

Blessed Memory
Elder Paisios of Mount Athos
Words

Volume IV
Family Life

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Preface

The fourth volume continues the publication of “The Words” of Blessed Elder Paisios. This book compiles the Elder’s teachings on the family and the trials people face due to the crisis the family is experiencing in our time. The Elder said that most of the letters he received were from people facing problems in their family lives, and he emphasized that the cause of these problems was people’s estrangement from God and their self-centeredness. “In the old days,” he said, “life was more peaceful, and people were patient. But today, everyone—no matter who you take—is like a lighter: [they fly off the handle and] can’t stand a single word. And divorce automatically follows.”

Having entered the great family of the Church at a very young age as one of its devoted members, the Elder felt that he no longer belonged to his own small [earthly] family. Having attained divine love, he became a child of God and therefore—regarding all people as his brothers and sisters—loved everyone “in the love of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:8). “When I see an elderly man,” the Elder would tell us, “I say to myself that he is my father. When I see an elderly woman, I say that she is my mother. When I meet a child, I look at him as if he were my own little nephew. I love everyone. I rejoice for some and grieve for others. Are you familiar with this kind of state of mind?” But the Elder himself, in every specific situation, became a son, a brother, a father, or a grandfather to every person. This genuine love helped those who grew close to the Elder to change for the better

and, having accepted the Word of God, to live in harmony with it. As a member of the Body of Christ, the Elder not only prayed with sorrow for people facing difficulties in their family lives, but—responding to their requests—he also helped them with his words. He helped people even with the most delicate issues of family life, despite the fact that, as a monk, he himself led an ascetic life.

Tested by the fires of temptation and tempered in the crucible of illness—which afflicted him in various forms from 1947 until his death in 1994—the Elder felt compassion for every suffering soul and prayed fervently for those who were in pain. He cared for his own health only to the extent necessary to take care of himself and help those who came to him. He believed that if someone prays for other sick people, paying no attention to their own pain, this moves God to compassion, and He hears such a prayer. However, the Elder advised the sick to first do everything humanly possible for their healing, and to leave to God whatever was beyond human strength. At the same time, he strengthened people’s faith so that they would face their illness with hope in God, never forgetting that throughout our earthly life we are all “strangers and pilgrims” (cf. 1 Pet. 2:11), and prepare for eternal life.

This volume is published with the blessing of our archpastor, His Eminence Metropolitan Nikodimos of Kassandria. The book consists of an introductory chapter and six parts. Many of the questions were posed to the Elder by the abbess and some of the sisters of our monastery. The Elder blessed us to refer people seeking our spiritual help to a spiritual father; however, often in conversation with the abbess or one of the senior sisters, people, overcome by their difficulties, speak of their pain and ask for advice. Sometimes, to be sure that we had answered a particular serious or complicated question correctly, we would turn to the Elder, and he would tell us how to resolve a given problem in a Godly way. However, the Elder himself, during general monastic gatherings and in private conversations with the sisters—using as a starting point some incident from our monastic community life or a question we had asked—would often speak about the difficulties faced by Christians in the world. He did this so that we might pray fervently for the world. In addition, the Elder cited examples from the lives of fathers or mothers who, lacking the favorable spiritual conditions available to monks, lived holy lives. In this way, Father Paisius encouraged us to strive with great zeal. Some of the Elder’s answers are enriched with excerpts from his letters, passed on to us by the clergy and devout laypeople to whom they were addressed.

The volume opens with an introductory chapter titled “Young People at a Crossroads in Life,” which aims to help young men and women who are uncertain about which path to take in life. This chapter emphasizes that both paths laid out by our Church—family life and monastic life—are blessed. Young people must choose one path in accordance with their calling, their strengths, and their love. They should do so not because of anyone’s “encouragement,” but with trust in God. A chaste and spiritual life for young people is the fundamental prerequisite for their success on the path they choose—whether it be monastic or family life.

The first of the six parts of this book outlines the foundations upon which a family is built: the noble, generous love and respect that spouses have for one another. Patience in the face of difficulties, accompanied by prayer, saves the family from falling apart.

The second part discusses the duties and responsibilities of parents in raising their children properly, placing particular emphasis on the importance of parental example—this “silent instruction” that parents provide to their children—as well as the role of the mother in the family. The elder also emphasizes that parental tenderness and love for children are the fundamental prerequisites for their natural and healthy development.

The third part of the volume is devoted to children. It discusses their joys and difficulties, as well as their responsibilities toward their parents. Children’s respect and love for their parents—not only in childhood but also in adulthood—is the key to receiving God’s blessing.

The fourth section contains the Elder's simple and practical advice on spiritual life within the family. This advice helps children and parents to live out the Gospel in their daily lives—whether they are at home or at work. The Elder also notes that a person's work should not cause them constant mental anguish, but rather contribute to their spiritual growth.

The fifth section is devoted to the various trials that people face in their lives. The Elder emphasizes the [great] comfort and strength that God gives to people if they not only endure the trials sent to them but also give thanks to God for them. Illness, disability, and slander are blessings for a person who has grasped the deepest meaning of life. Through the sufferings they endure, people atone for their sins or earn their heavenly reward.

Finally, the sixth section contains the Elder's answers to questions about how to view death properly and how to prepare for it. The Elder explains what constitutes true comfort for those mourning the loss of loved ones and emphasizes how much memorial services, prayer, and almsgiving performed for the repose of their souls help the departed. In simple and vivid terms, the Elder paints a picture of the future Last Judgment and eternal life.

The Elder's teachings collected in this volume can, on the one hand, help laypeople who are striving in the faith to continue their "good work" with great faithfulness (cf. 1 Tim. 6:12). On the other hand, they can awaken the consciences of people who are suffering far from God, kindle in them the desire to become conscious members of the Church, and rejoice in the small community of their family in the peace that spiritual life brings. At the same time, the Elder emphasizes that in marriage it is necessary to observe all of God's commandments, which "are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). For example, if one spouse sacrifices their own will and obeys the other, they do so out of love and therefore do not feel oppressed, but experience sweet consolation.

Perhaps to modern people, accustomed to the "lax laws" of today's society, some of Elder Paisios's views may seem extreme and unworkable. But upon examining the Elder's words in the light of the Gospel, the reader will see that they are an accurate and uncompromising expression of it. What the Elder always strives for is perfection in Christ. However, his God-inspired pastoral care is long-suffering toward human weakness and employs patristic economy¹—without, of course, ever compromising with sin. Through examples from the past, the Elder helps modern people understand that God is the Living God and "works in all through all" (1 Cor. 12:6). He acts not only in the life to come as the Rewarder, but also in this present life—as a tender, loving Father. However, a person must demonstrate his good will and undertake his small feat. By exerting a little effort, we receive much. It is necessary for a person to undertake this small effort—so as to give God the "right to intervene" in his life with abundant divine help.

We thank those who, after reading the manuscript of this volume prior to publication, respectfully offered their comments and helped make the book better.

We earnestly pray that the Elder's words will help families—who, especially in our day, suffer because of the neglect or violation of God's commandments—to find their true calling within the Orthodox Church, so that parents and children may begin to live in Paradise already in this life. Amen.

September 16, 2002

Commemoration of the Holy Great Martyr Euphemia

The Abbess of the Monastery of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist, the Theologian, Sister Philothea, together with her sisters in Christ

¹ In Orthodox theology, "oikonomia" refers to a deviation, in exceptional cases, from the precise meaning of the Sacred Canons in their practical application. The Church exercises oikonomia in the image of God's ineffable mercy and love for humanity, and the purpose of its application is the spiritual benefit and salvation of the human person. (Hereinafter, notes from the Greek editors are given without citation.)

Parents, who give birth to children and provide them with a physical body, should, as much as possible, foster their spiritual rebirth. What parents are unable to do for their children themselves, they should subsequently entrust to teachers. That is why our Church prays “for parents and teachers.” However, in addition to earthly fathers, there are also spiritual fathers. Spiritual fathers work toward the spiritual rebirth of people and contribute more effectively to the upbringing of children.

Young People at a Crossroads in Life

Both family life and monastic life are blessed

— Geronda, what should we tell young men and women who ask whether monastic life is superior to family life?

— First and foremost, we must help them understand the purpose of human existence and the meaning of life. Then we must explain to the young that both paths laid out by our Church are blessed, for if those who choose them live according to God’s will, both paths can lead to Paradise. Let’s imagine that two people set out on a pilgrimage. One walks along a well-traveled road, the other along a trail. However, both travelers have the same goal. God rejoices in the first and takes delight in the second. The situation will become problematic [only] if the one walking along the trail begins to condemn in his heart the one walking along the highway, or vice versa.

It is good for young people who are considering monastic life to know that a monk’s calling is very great. A monk’s calling is to become an angel. “In the life to come, in Heaven, we will live as angels,” Christ said to the Sadducee.² That is why some very pious young men and women become monks and begin to live an angelic life already in this earthly life.

However, one should not assume that everyone who enters a monastery will be saved simply because they have become monks. Every person will answer to God for whether they have sanctified the life they have chosen. Love is essential in every life. God does not create people predestined for success or failure. Those who lack love will not succeed on their own—no matter what path they choose. Whereas a loving person succeeds wherever they may be, for Divine Grace abides with them. Some married people live very virtuously and are sanctified. If the head of the household loves God, if he is drawn to divine care, then he can prosper greatly spiritually. Moreover, such a person instills virtues in his children, builds a good family, and receives a double reward from God.

Therefore, every young man should set the following goal for himself: to strive with love and without anxiety—so as to sanctify the life he has chosen. Does he wish to marry? Let him marry, but let him strive earnestly to become a good head of the family and to live a holy life. Does he wish to enter monastic life? Let him become a monk, but let him strive earnestly to be a good monk. Let him assess his strengths, determine what kind of life is within his capacity, and, in accordance with his conclusions, follow the path he has chosen. For example, if a young woman realizes she lacks the strength to become a nun, she should humbly ask God: “My God, I am a weak person and cannot live as a nun. Send me a man to help me [so that we may marry], that I may build a good family and live spiritually.” In this case, God will not forsake her. If, after getting married and raising a good family, she lives according to the Gospel, God will ask nothing more of her.

Of course, there are some young people from whom God does not demand much. However, out of love, they take on many feats and, by choosing the monastic life, offer Him more [than He expects

² See Matt. 22:30.

of them]. Such people will be crowned with double crowns. That is, if someone, having a natural inclination toward family life, out of great love wishes to sacrifice everything and embark on the monastic path, this moves God to great compassion. However, such a person must take great care to ensure that their motives are very pure: they must not act out of pride. If a person fulfills this condition, God will dispel all their difficulties.

Young People's Anxiety About Embarking on Their Chosen Path

— Geronda, if a young man or woman is anxious about getting married or entering monastic life, is this due to their lack of faith?

— Not always. Young people often worry about how best to embark on their chosen path and follow it while always remaining close to God. This is a sign of [spiritual] health. If a young man does not think about or worry about embarking on his chosen path, this indicates, first and foremost, that he is an indifferent person, and as a result, he will naturally not succeed. However, one must be careful that anxiety about marriage or monastic life does not become excessive, because the devil tries to distort this anxiety, turn it into mental distress, and keep the minds of young men and women in constant confusion.

To remain at peace, young people should entrust themselves to God. After all, the Good God, like a tender Father, acts where we can no longer do anything on our own. Young people should not rush into making immature decisions about which path to take. I know young people who worry a great deal and try to solve all their problems at once. In the end, they get confused and drop out of school. For example, they need to finish college, but they worry excessively about starting a family or entering a monastery. As a result, they fall behind in their studies and become even more confused. You can't do everything at once, and problems aren't solved that way. To help themselves, they need to really figure themselves out and sort everything out properly. First, they need to earn a degree, then find a job (young men also need to complete their military service). And only after that, once they have matured, can they make a decision and, with God's help, either get married and start a good family, or—if they have chosen the monastic life—enter the monastery of their choice.

That is why I advise young people who are still in school and have similar concerns to continue their studies, since they have not yet come to a mature decision about which path to choose. I advise them to make the decision that eventually matures within them and that they feel comfortable with. If they have a good disposition, then with God's help, as they gradually come to understand how they should live—whether in marriage or celibacy, or in a monastery—they will find peace of mind.

We must help young people follow their calling

Every person has their own calling. The Good God created human beings to be free. God is noble: He honors human freedom and allows everyone to freely follow the path that is closest to their heart. God does not line everyone up in a single file according to the rules of military discipline. Therefore, let young people remain free within the spiritual realm of God's freedom. If they try to emulate the life that so-and-so or so-and-so has chosen for themselves, it will not be to their benefit. In choosing a path in life, a person should not be subject to any external influence.

Parents, spiritual advisors, and teachers—without putting pressure on a young person or stepping on their toes—should help them choose a life that suits them and follow their calling. The decision about which path to take in life must be made by the young people themselves. The rest of us can simply express our opinions. Our only right is to help young souls find their own way.

