matter. And not only did he forget, but he later completely changed his attitude toward the Jews. This is the foundation of it all: so that the world may repent.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Matt. 18:22.

²⁶⁶ *Zōē* (Greek) — life. Cf.: Gen. 3:20.

²⁶⁷ See Gen. 3:1.

²⁶⁸ See 2 Esdras 1:1 ff.

²⁶⁹ See 1 Esdras 8:88–92.

²⁷⁰ See 3 Maccabees 5:1–35.

— Geronda, is there any benefit to the various international organizations dedicated to fighting for world peace? Do they help preserve it?

— It depends on many things. There are those who undertake all this with good intentions. But sometimes you get such a “mixed bag”! You’ve got sorcerers, fire-worshippers, and Protestants—such a hodgepodge, it makes your eyes spin! And they’re fighting “for world peace!” What good are they? May God forgive me, but the devil is the one concocting these “mishmashes.” If the organization itself is sinful, how can there be any peace there! How can peace come if people haven’t been reconciled with God? Only when a person is reconciled with God does peace come—both inner and outer. But in order for a person to be reconciled with God, they must come to their senses. They must repent and live according to God’s commandments. Then God’s grace and peace take root within them. And then they are able to help preserve peace around them as well.