Sometimes, when talking with young people who are struggling to choose a path in life, I can see which way the scales are tipping, but I don't tell them so as not to influence their own choice. I try to do only one thing: help them, as much as possible, to find the right path and inner peace. From

among the things they are drawn to, I try to eliminate everything harmful and retain what is good and holy, so that they may live joyfully with God in this life and rejoice even more in eternal life. I tell you sincerely: whatever life a young man I know may choose, I will be happy in any case. I will care equally for the salvation of his soul—as long as he is with Christ and lives in the Church. I will feel like his brother, because such a person is a child of our Mother the Church.

Of course, I am especially happy for those young people who are embarking on the path of monastic life. For truly wise is the person who follows this angelic way of life, since he does not fall for the devil's trap, where the world is used as bait on the hook. However, we cannot lump everyone together. After all, Christ, not wishing to force everyone to bear a heavy burden, did not command everyone to become a monk, even though monasticism is the path to perfection. Therefore, when the young man in the Gospel asked Christ how he might be saved,³ Christ replied to him: *"Keep the commandments."*⁴ When the young man told Christ that he kept the commandments and asked, *"What do I still lack?"*⁵ — Christ replied, *"There is one thing you have not yet done⁶ : if you wish to be perfect, go, sell all that you have... and come and follow Me..."*⁷ In other words, Christ spoke to the man about perfection, seeing that he was sincere, but He did not drag people [toward perfection] by force. Christ did not teach monasticism either, because by doing so He would have inflamed people's hearts, and it is possible that many would have rashly rushed to become monks, which would have led to evil. Christ merely planted the seed of a perfect life, and when the time was right, monasticism emerged.

Likewise, we have no right to coerce others. We have the right to compel only ourselves, but even that must be done with discernment. To this day, I have never told a single young man outright, "Get married" or "Go to a monastery." If someone asks me which path to choose, I reply, "Do what feels right to you, as long as you are with Christ." And if a young man tells me that secular life is not for him, then I speak to him about monastic life—to help him find his own path.

Deciding on a Life Path

The years pass quickly. It is better for a young person not to stand indecisively at the crossroads for a long time. May he, in accordance with his calling and love, choose his cross—one of the two paths—and walk along it, trusting in Christ. Let him follow Christ to the Cross if he wishes to rejoice in the joy of His Resurrection. Both family life and monastic life have their own bitterness, but if a person lives with God, the Sweet Jesus sweetens that bitterness.

After thirty years, choosing a path in life is no longer easy. And the more years a person has lived, the more difficulties they face. It is easier for a young person to adapt to the life they have chosen—whether it be marriage or monastic life. After all, an adult weighs and evaluates everything through common sense. Their character is already set, like a cast concrete structure—it's not easy to change. Look: people who embarked on the path of family or monastic life at a young age retain a childlike simplicity until old age. I knew a couple who married when they were young. The wife was like her husband in everything—in her manner of speaking, in her actions. Since they married young, one of them adopted all the other's habits: both in speech and in behavior. But it was also easier for them to grow accustomed to one another [than it is for those who marry late].

"Either get married while you're young, or take your vows while you're young," as the proverb goes. It is especially important for a young woman to decide on her path in life before she turns twenty-five. After twenty-five, it is no longer so easy to get married or enter a convent, because a

³ See Matt. 19:16; Mark 10:17; and Luke 18:18.

⁴ Matt. 19:17. See also Mark 10:19 and Luke 18:20.

⁵ Matt. 19:20.

⁶ Mark 10:21.

⁷ Matthew 19:21 and Luke 18:22.

young woman begins to think about having to submit to someone else's will. The older a young woman gets, the more whims and caprices she develops. And who needs someone like that? And if the years have slipped away, she no longer wants to get married to start a family, but mainly to be under someone's protection and care.

It has been observed that if a young man or woman constantly puts off getting married "until later," then, once the years have passed, he or she looks for a partner and cannot find one. In their youth, they were the ones making the choices, but now that the years have passed, others are choosing them. That's why I say that when it comes to starting a family, a little bit of recklessness is sometimes necessary. You have to turn a blind eye to some minor details, because things never turn out exactly the way we want them to.

One day it started to rain, and water began to flow down the bed of a mountain river. Two men were standing on the bank; they needed to get to the other side. One was very smart, and the other was a fool. "The rain will stop," the smart one began to think, "the water will recede, and then I'll be able to cross to the other side." But the fool didn't wait—he jumped into the water and waded across the river. Of course, his clothes got wet, but he managed to get where he wanted to go. And the rain, instead of stopping, poured down harder and harder. The current became turbulent and the river swelled. And in the end, the smart one remained standing on his own bank—because it was already too dangerous to cross the river.

Some people are full of pride and selfishness, and that is why God does not help them. Some young men come to Mount Athos year after year, visit me in my kaliva, and ask, "What does God want from me, Father?" One might think that God needs them! They haven't become monks, nor have they started a family. You'd think they were made of gold and were afraid that they'd be used—like a simple piece of rebar—in some reinforced concrete structure! And then there are those who ask me, "Geronda, what should I do: become a monk or get married? Tell me, what is my calling?" "What do you yourself want?" I ask. "Both to get married," they reply, "and to become a monk." In other words, they want both! But if I express my opinion to them—that, for example, their calling is family life and they get married, but then family life turns out not to be to their liking—they'll come to me later and complain: "You're the one who told me to choose this path, and now I'm suffering!"

— Geronda, how could something like that happen?

— Well, let's suppose that a young man's calling is family life, yet he is also considering monastic life. If, after getting married, he is inattentive and fails to build a good family, and problems arise that he deals with in an unspiritual way, then the evil one will stir up a storm of negative thoughts against him. "Your calling was monastic life," the enemy will say to him. "But since you got married, you have only yourself to blame." In other words, the enemy will not leave such a person alone, day or night.

And some people don't even know what they want themselves. A few years ago, a young woman came here and began telling me: "Geronda, I can't decide which path in life to choose. I want to get married, but I'm also thinking about becoming a nun. What should I do?" "Take a good look," I replied, "at which path appeals more to you personally, and choose that one." "I don't know..." she said. "Sometimes it seems to me that I'm leaning more toward marriage. I beg you, Geronda, you'd better tell me yourself what I should do." "Well," I advised her, "since you see that you're more inclined toward marriage, you'd better get married, and God will arrange your life." "With your blessing, Geronda," she replied, "that's exactly what I'll do." And today she came to see me again. "Geronda," she said, "I got married. To a sailor. He's a good man, thank God; I can't say a thing against him. But I'm suffering terribly. Isn't it torture: six months we live together, six months apart. Once he sets sail, I don't see him for half a year." "Blessed soul!" I replied. "Didn't you tell me yourself that both family life and monastic life appeal to you? Well, there you go: now you have both. Why don't you give thanks to God for arranging your life this way?"

— Geronda, however, we are going through difficult times today, which is why some young men and women are hesitant to start a family.

— No, that's not the right way to frame the question. If they have faith in Christ, they have nothing to fear. What about the years of persecution? Were those easy? But didn't Christians get married and start families back then? [On the contrary—] how many saints are there in our Church who endured martyrdom alongside their children and spouses!

Young People's Education and Choosing Their Path in Life

— Geronda, many young men and women, unsure of which path in life to choose, are unable to devote themselves properly to their studies. This question constantly troubles them, and they cannot concentrate on their studies.

— When a young person has problems like this, I tell him: "Have you ever seen those big, modern walk-in refrigerators? Well, here's what you do: put your problems in a refrigerator like that, and let them sit there until you finish your studies. I'm not saying you shouldn't think about what's bothering you at all. No—just put it all in the freezer until you've completed your education. If you're not focused on your education and your studies right now, then your friends—once they've graduated, found their place in life, and settled down—will later be praying with their rosaries that you, too, will find your place in life." Young people must be very attentive, because such restlessness is a trick of the enemy, which he uses to confuse them and distract their attention.

— Geronda, I advised a young woman: "If you're thinking of getting married, there's no point in you going to school."

— But until she gets married, what do you want her to do? Sell candy? She'd be better off graduating from college or learning a trade, because if something unexpected happens in her life, the knowledge or profession she's acquired might come in handy. A girl once told me, "I'm thinking about becoming a nun, but I keep changing my mind." "What grade are you in?" I asked. "I'm in my second year of high school,⁸," she replied, "but I don't want to continue my studies." "You don't want to study?" I said. "Then I'll tell your father to buy you some goats, a sheepdog, and a flute. The dog will guard the flock, and you'll play the flute and tend to them. So, do you like that? Here's what: let's see if you can get a college degree or learn some practical trade." "Then, Geronda," she replied, "until I decide whether to enter the monastery or get married, let me live in the monastery as a candidate for novitiate, so that I may learn the art of humility." "Well, that art," I replied, "you can learn right at home—if you joyfully accept what your family tells you. So let's do this: first you'll finish school, then you'll take the university entrance exams, and when you graduate, we'll see what you should do next." "Isn't five years, Geronda," she replied, "a bit too long?" "It is," I said, "but what else can we do, since you haven't yet reached a final decision?" "Is this my own fault, because of my indecision?" she asked. "No," I said, "but your [spiritual] scales haven't tipped one way or the other yet."

In such cases, we should advise young people to be mindful and not waste time aimlessly. While they are studying, they should live as spiritually as possible, strive to earn their degree (which is necessary) as quickly as possible, and then God will take care of everything. While they are studying, they need to find a good spiritual father who can help them avoid superficial enthusiasm for monastic or family life and prevent them from falling into despair. Let them be patient until they finish their studies.

Once they have completed their education and become mature adults, they will have the foundation for one way of life or another. It is then that they should decide on their path in life and do what they believe is best, for the glory of God.

⁸ Corresponds to the eleventh grade of a Russian secondary school. – *Translator's note.*

The world has reached such a state today that the more maturely they make decisions about their life path, the better. Do you know what kind of unpleasant situations can arise? A person needs to be very careful and avoid making immature decisions—especially if they are prone to enthusiasm and get carried away easily.

— Geronda, some young people don't do their schoolwork because they prefer spiritual reading and prayer.

— No, there's no need to start the lessons. To maintain their spiritual vitality, let them read a passage from a book by the Church Fathers alongside their textbooks, pray a little, and make a few bows. And when they have to study and read a lot, they can take breaks and recite the Jesus Prayer or sing a church hymn during that time. After all, if while studying they want to engage in [a higher] spiritual practice—which they could take up later—then, with their minds on lessons and studies, they will not be able to perform this spiritual practice properly and will be unable to keep up with their studies. In the end, they will achieve nothing. But by reading and studying their lessons, they will quickly earn their diploma and then be free to do whatever they want. While I was in the hospital⁹ for a few days, I set aside my prayer beads, my prostrations, and my fasts: I ate whatever they gave me. “Right now,” I told myself, “I need to help the doctors a little so that they, in turn, can help me recover. And then I'll do whatever I want.”

Some kids come to me and complain that their parents are breathing down their necks, forcing them to do their homework. If I were to hover over these kids too, it wouldn't do them any good. To help them understand that they shouldn't neglect their studies, I give them examples of their peers who didn't care about school and whose lives subsequently fell apart, as well as those who approached their studies diligently and therefore succeeded. I remember one such case: two boys grew up in a neighboring town. One, very quick-witted, handled his homework easily; in elementary and middle school, he got straight A's. The other wasn't as smart, and he had to work very hard just to keep up with the first one. Once he reached high school, the top student completed only one year of study; he fell in with a bad crowd, dropped out of school, and eventually was forced to take a job as a janitor at some company. He was already married, had two children, and was barely making ends meet. Meanwhile, his neighbor graduated from law school, then went on to study in Europe and earned a degree in business administration. One day, the factory where the former top student worked as a janitor was expecting a new manager. Everyone said he was highly educated. When the new manager arrived, the janitor immediately recognized him as his former classmate. The janitor was so overcome with despair that he attempted suicide several times. Someone advised him to come to the Holy Mountain and meet with me. As he was telling me about his life, he blurted out: “Just look at this—that good-for-nothing has become my manager!” Wow, did I give him a piece of my mind! “Oh, you,” I said, “you're such-and-such! But you could have risen higher than him! You would have lived well yourself, your children wouldn't have gone without, and you would have done good deeds! Isn't it enough that your family is suffering because of you? Now you want to take your own life too, to finish them off for good and leave your children orphaned? I don't feel sorry for you, because you're now paying the price for your own foolishness, but I do feel sorry for your children. Do you understand that? Let's be patient, and I think that, with God's help, the new manager will treat you well, too. He might transfer you to another position, one better than your previous one. And if it turns out that you don't like it at this company, find another job—don't let it get to the point where your children are left out in the cold.” After that, he somehow came to his senses.

So it turns out that if students study hard while in school, even though they'll get a little tired, they won't have any outstanding coursework, they'll graduate quickly, and they'll have nothing to worry about later on. I've noticed that students who fell behind in various subjects during their

⁹ In 1966, the Elder was in the hospital, where he underwent lung surgery because he was suffering from bronchiectasis.

studies continue to be in debt—to one person or another—even after graduating from college and getting a job, and they face a lot of problems.

— Geronda, if a young man meets a young woman while attending college, and this relationship could lead to marriage, does it make sense to get married before finishing his studies?

— I think that no matter how wonderful and kind this relationship may be, it will interfere with his studies. If a student gets married, such a marriage will be a burden on both his wife and his children—even if his chosen partner turns out to be the very best life companion. It's better for a young man like that to focus his mental and physical energy on getting an education and graduating from college without overexerting himself. And then he can sort out his personal life. After all, if his energy is scattered, he'll constantly be in a state of mental and physical exhaustion.

The main prerequisite for properly embarking on the path you have chosen is the spiritual life

— Geronda, do you remember the young woman who told you she was considering monastic life? She told me that a classmate of hers started pestering her with questions about why she doesn't go to the movies or go out with boys. What should she have told him?

— I should have told him, “Not even my own brother asks me questions like that! Are you really going to ask me about this?”

— A few days later, he ran into her again near the university and grabbed her by the shoulder. She just said, “Hi,” and immediately went inside.

— No, she handled it poorly! In that situation, she should have stood up to him. She acted in a way that might have given him the impression she actually liked his behavior, so he'll do it again. She's at a somewhat difficult age right now, and so if she starts hanging out with young men, it won't do her any good. And she certainly doesn't need to talk to them under the pretense of helping them. If, after meeting a kind, decent young man, she decides to get married, she must inform her parents. They will determine whether the young man possesses the qualities necessary to build a good family. But now, while she has not yet decided which path in life to take, talking with young men is not in her best interest, because it will simply turn her head and she will lose her peace of mind. Unhappy young men and women who are careless in this regard remain in a very unstable state, constantly agitated and without peace. Anxiety and restlessness are written on their faces and reflected in their eyes.

A woman's attraction to a man—and vice versa—is part of human nature. But tell this young woman that now is not the time for that. Let her focus on her studies. Young men and women who cultivate an attraction to the opposite sex from an early age “push the button” without waiting for the right moment. And then, when the right time comes, their “button” has already been pressed, and they are unable to experience the joy because they experienced it earlier—at the wrong time. But those young people who are mindful of themselves in this regard, having waited for the right time, rejoice more, and until that time comes, they remain at peace. Look at those mothers who lived in chastity before marriage. They are at peace, even though they are burdened with a host of worries.

I always emphasize that before marriage, a young person should strive to live as spiritually as possible and preserve his chastity, which ensures him a twofold well-being. The spiritual life is the fundamental prerequisite for both family life and monastic life. The world today resembles a field sown with wheat. The wheat had begun to form ears, but pigs entered the field and trampled and dug it all up. And now this field looks like this: plowed-up grass, dirt, ears of wheat trampled into the mud, and only here and there along the edges do untouched ears of wheat stand tall.

The more a person engages in spiritual practice during their youth, the easier it will be for them later on—no matter what path in life they choose. The better they arm themselves and prepare for

battle, the easier it will be for them during the fight, when bullets are whizzing by and bombs are exploding all around. Until a young woman decides whether to become a nun or a kind and good mother, she must live a chaste life. Therefore, for now, she should strive, as much as possible, to devote herself entirely to her studies.

If she is mindful of what she sees and hears, and if she banishes evil thoughts, then later on she will have less to purge from herself than if she had been careless. Or a young man, upon meeting, for example, a beautiful girl, should strive to cultivate good thoughts. He should look at her as if she were the living image of a saint. And if he encounters a girl of loose morals, he should look at her as if she were his sister. We are all children of Adam. He should feel pity for her, just as he would be distressed if his own sister had fallen into such a state.

— Geronda, however, young people today face many temptations at universities and other educational institutions.

— You need to befriend young people who live a spiritual life so that you can help one another and remain in a spiritual atmosphere. There's no need to paint a bleak picture. I know many young people who are studying at university and living a chaste life. They achieve this through a little effort on their part and God's great help.

Part 1.

How to Build a Strong Family

*“Husbands and wives should, as much as possible, cultivate the virtue of love, so that the two may always be united as one and so that the Third—our Sweetest **Christ**—may always dwell with them.”*

Chapter 1.

On a Harmonious Family

A Good Start to Family Life

— Geronda, a young man who had decided to embark on the path of married life asked me how to start it properly.

— First and foremost, one must try to find a good young woman who will win his heart. Because everyone's heart is drawn to people in its own way. Some feel affection for one person, others for another. One should not focus on whether the bride is rich and beautiful, but above all on whether she is simple and humble. In other words, one should pay more attention not to the future bride's outward beauty, but to her inner beauty. If the young woman is reliable, if she possesses courage—but no more than is necessary for a woman's character—this will greatly help her future husband to reach complete mutual understanding with her through all difficulties and avoid headaches. And if she also possesses the fear of God and humility, then, holding hands, they can cross to the opposite bank of the turbulent river of this world.

If a young man is seriously considering a certain young woman as his future bride, I think it would be best for him to first let her parents know about this through someone close to him. Then he should personally speak with her parents and with her about his intentions. Later, once they are engaged—and it is best if the time between the engagement and the wedding is not too long—he should regard his fiancée as his sister and treat her with respect. If both the groom and the bride, out

of love and with all their strength, strive to preserve their virginity until the wedding, then in the Sacrament of Marriage, when the priest places the crowns upon them, they will receive God's grace in abundance. For, as St. John Chrysostom says, the crowns of the Sacrament of Marriage are symbols of victory over sensual pleasure.¹⁰

Subsequently, the spouses should, as much as possible, cultivate the virtue of love so that the two may always be united as one and so that the Third—our Sweetest Christ—may dwell with them. Of course, at first, until the newlyweds' married life settles into a normal rhythm and until they get to know each other properly, they may experience some difficulties. This happens at the beginning of any endeavor. A few days ago, I watched a baby bird. It had flown out of the nest for the first time to find food for itself. The poor thing didn't know how to catch insects and, flying low over the ground, spent a whole hour before finally catching some kind of bug. Watching the little bird, I reflected on the fact that starting any new endeavor is not easy. A college graduate, after receiving a degree and starting work, experiences difficulties at first. A novice in a monastery also faces difficulties at the beginning of his monastic life. And a young man who has just gotten married will also face difficulties at first.

— Geronda, is it acceptable for the bride to be older than the groom?

— There is no Church rule that says if a young woman is two, three, or even five years older than her fiancé, they cannot get married.

Divine harmony lies in differences of character.

Once, a man came to my hut and began complaining that he was very upset because of constant disagreements with his wife. However, I realized that there was nothing truly serious between him and his wife. This man has his own "knots" and "bumps," and his wife has hers, which is why they can't get along. [Both of them] need to be "planed down" a little. Take two unplaned boards. One has a knot in one place, the other in another. And if you want to join them as they are, unplaned, there will be a gap between them. However, if you plane the first board a little in one place and the second in another, they'll fit together right away. You just have to use the same plane.¹¹

"I can't seem to get along with my wife!" some husbands complain to me. "We have completely different personalities! She's a person of a completely different disposition. How can God allow such absurdities? Couldn't He have arranged things so that spouses would have the same personalities, so that they could live spiritually?" "Don't you understand," I reply, "that divine harmony lies in the difference in personalities? Different personalities come together in harmony. Imagine if you and your wife had identical personalities! God forbid! Imagine what would happen if, for example, both you and your wife were quick to get angry. You wouldn't leave a single stone standing in your house! And what if both spouses had equally gentle, meek temperaments? You'd be falling asleep on your feet! If neither you nor your wife could be persuaded to ask for snow in winter—you would, of course, get along with each other, but you'd both end up in hellish torment. And what if you were both spendthrifts? Would you be able to run a household? You'd squander your fortune, and your children would be left out in the cold."

If a difficult, headstrong man finds a wife who's just his match—one who'll do things her own way no matter what you do to her—then, of course, they'll be a good match for each other. Isn't that so? However, after just one day of living together, they'll be at each other's throats! That's why look at how God arranges things: He makes it so that a good, kind person marries a wayward one, and

¹⁰ "Wreaths are placed on the heads of the newlyweds, symbolizing victory—that, having not been defeated, they enter the marriage bed, that they have not been overcome by pleasure." St. John Chrysostom. Commentary on the First Epistle to Timothy, Homily 9. PG 62, col. 546.

¹¹ The Elder is referring to the spiritual father's work with married couples. This work proves effective when the husband and wife have the same spiritual father—that is, their "knots" and "bumps" are planed down by the same "plane."

then the other spouse can receive help if they were originally of a good disposition but were led astray by evil in their youth.

A slight difference in the spouses' personalities helps create a harmonious family, because one spouse complements the other. A car needs both pedals: the gas pedal to move forward and the brake to stop in time. If a car had only one brake, it wouldn't move from a standstill, and if it had only an accelerator, it wouldn't be able to stop. "You're both on the same wavelength," I told one married couple, "and that's why you're not right for each other!" Both of these people were very impressionable. If something happened at home, they'd both let go of the reins and start wailing. "Oh, what a calamity has befallen us !" the husband wails. "Oh, what bitter sorrow this is!" the wife sobs. In other words, one spouse "helps" the other sink into even greater despair! The husband can't cheer up his wife and tell her, "Wait a minute, what happened to us isn't really that serious." I've seen this in many families.

With different personalities, spouses can achieve more when it comes to raising children. One spouse will tend to rein the children in a bit, while the other will say, "Come on, give the kids a little freedom." If both the husband and wife are too strict with their children, they'll lose them. But they'll also lose their children if both of them let them do whatever they want. If, however, the mother and father have different personalities, their children will find a healthy balance.

What I mean is that [in a family] everything is necessary. Of course, spouses shouldn't go overboard when it comes to their personality traits, but each of them, in accordance with their own nature, should help the other. If you eat something very sweet, for example, you'll crave something salty. When you've had your fill of grapes, you'll want to wash them down with a piece of cheese to cut through the sweetness. Garden greens: if they're too bitter, they're inedible; but if the vegetables have just a hint of bitterness or tartness, they're both tasty and healthy. But if a person with a sour disposition starts saying that everyone else should become just as sour, and someone with a bitter disposition urges everyone to become bitter, and a third—a salty one—insists that everyone become salty, then they will never reach mutual understanding.

Respect Between Spouses

God has wisely arranged everything. He endowed men with certain gifts and women with others. He gave men courage so that they might find a way out of difficult situations and so that women would obey them. For if God had given women the same courage, the family would not be able to hold together.

In Epirus¹², people told stories about a woman who was the terror of the entire region! She wore a long white shirt and always carried a yatagan at her belt.¹³ Bandits would even take her along on their raids! Just imagine: a woman in a band of robbers! Once, she went to a remote village, a few hours' walk from her own, to kidnap a young Wallachian man and marry him off to her daughter. When the young man started to resist, she overpowered him, hoisted him onto her shoulders, and dragged him back to her village! However, such cases are the exception to the rule. Try conscripting women into the army and forming a women's company out of them. Then take a dozen teenagers in Scout uniforms and have them appear from a distance to the female warriors. The whole company will take off running right away! They'll think the enemy is launching an attack!

The husband, says Scripture, "*is the head of the wife.*"¹⁴ That is, God has ordained that the husband should have authority over the wife. A wife's authority over her husband is an insult to God. God first created Adam, who said of his wife: "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my*

¹² Epirus—a region in western Greece. —*Translator's note.*

¹³ Yatagan—a large, curved Turkish dagger. —*Translator's note.*

¹⁴ Eph. 5:23.

flesh.”¹⁵ The Gospel says that a wife should fear her husband—that is, she should honor him. And a husband should love his wife.¹⁶ Respect is present in love. Love is present in respect. What I love, I also honor. What I honor, I love. In other words, love and respect are not different things. They are one and the same.

However, people stray from this divine harmony and fail to understand the meaning of the Gospel’s words. Thus, a husband, misinterpreting the Gospel, says to his wife: “You must be afraid of me!” What a strange man—if she were afraid of you, she wouldn’t have married you in the first place! And some women have their own take on it: “Why should a wife be afraid of her husband? No, I can’t accept that. What kind of religion is this? Discrimination!” But look at what Scripture says: “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*”¹⁷ The fear of God is reverence for God, awe, and spiritual humility. This fear leads you to a reverent trembling; it is something sacred.

The equality with men that some women strive for can be justified only to a certain extent. Today, women work and vote on an equal footing with men. As a result, they have been infected by a kind of unhealthy mindset and believe that they are equal to men [in everything]. Of course, the souls of men and women are the same. But if a husband does not love his wife, and a wife does not respect her husband, discord arises in the family. In the old days, it was considered utterly unacceptable for a wife to contradict her husband. But now a brazen, insolent spirit has emerged. How wonderful those times were! I knew a married couple. The husband was a short, unassuming little man, while the wife was towering, of heroic stature! She could unload a centner of grain from a cart all by herself with ease! Once, a worker—also a strapping fellow—started making advances toward her, and she grabbed him and flung him several meters to the side, like a matchstick! But if only you could have seen how obedient this woman was to her husband, how she honored him! That’s how a family becomes strong and unbreakable. Otherwise, it cannot stand firm.

Love Between Spouses

“So, Mother, did you write a congratulatory note to Dimitri, who’s getting married?”

— I did, Geronda.

— Give me that postcard, and I’ll add a note of my own: “May Christ and the Most Holy Mother of God be with you! Dimitri, I give you my blessing to quarrel with the whole world—except for Mary! And to Mary, the same blessing: to quarrel with everyone—but not with you!” Let’s see if they understand what I mean. One man asked me, “Geronda, what unites a husband and wife most of all?” “Gratitude,” I replied. One person loves another for what that person gives them. A wife gives her husband trust, devotion, and obedience. A husband gives his wife the assurance that she is under his protection and care. A wife is the mistress of the home, but also its chief servant. A husband is the head of the household, but also the one who bears its burdens.

A husband and wife must have pure love for one another—so that they may find mutual comfort in each other and be able to fulfill their spiritual duties. To live in harmony, they must, above all, build their life on love—that precious love which consists in spiritual nobility and self-sacrifice, rather than false, worldly, or carnal love. When love and self-sacrifice are present, one person always puts themselves in the other’s shoes, understands them, and feels their pain. And by welcoming one’s neighbor into one’s suffering heart, a person welcomes Christ into their heart, Who then fills it anew with His inexpressible joy.

When one spouse loves the other, even when they are far apart—if circumstances require it—they will still be close, because there are no distances in the love of Christ. However, if, God forbid,

¹⁵ Gen. 2:23.

¹⁶ See Eph. 5:33.

¹⁷ Prov. 1:7.

there is no love between the spouses, then even when they are side by side, they may, in essence, be far apart. Therefore, each spouse must strive throughout their entire life to preserve their love for the other, sacrificing themselves for the other's sake.

Carnal love unites worldly people outwardly, but only as long as they possess the worldly qualities [necessary for such carnal love]. When these worldly qualities are lost, carnal love separates people, and they slide into ruin. But when there is true, precious spiritual love between spouses, if one of them loses their worldly qualities, this will not only fail to separate them but will unite them even more strongly. If there is only carnal love, then a wife, upon learning, for example, that her life partner has looked at another woman, will splash sulfuric acid into his eyes and blind him. But if she loves him with pure love, she feels even greater pain for him and, with sensitivity and care, tries to guide him back onto the right path. In this way, God's grace comes.

One day, an American of Greek descent—a doctor—came to visit me in my kaliva. I noticed that his complexion was fair, so I tactfully asked him about his life. “Father,” he said to me. “I am an Orthodox Christian, but until recently I did not observe the fasts, and I rarely went to church. One night, as I knelt in my room and asked God to help me with an important matter, the room was filled with a kind of sweet Light. This lasted quite a while: I saw nothing but the Light, and felt within myself a kind of indescribable peace.” I was struck by this, because I realized that this man had been granted a vision of the Uncreated Light. So I asked him to tell me what had preceded this event. “Father,” he began, “I am a married man and have three children. The beginning of our married life was good. However, later my wife, lacking the patience to take care of the house and the children, began asking me if we could go out and have fun with her friends. I gave in to her. Time passed, and she declared that she wanted to go out with her friends on her own. I accepted that as well, and began taking care of the children myself. After that, she no longer wanted to go on vacation with me, and she began asking me for money to go on vacation alone. Then she asked me to rent a separate apartment for her. I went along with that, too. But she was bringing her lovers to that apartment. All this time, I tried in various ways—through advice and persuasion—to help her, so that she would have a change of heart for the sake of our children. But she wouldn't take any advice. In the end, after taking a significant amount of money from me, she disappeared. I searched for her, asked about her wherever I could—but to no avail; I lost all trace of her. And then one day I was told that she had come here, to Greece, and had begun selling herself in one of the depraved dens. It is impossible to describe the grief over her pitiful downfall that overwhelmed me. In my grief, I fell to my knees and began to pray: “My God,” I pleaded, “help me find her, and I will do everything I can to keep her from ruining her soul. I cannot bear the state to which she has sunk.” And then that Light washed over me, and my heart was filled with peace.”—“Brother!” I said to him. “God saw your patience, your kindness, your love, and granted you this comfort.”

That's why I'm saying that laypeople will judge us. Do you see what I mean? A doctor somewhere in America, with a wife like that, living in those circumstances and surrounded by that kind of people—and yet, look what he's been reduced to!

Chapter 2.

On How Patience Keeps a Family from Falling Apart

— How is your sister doing? Is she getting along with her husband?

— Geronda, I've heard rumors that things aren't going smoothly for them. But she's patient, and when necessary, she carries the load on her own.

— That’s how it goes. If a pair of oxen is yoked together and one of them is weak or lazy, the other animal pushes harder and, in a way, pulls the first one along. See how it is: these are ordinary people, yet they’re working on themselves. And here you are, acting like princesses anyway! Just imagine a mother with four children: one is mentally disabled, another is mentally ill, the third suffers from thalassemia,¹⁸ and the fourth wanders off at night to who knows where—and the poor woman suffers alongside her husband as well. Just think of everything she has to endure! She can’t even scream it out—she can’t tell anyone about her pain, because some things that happen within a family simply can’t be discussed outside the home. For example, her husband might live a completely separate life and pay her no attention at all. The poor woman doesn’t even have enough money to pay for housing; they want to evict her from her home. She is forced to look for work, expose herself to various dangers, and ask you: “Please pray that I may at least be spared from these dangers!”

Or her husband drinks, doesn’t work, and she’s forced to work on her own—for example, cleaning stairwells in high-rise buildings. Meanwhile, her husband hangs out in taverns, comes home drunk after midnight, beats her, demands money from her, or even goes to her boss himself and takes what she’s earned. Oh, what a torment that is!

With some women, it’s clear—they have certain sins, and by suffering in this way, they are paying for them. But there are others—who have no such sins. These latter women will receive a just reward for the suffering they endure. I know one mother. As a child, she was like an angel! The kindest soul, the quietest child in the family. And what a terrible troublemaker she ended up with! How her family was deceived! She married a drunkard who had been a notorious troublemaker even as a child. His father drank, and he, too, picked up that bad habit. And now this unfortunate woman goes around hunched over in other people’s homes, working herself to the bone, while her husband beats her and threatens her with a knife. How many times has he shouted, “I’ll stab you to death!” And she’s afraid he might actually do it! She’s going through real torment! And yet she has four children. This poor woman’s own family has gone so far as to advise her to get a divorce, but she replies to them, “I think I’ll put up with it a little longer.” And she endures it. Can you understand that? This woman has read neither the spiritual guides nor the lives of the saints, and yet she endures! “All right,” I said to her once. “What about your kids—they see all this and don’t intervene?” “They’re still fifteen or sixteen,” she replied. “Let them serve in the army first, and when they come back, they’ll give their father a little taste of his own medicine!” In other words, until they’ve served in the army, she’ll have to put up with the beatings!

Patience fills a person with Divine Grace

— Geronda, how should one behave toward someone who is irritated or agitated?

— With patience.

— What if I don’t have any?

— We should go buy some! It’s sold in supermarkets!... You see, when a person is seething with anger, no matter what you say to them, it won’t do any good. At a moment like that, it’s better to remain silent and say the Jesus Prayer. The prayer will calm them down, and then you can reach a mutual understanding with them. Look, even fishermen don’t go out to fish when the sea is rough. They wait patiently until the weather clears up.

— Geronda, what explains people’s impatience?

¹⁸ Thalassemia is a hereditary hemolytic anemia characterized by impaired synthesis of the globin protein, common in Mediterranean countries. The disease leads to progressive anemia, enlargement of the liver and spleen, jaundice, etc. — *Translator’s note.*

— This is because they have so much... peace within them! God has made people's salvation contingent upon their patience. "*But he who endures to the end will be saved*" (¹⁹), says the Gospel. God gives people difficulties and various trials so that they may become skilled in patience.

Patience begins with love. To be patient with someone, you must feel compassion for them. "Patience saves a family from destruction. I have seen wild beasts become as gentle as lambs. If you trust in God, all problems are resolved smoothly and spiritually. Once, while living at the Stomion Monastery, I met a woman in Konitsa²⁰ whose face was radiant. She was the mother of five children. Later, I remembered her. Her husband was a carpenter and often worked alongside my master.²¹ If clients made even the slightest comment to this man—for example, "Master Yannis, maybe we should do it this way?"—he would definitely fly off the handle. "Are you trying to teach me a lesson?!" he would yell, breaking his tools, throwing them into a corner, and walking out. Can you imagine what he must have been up to in his own home, if he was smashing everything even in other people's homes! It was impossible to spend even a single day with this man, yet his wife had lived with him for years. Every day she endured torment, yet she treated everything with great kindness and bore it all with patience. I knew what was going on in their home, so whenever I ran into her, I'd ask, "How's Mr. Janis doing? Is he working?" "Uh," she'd reply, "Sometimes he works, and other times he just sits around for a little while!" "And how are things going for you?" I'd ask again. "Very well, Father!" she replied. And she meant it from the bottom of her heart. She didn't take into account that her husband was breaking his tools—and expensive ones at that!—so that the poor woman was forced to take on work in other people's homes to earn a living for them. See how much patience, kindness, and nobility she showed toward everything! She didn't even condemn him in the slightest! That is why God filled her with Grace, and her face shone. She was able to raise five children, brought them up, and all five turned out to be very good people.

— Geronda, how did she manage to defend her husband?

— With a kind thought. "After all, he's my husband," she thought. "Well, let him scold me a little. Perhaps, if I were in his place, I would behave exactly the same way." This woman applied the Gospel to her life, and that is why God bestowed His Divine Grace upon her. And if even worldly people can endure and be filled with Grace, how much more should we, as monks who have every opportunity for the spiritual life, endure!

As far as I can tell, the biggest scandals—not only within families but also in the life of nations—stem from trivial matters. In a family, one spouse must humble themselves before the other; they must not only emulate the other's virtues but also put up with their quirks. Reflecting on the fact that Christ sacrificed Himself for our sins—and that He, being sinless, endures us all—billions of people—while we, tormented by the quirks of others, are paying off the debt for our own sins—greatly helps us approach such situations in this way. The Good God has arranged things so that, when a person has a gift, they help others, and when they have a shortcoming, they humble themselves before others. After all, everyone has their own gifts. However, everyone also has shortcomings, and we must strive to cut them off.

I really gave one man a good thrashing! You should see how obedient his wife is to him, even though she is endowed with many abilities and talents. Next to her, he's just like a little child. And this woman, by obeying her husband, constantly receives Divine Grace and adds it to her spiritual account, whereas her husband, through his selfishness, constantly drives Divine Grace away from himself and becomes emptier and emptier. And who, in the end, will come out ahead? You see: the

¹⁹ Matthew 10:22.

²⁰ Konitsa—a small town in Western Greece. The Elder spent his childhood and youth there. From 1958 to 1960, the Blessed Elder Paisios lived as a monk at the Stomion Monastery, located not far from Konitsa.—*Translator's note.*

²¹ In his youth, Elder Paisios learned the carpentry trade.

whole secret lies in humility. That is the entire foundation: obedience and humility. But if this man were to acknowledge his weakness and ask God for help, Divine Grace would come to him as well.

A Faithful Wife

— Geronda, a woman has asked me for advice on what to do. Her husband left her, took their child, and has been seeing two other women.

— Tell her to be as patient as possible, to pray, and to treat him kindly. Let her wait and not be the one to end the marriage. There was a man who treated his wife with contempt, beat her, and hurt her, yet she endured it all with patience and kindness until she died at a relatively young age. When, several years after her death, her remains were exhumed from the grave, everyone sensed a sweet fragrance.²² Those who were present were amazed. You see: this woman faced everything with patience, and therefore she was vindicated in the afterlife.

There was another similar case. A young man who lived a worldly life began to develop feelings for a young woman who led a spiritual life. Hoping she would return his feelings, he, too, tried to lead a spiritual life and attend church. They got married. But as the years passed, he returned to his former worldly ways. They already had grown children—the eldest was studying at the university, one daughter was in high school, and the other was in middle school. But despite everything, this man continued to live a dissolute life. He earned a lot of money, but spent almost all of it on his debauched lifestyle. His unfortunate wife's thriftiness kept their household from collapsing, and with her advice, she helped the children stay on the right path. She did not condemn their father, so that the children would not begin to feel resentment toward him or suffer emotional trauma, and also so that they would not be drawn into the lifestyle he led. When her husband came home late at night, it was relatively easy for her to make excuses for him to the children: she would say he had a lot of work. But what was she supposed to say when he showed up at home in broad daylight with his mistress? Do you know what this God-fearing man was up to? Although he wasn't even worthy of being called a man, because he lacked any sense of humanity whatsoever. He would call his wife and order various dishes, and then come over in the afternoon to have lunch with one of his mistresses. The poor mother, wanting to protect her children from impure thoughts, welcomed them warmly. She presented the situation as if her husband's mistress were her friend, and her husband would stop by the "friend's" house to pick her up in his car and bring her over to visit. She would send the children to other rooms to do their homework so they wouldn't witness any indecent scenes, since her husband, paying no attention to the children, would even engage in lewd behavior right in front of them. This happened day after day. Every so often, he would show up with a new mistress. It got to the point where the children began asking her, "Mom, how many friends do you have?" "Oh, they're just old acquaintances!" she would reply. Moreover, her husband treated her like a servant—or even worse. He treated her very cruelly and inhumanely. Just think about how this woman served two beasts every day who brought shame upon her home, all while constantly instilling good thoughts in her children! And yet she couldn't count on this misery ever ending, so she couldn't tell herself, "I'll endure it a little longer," and find comfort in that. This nightmare went on for several years. However, since this wretched man had given the devil too much power over himself, he began to be subjected to terrible demonic influences. He began to act like a madman, losing control of himself and blaming everyone and everything. And then one day, intoxicated by the intoxication of carnal passion, he was speeding in his car and plunged into a ravine. The car was smashed to pieces, and he himself suffered very serious injuries. He was taken to the hospital, and

²² In Greece, the remains of the deceased are exhumed from the grave 3–4 years after death, washed, and placed in special burial chambers. If the body has not decomposed, it is reburied in the grave, and prayers for the repose of the departed are intensified. — *Translator's note*

the doctors, having done all they could, sent him home. He was left crippled. Not a single one of his mistresses even visited him, because he no longer had much money, and his face was disfigured. However, his kind wife cared for him devotedly, without reminding him of anything from his life of debauchery. He was deeply shaken, and this changed him spiritually. He sincerely repented, asked for a priest to be sent to him, confessed his sins, lived a Christian life for several years with inner peace, and passed away in the Lord. After his death, his eldest son took his place in the business and provided for the family. This man's children lived in great harmony because they had inherited their mother's good principles. This woman was a heroic mother. To save her family from falling apart and her children from bitter sorrow, she drank their bitter cup herself. She kept the family from falling apart, saved her husband, and earned her own heavenly reward. God will grant this woman the best place in Paradise.

Children from Broken Homes

— Geronda, if a husband in a family, having some kind of passion, admits his guilt, confesses, but continues to be influenced by this passion and says to his wife, "I'm causing you suffering—both you and the children. It would be better if I left and, living far away from you, sent you money so that you wouldn't suffer," what should his wife do?

— If a husband truly means what he says, it shows that he is very affectionate, and his wife should be patient. However, it is better if she does not believe what she hears right away. Let her look more deeply into the heart of the matter. After all, sometimes this happens: a husband supposedly says out of nobility, "I'll leave so as not to torment you," when in reality he wants to leave because he's become involved with another woman.

Marriage, having reached the state we see today, has lost its meaning. Families are falling apart for no apparent reason. A few days ago, a completely confused man came to my kaliva. At first, he had two children with one mistress. Then he left her for another. She gave birth to a child for him, and he divorced her. After that, he got married for the third time. His third wife was also divorced and also had three children: two from her first marriage and one out of wedlock. He had two more children with this woman. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," I interrupted him as I listened to all this. "How many mothers do all these children have, and how many fathers?"

And that's how these unfortunate children perish. Those among them who, being particularly sensitive, cannot overcome the distress caused by the tragedy that has befallen them, fall into despair, and some even take their own lives. Others turn to drinking to numb themselves. Still others turn to drugs. And where on earth do they find the money for all this? The smallest dose of heroin costs four thousand drachmas. A larger dose costs six or seven thousand.²³

Such are the wayward, undisciplined children of the previous generation. What will become of the others—those little ones whose parents divorced under the automatic divorce law? How many young people who use drugs have passed through my shelter this summer! Most of these unfortunate souls are children from broken homes. A guy is twenty-seven years old, yet he's in despair and begging for help! And you know, you can spot children from broken homes from a mile away. I keep a jar of Turkish delight on a bench near my kaliva. And when these kids come by, they take a piece of Turkish delight from the jar and start eating it, and then, when they see me stepping out of the kaliva onto the porch—before they've even finished the treat—they immediately run up to kiss me. Their hands are all covered in powdered sugar from the Turkish delight, and they'll cover me in it too! These children are deprived of love and tenderness. It makes no difference to them whether they have parents or not. Whether their father comes home, leaves, lives with them, or doesn't—nothing changes for these poor children.

²³ Delivered in 1990. 4,000 Greek drachmas—approximately 12 U.S. dollars. — *Translator's note.*

“Right” and “Wrong” in Married Life

I’ve noticed that some spiritual fathers tell husbands who are at odds with their wives: “Be patient; this is the cross you have to bear. What can you do? God will reward you for such patience.” Then the wives go to these spiritual fathers, and they tell them the same thing: “Be patient, be patient, so that you may receive your reward from God.” In other words, both spouses may be at fault, and yet the spiritual father urges both of them to be patient. Or perhaps one spouse is at fault, and the confessor tells him, “Be patient, be patient.” In this way, the spouse who is to blame for the lack of peace in the family soothes his conscience by thinking that he is supposedly being patient with his spouse, when in reality he torments him day after day.

One day, a man came to my hut and began complaining about how badly he was getting along with his wife. Their marriage was on the verge of divorce. Neither he nor his wife wanted to see each other. They were both teachers and had two children. They never ate at home: after school, the husband would go to one restaurant for dinner, and the wife to another. As for the children, they would buy them some sandwiches, and the poor kids, when their parents came home, would rummage through their pockets and bags to see what Mom and Dad had brought to eat! The children were going through a real ordeal! On top of everything else, this man sang in church, but his wife didn’t attend the church where he sang—she went to a different one. That’s how strong their animosity toward each other was! “What can I do, Father,” he told me, “I’m carrying a heavy cross. A very heavy one. Every day there are arguments in our house.” “Have you gone to see your spiritual father?” I asked him. “Yes,” he replied, “I have. My spiritual father told me, ‘Be patient, be patient. You’re carrying a heavy cross.’” “Well then,” I said to him at the time, “let’s see who’s really carrying a heavy cross. Let’s start from the beginning. When you got married, did you argue like this back then?” “No,” he replied. “We lived very happily together for eight years. I adored my wife! I revered her more than I revered God! Then she became a different person! She started tormenting me with her whining, her nitpicking, her oddities...” Do you hear what’s going on! He revered her more than he revered God! “Well then,” I said, “come here, my dear! So, you revered your wife more than you revered God? So who’s to blame now for the fact that you’ve ended up in this situation: you or her? It’s because of you that God has withdrawn His grace from your wife.” Then I asked him, “So what do you plan to do now?” “Most likely, we’ll get a divorce,” he said. “Maybe,” I asked, “you’ve started an affair on the side?” “Yes,” he replied, “I’m thinking of running off with another woman.” “Come to your senses!” I said. “Snap out of it! Don’t you understand that you’re the one to blame for all of this? First of all, you need to ask God for forgiveness for revering your wife more than you revered Him. Then go to your wife and ask her for forgiveness. Tell her: ‘Forgive me. It’s my fault that our relationship has come to this, and that our children are now suffering.’ Then go and confess—and revere God as God, and love your wife as your wife. And you’ll see that everything will work out for you.” My scolding did him good. He began to cry and promised that he would follow my advice. Before long, he came to see me again, now full of joy: “Thank you, Father, you saved our family. Everything is wonderful for us: for my wife and me, and for our children.” See how it is? He’s entirely to blame for everything, yet he thinks he’s “carrying a very heavy cross”!

And never make excuses for women who come to your monastery to complain about their husbands. In such cases, I don’t make excuses for either the husbands or the wives. On the contrary: I make both of them think things over. For example, a woman starts complaining: “My husband drinks, comes home late at night, uses foul language...” “Listen,” I advise her, “when he comes home drunk at night, be kind to him. If you greet him with a sour face and start nagging: ‘Why are you so late?’, ‘How can you come home at a time like this?’, ‘When are you finally going to change?’, ‘What on earth is this bitter misery?’, ‘This has been going on for more than a day or two!’, ‘and how much longer am I going to put up with all this?’—then the devil will whisper to

him, “Are you out of your mind? Why won’t you just break up with this fool? Wouldn’t it be better to go out and have some fun with someone else?” In other words, you may be right, but the devil will tempt him from the other side. But if you treat him kindly, bear with what’s happening for a little while, and pray without voicing your complaints to him, then, seeing a little warmth and light from you, he’ll reflect on his behavior and change for the better.”

And then the husband comes home and starts with his usual routine: “My wife nags me, drives me crazy with her whining...” “Oh, you,” I say, “you shameless man! Your children and your long-suffering wife wait impatiently for you until midnight, and you stumble home drunk and start swearing! Shame on you! Did you get married just to torment your family?”

But there are times when both the husband and the wife can be right. Once, a group of pilgrims came to see me, and I was telling them about what a chaste man Makrianis was.²⁴ He was distinguished by both physical and spiritual purity. Upon hearing this, one of my listeners jumped up and shouted, “Don’t you dare make Makrianis into a saint as well!” “Why,” I said, “don’t dare?” “Because,” he replied, “he beat his wife.” “Listen,” I said, “I’ll explain to you what happened between him and his wife. Whenever Makrianis had a penny to spare and some widow with children came to him, he would give her the money. His poor wife would grumble and start nagging him. ‘But you,’ she would say to him, ‘have your own children. Why did you give the money to her?’ Then he’d slap her and say, ‘You have a husband who’ll provide for you. But this poor woman has no husband. Who’s going to take care of her?’ So both Makrianis and his wife were right.”

Furthermore, if one spouse lives a spiritual life, then—even if he or she is in the right—he or she “has no right” to be in the right. After all, as a spiritual person, he or she must respond to injustice spiritually. That is, he or she must approach everything as divine justice requires. He or she must strive for what brings peace to the other person. After all, if someone makes a mistake out of weakness, they have extenuating circumstances. However, the other person—the one who is in a better spiritual state and does not treat the first with understanding, does not meet them halfway—sins far more. If even spiritual people approach everything in a worldly manner—from the perspective of worldly, human justice—where will that lead? It will lead to them constantly running to worldly courts. This is what causes people to suffer.

Part 2.

On Parents and Their Responsibilities

“Parents, who give birth to children and provide them with a body, must, as far as possible, contribute to their spiritual rebirth”

Chapter 1.

On the Birth of Children

²⁴ Ioannis Makriyanis (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. Makriyanis is a wonderful example of self-sacrificing Christian love for God, one’s neighbor, and one’s homeland. —*Translator’s note.*

Saints Joachim and Anne—the most selfless married couple

— Geronda, please tell us something about Saint Anne and Saint Joachim, the God-parents. You had already begun to tell us about them once...

— Ever since I was a child, I have regarded the Holy Godparents with great reverence. I even asked to be given the name Joachim when I entered monastic life. How much we owe them! Saints Joachim and Anna were the most selfless married couple who ever lived. They were completely free from worldly wisdom.

That is exactly how God created humankind. And He wanted people to be born in the same way—without passion. But after the Fall, passion entered into the relationship between a man and a woman. And as soon as a passionless married couple appeared—such as God created man to be and as human birth was meant to be according to His plan—the Most Holy Mother of God was born—this Pure Creation—and subsequently, Christ was incarnated from her. It occurs to me that Christ would have come to Earth even earlier—if a pure, chaste married couple, such as Saints Joachim and Anna, had appeared on Earth sooner.

Roman Catholics fall into error. Supposedly out of reverence, they believe that the Mother of God was born free from original sin. Yet She was not exempt from original sin and was born exactly as God intended for people to be born after Creation. She was the All-Pure One,²⁵ because her conception took place without sexual intercourse. The Holy Parents prayed fervently to God that He might grant them a child. And after this prayer, they came together [as husband and wife]—not out of carnal lust, but out of obedience to God. I became convinced of this after a miraculous event I experienced on Mount Sinai.²⁶

Chastity in Married Life

God “*made everything very good.*”²⁷ Men feel a natural attraction to women, and women to men. If it weren’t for this attraction, no one would ever decide to start a family. People would think about the difficulties that would later await them in family life—related to raising children and other family matters—and therefore would not dare to get married.

After the Fall of the First Men, some people may have five percent worldly wisdom, others ten, thirty, and so on. But where today can you find people whose worldly wisdom amounts to only five percent—that is, people with pure, chaste wisdom! However, be that as it may, God has given all people the opportunity to attain dispassion—if they undertake a labor of love.

Choosing the path of married life does not give married people an excuse to forget that a person is not just flesh, but also spirit. We must not forget this and allow ourselves [and our passions] to run wild.²⁸ Spouses must make the effort to subdue the flesh to the spirit. If, under the guidance of a

²⁵ The conception and Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos were natural, not virgin. “She was All-Pure” because, as St. John of Damascus writes in his “Homily on the Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary,” she was conceived “chastely.” But She Herself, through Her own ascetic efforts, multiplied the holiness She had received from Her parents, rejecting “every superfluous and soul-damaging thought before She even entertained it” (see PG 96, 669 A, 676 B).

²⁶ From 1962 to 1964, Elder Paisios lived as an ascetic on Mount Sinai at the hermitage of Saints Epistimia and Galaktion. He did not reveal to us the nature of the miraculous event he mentioned.

²⁷ Cf. Gen. 1:31.

²⁸ In one of his letters, Elder Paisios writes the following regarding marital relations: “You ask me about the marital relations of married priests and laypeople. The Holy Fathers do not provide precise definitions of how these relationships should be structured. This means that marital relationships are a topic that cannot be clearly defined, since not all people can live according to a single template. The Fathers leave the question of marital relationships to the judgment, love, spiritual sensitivity, and strength of each individual. To make this clearer, I will give examples from the lives of people who are striving in the faith—married priests and laypeople. These people are still alive, and I know them personally. Among them are those who, after starting a family, engaged in marital intimacy and had one, two, or three children, after which they live in chastity. Others engage in marital relations once a year for the sake of having children, and the rest of the time they live as brother and sister. Still others abstain from marital relations during fasts and then resume them afterward. A fourth group is unable to even do this. There are spouses who have relations in the

spiritual father, spouses strive to live spiritually, they will gradually begin to experience higher joys—spiritual, heavenly joys. They will no longer seek carnal joys. Spouses are obligated to strive for self-restraint so as not to pass on carnal passion to their children. If parents are characterized by very carnal musings, then their child will have similar inclinations from an early age. This happens because the child inherits carnal musings from the parents. At first, like all passions inherited from parents, carnal thinking is still mild and gentle, like a young nettle that does not sting, and you can easily touch its leaves. But as it grows, its leaves begin to sting. So it is with worldly wisdom—at first, it can be healed by a good, discerning spiritual father. However, if worldly wisdom is not cut off at a young age, it will take a considerable feat of strength to do so once you become an adult.

Human reasoning regarding God's will concerning the birth of children

Spouses who come to me often share their concerns about having children and ask for my opinion. Some couples want to have one or two children, while others want to have a large family. However, it is best for them to entrust the matter of having children to God. Couples should entrust their lives to Divine Providence and not make their own plans. They should believe that God, who cares even for the birds of the air, will show far greater care for their children. I remember a sailor who got married when he was eighteen years old. He himself was poor, and he married a girl from a poor family. They rented some sort of basement and huddled there. His wife also had a low-paying job, and they lived very modestly. Just imagine: instead of a table, they had a peach crate—one they'd somehow managed to buy! Then they had children. To raise them, they barely scraped by. And yet, little by little, they became wealthy and began to live well.

There are married couples who first try to sort out all their other problems and only then begin to think about having children. Such people do not take God into account at all. Other couples say, "Life these days isn't easy. Let's have just one child—that's enough. It's hard enough to raise even one!" And so they don't have any more children. These people don't realize how much they are

middle of the week so that they may be in a state of purity for the three days before Holy Communion and the three days after it. Others stumble even in this. Therefore, when Christ appeared to the apostles after His Resurrection and gave them the authority to forgive sins, He first said to them: "Just as the Father has sent Me, so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit: whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins you retain, they are retained." The goal is for everyone to strive with discernment and love, in accordance with their spiritual strength. Of course, youth is a hindrance at first. But as time passes, the flesh weakens and the spirit can take the dominant position. And when this happens, even married people begin to taste a little of the divine delights. They naturally turn away from carnal pleasures, which they now regard as utterly insignificant. Thus, people living in marriage are purified in a certain way and, ascending along a gentle, gentle, winding path, reach Paradise. Whereas monks ascend to Paradise by going straight up—vertically, scaling the cliffs. You must also bear in mind that the issue of marital relations is not solely your problem, and you have no right to regulate this matter on your own; rather, as the Apostle Paul writes, "by mutual consent." But even when spouses undertake this [abstinence] "by mutual consent," caution is still necessary. The stronger spouse must put themselves in the weaker spouse's shoes. It often happens that one spouse agrees to abstain so as not to upset the other, but suffers inwardly. Most often this happens to women who have a certain degree of fear of God, yet their flesh gets the better of them. Often, out of imprudence, some devout husbands, upon hearing their wives' words of consent, imprudently abstain from marital relations for a long time. In such cases, the wives suffer and find release in nervous breakdowns and the like. Husbands think their wives have excelled in virtue and wish to live more chastely by engaging in intimate relations only after longer periods of abstinence. But then the wives begin to face temptations and seek someone on the side. When they fall into sin, they begin to be tormented by pangs of conscience, while their husbands, seeing that their wives are not inclined [toward marital relations], try to live even more chastely. They think their wives have achieved spiritual growth and do not desire physical intimacy. Of course, the reason for all this lies in female selfishness—which is understandable—and in the jealousy a woman feels when she perceives herself as lacking. Seeing that her husband wants to live a spiritual life, the wife begins to push herself to the limit, wanting to outdo him. Forgive me for straying into a subject that is not my own, for a monk's business is his prayer beads, not such matters. But, so as not to upset you, I was compelled to write a little about this (which I know only from a distance)—about what torments our brothers and sisters in the world and gives the enemy an opportunity to act [against them]. It is of great importance whether spouses are similar in temperament and disposition. When one spouse is gentle and the other is lively and energetic, the stronger one must sacrifice themselves for the weaker one. And gradually, with the help of the stronger one, the weaker one will become healthy. And then, being healthy, both must move forward." (From the book by Fr. D. Tatsis, **The Elder Paisios**, Konitsa, 1995, pp. 176–178.)

sinning by thinking this way, without trusting in God. God is “compassionate.” It is easy for Him to stop giving children to a couple if He sees that they are no longer able to raise them.

Many people rush into marriage without considering that having children and raising them in the Christian faith should be the goal [of married life]. People don’t want to have many children so as not to burden themselves with the work involved, yet they keep dogs and cats in their apartments. I’ve been told that in America today²⁹, instead of dogs, people keep very expensive breeds of pigs in their homes. These pigs stay small; they don’t grow any larger. They were specifically bred this way so they could be kept in apartments. People don’t want to have children because it’s a hassle to bathe them and take care of them. But don’t they have to bathe the piglets? A dog, fine—at least it’s a guard dog. But keeping a pig in the house! That’s terrible! While in Australia,³⁰ I saw a “retirement home” for dogs and cats. There was even a pet cemetery there! It’s coming to the point where people will breed mice and can them to feed cats, and they’ll breed hares and rabbits and can them to feed dogs! And at the very same time, other people will be dying of hunger. And just think: if someone kills a dog, it’s quite possible they’ll pay more for it than if they’d killed a person (of course, it also depends on who the dog belonged to). What have we come to!... A human being these days is worth less than a dog. I’m amazed by what some spiritual fathers say. Once, some pilgrims came to my cell and asked me, “Geronda, does St. John Chrysostom write anywhere that married couples shouldn’t have children?” “What on earth are you talking about?” I asked in surprise. “Where did you hear such a thing?” “Well,” they said, “Father So-and-so told us that.” When I met this priest, I asked him, “Did you really say that?” “Yes,” he replied. “Where did you read that?”—“St. John Chrysostom speaks of this in his ‘Homily on Virginity,’” he replied. “Listen,” I said to him. “I haven’t read anything like that in St. John Chrysostom, but the saint couldn’t possibly say such things. He must mean something else. Bring me the book so I can see what it says.” He brought the book and showed me the passage. I began to read and saw that the Saint wrote the following: “Nowadays, the population has grown, and you, too, have the opportunity to live in virginity: it is not like in the past, when people had to leave descendants behind.”³¹ In other words, the Saint isn’t saying, “Don’t have children.” But this priest insisted on his own interpretation. A priest with a theological education, yet spouting such nonsense! He wants to portray himself as well-read, to show that he is a scholar of John Chrysostom’s theological legacy, so that people will consider him a good spiritual father. Do you know what harm such twisted interpretations cause to people who want to put their minds at ease?

For many people who live according to worldly standards, family has lost its meaning today. That is why such people do not marry, or, if they do marry, they avoid having children or kill their children through abortion, thereby exterminating their own lineage. In other words, it is not God who destroys people—people destroy themselves. Believers, on the other hand, who keep God’s commandments, receive Divine Grace, since God—if I may put it that way—is bound to help them during the difficult times we are going through. We see Christians who have families and raise their children in the fear of God, no matter how many children He gives them. And all the children [of such parents] are well-adjusted and joyful. These children are a blessing from God. They grow up to be good, diligent people. We keep asking, “What will become of the world?”—but at the same time, we see how, by God’s grace, a good generation is now gaining strength and coming of age. The devil is trying to destroy everything, but the Good God is at work as well. He will not allow our people to disappear from the face of the earth.

²⁹ Delivered in November 1990.

³⁰ In 1977, at the invitation of the Church, the Elder visited Australia to provide spiritual guidance to the Orthodox Greeks living there.

³¹ See *St. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity**, 17, PG 48, 546.

Difficulties in Conceiving

— Geronda, if a non-Orthodox woman is childless, is it permissible, if she asks, to give her a belt as a blessing—one that we have touched in the shape of a cross to the holy relics of St. Arsenius of Cappadocia?³²

— Does she believe in the power of the Saint, or does she want to receive help through magical means? If she believes, then she may wear such a belt.

Some infertile women did not get married when they should have, and as a result, spiritual laws now apply to them.³³ Some picky young women start picking out suitors: “No, I don’t like this one, and that one isn’t my type.” After promising a guy she’ll marry him, such a young woman simultaneously eyes another man, then tells the first one “no,” and he wants to take his own life, instead of considering it a blessing that she deceived him at least before they got married, rather than after. Um, what kind of family will a girl like that build? And there are women who are infertile because they lived a promiscuous, sinful life in their youth. There are also those whose infertility stems from poor nutrition, because many foods contain a whole bunch of chemicals and hormones.

There are also married couples who want to have a child as soon as they get married. And if the birth of the child is delayed, they begin to worry and fret. How can they have a child if they themselves are full of anxiety and inner turmoil? They will have a child when they cast out their anxiety and inner turmoil and set their lives on the right spiritual path.

Sometimes God deliberately delays and does not grant a married couple children. Consider this: after all, He gave a child in their old age to the holy God-bearing parents Joachim and Anne, as well as to the holy prophet Zechariah and Elizabeth, in order to fulfill His eternal plan for the salvation of humanity.

Spouses must always be ready to accept God’s will into their lives. God does not abandon anyone who entrusts themselves to Him with faith. We do nothing, yet how much God does for us! With such love and generosity, He gives us everything! Is there anything that is beyond God’s power? One married couple had five children, but when their children reached adulthood, they started their own families and flew the nest. The father and mother were left alone. So they decided to have one more child so that they would have someone by their side in their old age. The wife was already at an age when conception was impossible, and from a human perspective, their desire seemed unattainable. However, despite this, the couple had great faith in God, and they were blessed with a son who became their comfort in their old age. And they raised him well, guiding him to become a productive member of society.

Having children does not depend solely on human beings. It also depends on God. When God sees that a couple struggling to conceive is humble, He may not only grant them a child but also bless them with many children. However, when God sees persistence and selfishness in a couple [He does not grant their wish because], by granting their request for children, He would be indulging their persistence and selfishness. Couples must surrender themselves completely to God. They must say: “My God, You care for our well-being; *Thy will be done.*”³⁴ In this case, their request will be granted. After all, God’s will is fulfilled when we say, “*Thy will be done,*” and entrust ourselves to Him with faith. But even though we say, “*Thy will be done,*” we simultaneously insist on our own will. So what can God do for us in this case?

³² The life of the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia mentions that in cases of infertility, the Venerable One would bless a small cord and give it to the barren woman so that she might tie it around her waist, and her infertility would be resolved. The elder said that in such cases we should place a ribbon belt in the shape of a cross against the relics of Saint Arsenius and give it to the barren woman so that she might wear it.

³³ For more on spiritual laws, see Chapter 4 of Part 5 of this volume.

³⁴ Matt. 6:10.

Marital Infertility

— Geronda, a married couple came to us. Both he and she have an undiagnosed form of thalassemia. They asked us whether they should have children. We suggested they consult their spiritual father.

— Spiritual fathers cannot forbid such married couples from having children. Spiritual mentors should cultivate chastity in such spouses so that they strive to practice abstinence. And with discernment, spiritual fathers should show them leniency.

— Geronda, there are married couples who, despite living very spiritually and wanting to have a child, are unable to do so.

— God does not give children to many people so that, by loving the children of the whole world as their own, these people might help bring about their spiritual rebirth. One man had no children of his own, but whenever he left his house, children from the neighboring houses would run up to him and surround him with love. They wouldn't let him go to work. You see: God did not give this man his own children, but He blessed him so that all the neighborhood children would love him as a father, and he, in his own way, helped them spiritually. God's ways are unfathomable.

In other cases, God does not grant a couple children so that they may take in an orphan. I knew a kind Christian man who was a lawyer. While I was once in the city where he lived, I visited his home. He welcomed me very warmly, and I stayed with him for a day as a guest. I also met his wife. She was just as virtuous as her husband. From her, I learned about the spiritual life her husband led, and from him, I learned about his wife's spiritual state.

Later, I learned about these people from other Christians who knew them and had received various acts of kindness from them. This man of God practiced law with integrity. Seeing that the defendant was indeed a swindler, he not only refused to defend him but also sternly rebuked him in order to bring him to his senses. When he saw that a person was guilty but had repented, he would try to settle the case or work to ensure a more lenient sentence. When he saw that an unjust accusation had been leveled against some poor person, he would take up that person's defense entirely free of charge and strive to exonerate the unfortunate individual in court. This man lived very simply, so the little money he earned was enough to support himself and still allow him to help poor families. The home of this devout lawyer was a true spiritual oasis in the midst of the [spiritual] Sahara of the city where he lived. There, the suffering, the poor, and the unemployed gathered; those with family problems came as well. And he came to the aid of all these unfortunate people, supporting them like a kind father. This man had acquaintances who held positions of responsibility. They loved and valued him, and so when he called his high-ranking acquaintances to help a poor person with some matter or illness, no one refused him. His wife worked in the same way. She helped poor children or young people who could not afford an education. She was like a mother to them. However, in a conversation with me, this woman let slip by accident: "Before I got married, Father, I taught high school. Right after the wedding, I quit my job because I decided to become a good mother. I asked Christ to give me many—even twenty—children, but, unfortunately, He didn't give me a single one." Then I replied to her: "You, sister, have more than five hundred children. And you're still complaining? Christ saw your good will. And He will reward you for it. Now, by helping so many children experience spiritual rebirth, you are a better mother than many others. You surpass even all mothers with many children! And the reward you will receive will also be much greater, because, by being spiritually reborn, the children are securing their future in eternal life." On top of everything else, these people adopted a young woman in whose name they had registered all their property. Their adopted daughter cared for them in their old age, and after burying them, she entered a convent. But this couple's home was just like a monastery! All the church services were held there. At Vespers and Compline, other brothers and sisters in Christ prayed with them, and the three of them recited

Midnight Office and Matins together. These blessed people helped many who were suffering. May God grant rest to their souls as well.

That is why I say that the best and most fruitful father is the man who, having been spiritually reborn, helps bring about the spiritual rebirth of children all over the world, so that they may secure the future of their souls in Paradise.

— Geronda, some couples suffering from infertility are considering adopting a child.

— Yes, it is better for such people to adopt a child; they should not [selfishly] insist on having a child of their own. A person's desire and God's will are not always the same.

— Geronda, should adoptive parents tell their child that they were adopted once the child reaches a certain age?

— It's better to tell the child about this once they're a little older. But the most important thing is that the adoptive parents love the child deeply and unconditionally. There are children who love strangers more than their own father and mother because their parents don't love them.

Large Families

God has a special love for large families. He shows them special care. In a large family, children are given many opportunities for healthy development—provided that their parents raise them properly. One child in a large family helps another. The oldest daughter helps her mother, the middle child looks after the youngest, and so on. In other words, these children devote themselves to one another and live in an atmosphere of self-sacrifice and love. The youngest loves and respects the oldest. Love and respect are cultivated naturally in a large family.

Therefore, if a family has only one or two children, parents need to be very mindful of how they raise them. Usually [in such small families], parents try to ensure that their children lack for nothing. These children have everything they could possibly want, and as a result, they grow up completely ill-equipped to cope with anything. Take, for example, a young woman—the only child of wealthy parents. She has a maid who sets the table for her, tidies her room, and does all the necessary housework. The maid receives money for her work, but at the same time she grows in virtue because she is of service to others. Whereas the young woman she serves, having never learned any sense of self-sacrifice, remains a “stump”—an uncultivated person. I advise young men to marry young women from large families, because children who grow up in need get used to making sacrifices and are always thinking about how to help their parents. This rarely happens with children who grow up living a life of luxury.

However, it's not just the children but also the parents in large families who have generous hearts. I remember how, during the occupation³⁵, a little boy in one of our neighbors' homes was left completely orphaned. A poor man—the head of a family with ten children—took pity on the unfortunate orphan, took him into his home, and raised him alongside his own children. And do you know what blessings God bestowed upon that man afterward? For how could God possibly leave a person with such a generous heart without help?

A person with many children may face difficulties at first. But God will not abandon such a person. Let me tell you about one instance. Once, the head of a family with six children asked me to pray that God would soften the hearts of the people from whom he was renting a house, so that they would not evict him. Unfortunately, many landlords who rent to couples with five dogs or cats—animals that make a mess both inside and outside the house—are reluctant to rent to large families, fearing that the children will damage their property. And so this unfortunate father of many children was simply at his wits' end: one landlord evicted him from his home, another refused to rent to him at all, and he was forced to wander from house to house with his children and belongings. To feed

³⁵ The occupation of Greece in 1941–1944 by Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria. — *Translator's note.*

his family, this man worked tirelessly. He didn't even haggle with the landlords over the rent—it would have been enough for him if they'd simply allowed him to live in the house for a few years, to get a break from the constant moving. When I heard this, my heart went out to him. “Don't be discouraged,” I told him. “God cares for your children, too. After all, He is the Creator who gives children what matters most—the soul—while you and your wife, as God's co-creators, give them a body. Therefore, God cares for your children more than you do yourselves.” Barely two or three months had passed when this man, looking joyful, came to me again and said, “Praise God, God has given me a house, and I still have plenty of money left.” I asked him what had happened, and he told me the following: “On my way back to my village, I was sitting at the bus stop waiting for the bus. A lottery ticket vendor approached me and offered to sell me a ticket. As a Christian, I don't buy lottery tickets—I stick to that as a matter of principle. So I refused. However, seeing that he was walking away, I thought that perhaps this man was in dire need. So I called him back and took out some money to pay for one lottery ticket—without actually taking the ticket itself. But the vendor was an honest man and didn't want to take the money for nothing. Then I felt bad too, and, wanting to help him, I said: “All right, give me one ticket—maybe I'll need it.” “Let this man have a little joy,” I thought to myself, “and as for me, even if I break my ‘rule’ and get a little upset—it's no big deal.” And it turned out that the lottery ticket I bought was a winner. I won a large sum of money, bought a house, and, on top of that, I had money left over to raise my children. And after finding out where the lottery ticket seller lived, I quietly went to his house and left an envelope containing a substantial amount of money in his mailbox. I knew that if I had handed him the money directly, he wouldn't have accepted it.” It's amazing how God's love works in honest people!

Abortion is a terrible sin

— Geronda, a forty-year-old woman, the mother of grown children, has become pregnant and is now in her third month. Her husband is insisting that she have an abortion and is threatening to divorce her if she refuses.

— If she has an abortion, her other children will pay the price—through illness and misfortune. Today, parents kill their children through abortion and forfeit God's blessing. In the old days, if a baby was born sick, it was baptized, and it died like a little angel. And there was no reason to worry about its fate in the afterlife. The parents were left with other—healthy—children, and God's blessing remained with them. But now parents kill their healthy children through abortion, while trying by force to keep their sick children in this life. Parents travel all over England and America to cure their sick children. As a result, from generation to generation, children are born less and less healthy. Because even if parents manage to cure their children and they don't die and go on to marry, the children they bear may also be sick. Do you see where all this is leading? But if parents had not just one child but several, they wouldn't have to go to such great lengths, running from doctor to doctor and traveling abroad, just to prolong the life of a sick child. A sick child would go to God. And he would go to Him like an angel.

— Geronda, I read somewhere that 50 million abortions are performed worldwide each year,³⁶ and that 200,000 women die as a result.

— Children are being killed because, as they say, if the population grows, there won't be enough to eat for those who are alive, and people won't have the necessities they need. But there is so much unused land and so many forests, and with modern technology, they can be quickly transformed, for example, into olive groves that can be distributed to the poor. And there is no danger that deforestation will lead to a shortage of oxygen, because cultivated trees will be planted in place of

³⁶ Delivered in 1989. — *Translator's note.* According to official data for 2001, 1,900,000 abortions were performed in Russia. In reality, this figure is significantly higher. — *Editor's note.*

the wild ones. In America, they burn wheat, and here in Greece, they bury fruits and other crops in the ground [so their prices won't drop]. Meanwhile, in Africa, people are dying of starvation. When there was a terrible drought in Abyssinia and people were dying of exhaustion, I asked a shipowner I know—who helps people in such situations—to appeal to those who bury fruits and vegetables in the ground, , and ask them to load a ship with these goods for free so they could be taken to the starving. But no matter how much he pleaded with them, they refused.

How many thousands of human embryos are killed every day! Abortion is a terrible sin. Abortion is murder—and not just any murder, but a very grave one, because it involves the killing of unbaptized children. Parents must understand that human life begins at the moment of conception.

One night, by God's will, I had a terrifying vision. After that, I understood what abortion really is! It was Tuesday night during Bright Week. As usual, I lit two candles and placed them in two tin cans. These candles usually burn even while I'm asleep. I light them for those who suffer in body and soul—both the living and the departed. And so, at midnight, while reciting the Jesus Prayer, I saw a large field enclosed by a stone fence. The field was sown with wheat; the seedlings had barely begun to sprout. Standing behind the fence, I lit candles for the departed and placed them on the stone wall. To the left lay a waterless, barren landscape—nothing but rocks and rocky cliffs. This landscape trembled incessantly from a powerful rumble, into which thousands of heart-rending, soul-shaking cries merged. Even the most callous person, upon hearing this, could not remain indifferent. Tormented by these cries and not understanding what was happening, I heard a voice saying to me: “A field sown with wheat that has not yet begun to sprout is the resting place of the souls of the dead who will be resurrected. In this place, shaking and trembling from the heart-wrenching cries, are the souls of children killed by abortion.” After experiencing this, I could not recover from the immense pain I felt for the souls of these children. Nor could I lie down to rest, even though I was very tired.

— Geronda, is there anything we can do to get the law legalizing abortion repealed?

— It's possible, but the government and the Church need to take action so that people become aware of the consequences that a low birth rate will lead to. Priests must explain to people that the abortion law contradicts the commandments of the Gospel. Doctors, for their part, must speak out about the dangers faced by women who have abortions. Look: Europeans, who once had a culture of proper conduct, passed it on to their children as a legacy. We, on the other hand, who once had the fear of God, have lost it and left nothing as a legacy for future generations. That is why we now permit abortions and legalize civil marriage...

If one person breaks a Gospel commandment, the responsibility falls on that person alone. However, if something that contradicts the commandments of the Gospel becomes state law, God's wrath falls upon the entire nation—in order to discipline it.

Chapter 2.

On the Role of the Mother in Raising Children

A Mother's Love

— Geronda, you once told us that a person grows and matures through love.

— Simply loving someone isn't enough. You have to love another person more than you love yourself. A mother loves her children more than she loves herself. To feed her children, she goes hungry. Yet the joy she feels is greater than the joy her children experience . The little ones are

nourished physically, while the mother is nourished spiritually. They experience the sensory pleasure of food, whereas she rejoices in spiritual joy.

Another young woman, before she gets married, might sleep until ten in the morning and still expect her mother to warm up milk for her breakfast. Such a young woman is too lazy to do any work. She wants everything handed to her on a silver platter. She wants everyone to wait on her hand and foot. She has complaints about her mother, complaints about her father, yet she herself enjoys doing nothing. Even though love is part of her [feminine] nature, it doesn't develop because she accepts help and blessings from her mother, her father, and her brothers and sisters. However, once she becomes a mother herself, she begins to resemble a self-charging device: the harder she works, the more she recharges—because love is constantly at work within her. Before, when she touched something dirty, she felt a sense of disgust and would wash her hands thoroughly with scented soap. But now, when her baby soils his diaper and it needs to be washed, she feels as if she's picking up marmalade candies! She feels no disgust. Before, when she was woken up, she would loudly express her displeasure at being disturbed. Now, when her child cries, she stays up all night, and it's not hard for her. She cares for her baby and finds joy in it. Why? Because she is no longer a child herself. She has become a mother, and she has come to possess self-sacrifice and love.

It's also worth noting that a mother achieves a greater capacity for love and self-sacrifice than a father, since a father isn't afforded as many opportunities to make such sacrifices. A mother struggles with her children and spends more time tending to them than a father does, but at the same time, she "recharges" from her children and gives them her all. A father, on the other hand, does not struggle with his children as much as a mother does, nor does he "recharge" from them, which is why his love is not as great as a mother's love.

How many mothers come to me in tears and ask, "Pray for my child, Father." You have no idea how much they suffer! You rarely hear a man say, "Pray—my child has strayed from the right path." Just today, a mother with eight children came to see me. With such trepidation, this poor woman nudged her little ones forward and lined them up in a row so that they could all receive a blessing. A father who behaves this way is a great rarity. And Russia has endured thanks to mothers. A father's embrace—if it lacks God's grace—is dry. But a mother's embrace—even without God—contains nourishment. A child loves and respects his father. But even this love for his father is deepened by the tenderness and warmth of a mother's love.

The Right Attitude Toward Childlessness

If a childless woman does not approach her situation with a spiritual attitude, she suffers. How I struggled with one such childless woman! This poor woman's husband held a high-ranking position. She owned several houses, which she rented out. In addition, they had a large house where she lived with her husband, who had received a substantial dowry from her at the time of their marriage. But everything was a burden to her: going to the market, preparing meals... And she didn't even know how to cook. Sitting at home, she'd call a restaurant, and they'd bring her ready-made meals. She had everything, yet she was tormented because nothing brought her joy. She sat at home all day long: this wasn't right, that wasn't right. Doing one thing was boring, doing another was too hard... Then her thoughts began to overwhelm her, and she was forced to take pills. Her husband took work home so she'd have a better time, but she, not knowing how to kill time, stood over him while he showered. Of course, she got on that poor guy's nerves: after all, on top of everything else, he had to get his work done! When I met her, I advised her: "Don't just sit at home all day! You'll get completely rusty that way! Go to the hospital, visit the sick..." "But where would I go, Father?" she replied. "Is that even something I'm capable of?" "Then," I said, "do this: when it's time to read

the first hour, read it; then, in due time, read the third hour, and so on.³⁷ Add a bow or two here and there..." "I can't," she replied. "Oh well," I said, "then take up the Lives of the Saints." I told her to read the lives of all the women who had attained sainthood, so that something she read would sink into her soul and help her. With great difficulty, I managed to get her back on the right track so she wouldn't end up in a mental hospital. This woman had reduced herself to a complete wreck. A powerful engine, but the oil in it had congealed.

What I'm trying to say is that a woman's heart withers away if the love that is inherent in her nature finds no outlet. Just look: another woman may have five, six, or even eight children. The poor woman may not have a penny to her name, yet she is happy. She possesses both noble generosity and courageous fortitude. Why? Because she has found her purpose.

One incident has stuck in my memory. An acquaintance of mine had two sisters. One married very young and had many children. This woman devoted her life to others. Among other things, as a seamstress, she sewed clothes and in this way gave alms to the poor. The other day she came to visit and said to me, "I even have grandchildren now!" Her heart was trembling with joy. Her other sister, however, never married. Yet she derived no spiritual benefit from her carefree situation. What a state she was in! It's better not even to ask how she lived... She expected her elderly mother to wait on her hand and foot, and even complained that her mother wasn't doing it diligently enough. Do you see? She did not become a mother, and therefore nothing changed within her. But by helping those in need, she could have put into practice the love that is already present in a woman's nature and derived benefit from it. However, she did not do so.

That is why I say that a woman must make sacrifices. A man—even if he does not cultivate love within himself—suffers no particular harm. However, a woman who possesses love but does not channel it in the right direction is like a machine that has been turned on but, lacking raw materials, runs idle, shaking itself and others.

A Mother's Endurance

— Geronda, in one of his letters to the nuns, Saint Nektarios of Aegina urges them not to forget that they are women and to emulate the holy women, not the holy men.³⁸ Why does the Saint say this? Perhaps because women lack endurance?

— To whom? Do these women lack stamina? I'm simply amazed at how much stamina they have! After all, they have seven-veined hearts! A woman's body may be weaker than a man's, but she has a [strong] heart, and by drawing on it, she possesses a stamina that surpasses a man's strength. Yes, a man has physical strength, but he lacks the heart that a woman has. Once, I watched a cat that came into my hut with her kittens. She was skin and bones—you could count her ribs. One day, a large hunting dog ran into my yard. Kurd—that was the cat's name—took off running, while the female cat braced for battle, arched her back, struck a threatening pose, and was ready to pounce on the dog. I was simply amazed: where did she get so much courage! You see: she was protecting her kittens.

A mother suffers and works herself to the bone, yet she feels neither pain nor fatigue. She forces herself [to work], but because she loves her children and her home, she does everything with joy. A person who lies on their side all day gets more tired than she does. I remember when we were little, our mother had to carry water from far away, and on top of that, cook, bake bread, do laundry, and work in the fields. And on top of all that, we—the children—never gave her a moment's peace: when

³⁷ The Hours are a brief liturgical service that forms part of the daily cycle of worship. The Hours, recited at specific times, sanctify the hours into which the day was divided during the Roman era. The First Hour is read around 6:00 a.m., the Third Hour around 9:00 a.m., the Sixth Hour around noon, and the Ninth Hour around 3:00 p.m.

³⁸ St. Nectarius, Bishop of Pentapolis. 35 Pastoral Letters, Letter 26. Published by Aupakoē. Athens, 1993. p. 12.

we quarreled among ourselves, her numerous chores and responsibilities were compounded by the duty of acting as a judge! However, she would say, “This is my duty. I must do all this and not complain.” She meant those words with kindness. She loved her home, loved her children, and never let her chores and worries wear her down. She did everything wholeheartedly, with joy.

And the more years go by, the more her mother loves her home. She is no longer as young as she once was, yet despite this, she sacrifices more and more of herself to raise her grandchildren as well. She has less and less strength left, yet she carries out all her duties from the heart, and her strength surpasses even that of her husband—and the strength she herself had in her youth.

“You know, Geronda, even when they’re sick, women tend to be much more composed than men.”

“You know what the thing is? The mother has dealt with her own child getting sick many times, so she knows what illness is all about—she has a wealth of experience in this regard. She remembers how many times her little one’s fever spiked and how many times it went down.” She’s seen all kinds of situations: for example, a child who was gasping for breath or losing consciousness would come to as soon as she gave their cheeks a light pat. A man doesn’t see any of this, and he doesn’t have that kind of experience. So when he finds out that the child’s temperature has risen or that the child has turned pale, he panics and starts to get nervous: “The child is dying! What are we going to do now? Let’s hurry up and call the doctor!”

Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

A child’s upbringing begins during pregnancy. If the mother carrying the child in her womb is anxious or upset, the embryo in her womb is also troubled. And if the mother prays and lives a spiritual life, the baby in her womb is sanctified. Therefore, while pregnant, a woman should recite the Jesus Prayer, read passages from the Gospel, sing church hymns, and keep her soul at peace. But her loved ones must also be considerate so as not to upset her. In this case, the child born will be a sanctified child, and the parents will not have to face difficulties with him—neither while he is young nor as he grows older.

Then, once the child is born, the mother should breastfeed—the longer, the better. Breast milk promotes children’s health. When breastfeeding, infants absorb more than just milk: they absorb love, tenderness, comfort, and a sense of security, and in this way grow into people with strong character. But breastfeeding also helps the mother herself. If mothers do not breastfeed their children, abnormalities can develop in their bodies, which may lead to [cancer] and a mastectomy.

In the old days, if a mother had milk, she could breastfeed both her own baby and her neighbor’s. But now, many mothers find it difficult to breastfeed even their own children. A mother who is idle and does not breastfeed her child passes on the “germs” of idleness and laziness to him as well. In the past, cans of condensed milk featured a picture of a mother holding a baby in her arms, but now they depict a “mother” holding flowers! Mothers don’t breastfeed their children, and so the children grow up without comfort. Who will give them tenderness and love? A can of cow’s milk? Babies suck on a pacifier attached to an “icy” glass bottle, and their hearts grow cold as well. And then, when they come of age, they too seek comfort in a bottle—in bars. To forget their inner turmoil, they start drinking and become alcoholics. If children do not receive tenderness themselves, then they will not have enough of it to pass on to their own children. Thus, one thing leads to another. And then mothers come and begin to plead: “Pray for me, Father! I am losing my child.”

Working Mother

- Geronda, should a woman work?
- What does her husband say about this?

— He leaves it up to her.

— It's not easy for a woman to simply quit her job and devote herself to her children if she received an education before marriage. But a woman who didn't receive an education and works at some simple job can quit without any difficulty.

— Geronda, I think that if a woman doesn't have children, then working is good for her.

— So, what do you mean? Are you saying that if she doesn't have children, she absolutely has to work? After all, there are so many other things she could do. Of course, if she has children, it's better for her to stay home. Otherwise, how will she be able to help them?

— Geronda, many women say they're forced to work because they can't make ends meet.

— They can't make ends meet because they want a TV, a VCR, a car, and things like that. That's why they have to work, and the result is that they neglect their own children and lose them. If only the father works and the family makes do with little, then this problem doesn't exist. But because both the husband and wife work—supposedly because they don't have enough money—the family becomes scattered and loses its true purpose. And what is left for the children to do after that? If mothers lived more simply, they themselves wouldn't be working themselves to the bone, and their children would be happy. One man knew seven foreign languages, while his wife made tremendous efforts to learn four. She also gave private lessons and, to stay in top form, relied on pills. This couple's children were born healthy but grew up mentally ill. Later, they turned to the “help” of psychoanalysts... That is why I advise mothers to simplify their lives so they can devote more time to their children, who need them. It's a different matter if a mother has some kind of work at home that she can turn to when she gets tired of caring for the children. While staying at home, a mother can keep an eye on her children and engage in some other activity. This helps the family avoid many problems.

Today, children are “starving” for a lack of a mother's love. But they don't even learn their native language, because their mothers spend entire days at work and leave the children in the care of strangers—often foreign women. Children in an orphanage, where among the caregivers there might be a woman from a Christian sisterhood who has taken a vow of celibacy and shows them at least a little tenderness, are in a situation a thousand times better than those children whose parents abandon them to the care of women who are paid to look after them! And do you know what all this leads to? It leads to a situation where, if a child doesn't have a single mother, he has a whole bunch of nannies!

Household Management and a Mother's Spiritual Life

— Geronda, how can a homemaker organize her tasks and responsibilities so that she has time for prayer as well? What should the balance be between work and prayer?

— Women usually lack moderation in their affairs. They want to keep adding more and more to their tasks and concerns. With their big hearts, women could very successfully manage the “household” of their souls, but instead they squander their hearts on trifles. Imagine, for example, that we have a glass decorated with beautiful patterns, stripes, and the like. If it weren't decorated with these stripes, it wouldn't prevent it from serving its purpose. However, women come into a store and start explaining to the salesperson: “No, no, I need the stripes to go just this far, and they shouldn't be drawn like that—they should be drawn like this.” And if there's a little flower painted on it, their hearts simply start to rejoice! In this way, a woman wastes all her potential. You rarely meet a man who would pay attention to such things. Take, for example, his desk lamp—if it's brown or black, a man won't even notice. But a woman [on the contrary]—she wants something beautiful; she rejoices and gives a piece of her heart to that beauty. She gives another piece to something else “beautiful,” but what is left for Christ afterward? Yawning and fatigue during prayer. The more a

woman's heart distances itself from beautiful things, the closer it draws to Christ. And if the heart is given to Christ, it possesses great power! The other day I met a woman who had entrusted herself entirely to God. You could see a certain sweet flame burning within her! She tackles every task with fervor. This woman used to be a completely worldly person, though kind-hearted, and at some point a spark ignited in her soul. She threw away all her gold jewelry and luxurious clothes. Now she lives with remarkable simplicity! She strives and engages in spiritual work on herself. How full of self-sacrifice her actions are! She has come to "envy" and "be jealous" of the saints—in the best sense of the word. Do you know how many rosary beads she passes through her fingers in prayer, what fasts she observes, how much time she devotes to reading the Psalter?!... It's an amazing thing! Asceticism has now become her sustenance.

— Geronda, a mother once told me, "I'm physically weak and get very tired. I can't even get my chores done, and I don't have any time left for prayer."

— In order to have time for prayer, she must simplify her life. Through simplicity, a mother can achieve a great deal. A mother has the right to say, "I'm tired," if she has simplified her life and works hard only because she has many children. However, if she wastes her time trying to make her home look impressive to strangers, what can one say? Some mothers, wanting every item in their home to be neatly in its place, oppress and "smother" their little ones by not allowing them to move a chair or a pillow. They force children to live by the rules of military-style discipline, and thus children, though born normal, unfortunately grow up no longer entirely normal. If a sensible person sees that in a large family every item is in its proper place, they will conclude that either the children are mentally retarded, or the mother, characterized by cruelty and despotism, is forcing them to follow military discipline. In the latter case, fear dwells in the children's hearts, and it is this fear that causes them to behave in a disciplined manner. Once, I found myself in a home with many children. How delighted I was by the little ones' childish pranks, which shattered the worldly order that dictates, "everything in its place." This "order" is the greatest disorder of all, one that greatly drains the energy of modern people.

In the past, there were no spiritual books, and mothers had no way to occupy themselves or find solace through reading. Nowadays, a vast number of books by the Church Fathers have been published, many of them translated into modern language, but, unfortunately, most mothers [pass by all this wealth and] spend their time on trivialities or [constantly] work just to make ends meet.

Instead of meticulously and pedantically tending to household chores—soulless tasks—a mother would do better to devote herself to raising her children. Let her tell them about Christ and read them the Lives of the Saints. At the same time, she must also purify her own soul—so that she, too, may shine spiritually. A mother's spiritual life will imperceptibly and silently help the souls of her children as well. In this way, her children will live joyfully, and she herself will be happy, because she will have Christ within her. If a mother cannot find the time even to recite the "Holy God," how will her children be sanctified?

— Geronda, what should one do if a mother has many children and a lot of work?

— But can't she pray while doing housework? My mother taught me the Jesus Prayer. When we were children and got into some mischief and she was about to get angry, I would hear her begin to pray aloud: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." When she put bread in the oven, my mother would say, "In the name of Christ and the Most Holy Mother of God." While kneading dough and preparing food, she would also constantly recite the Jesus Prayer. In this way, she sanctified herself, the bread and food she prepared, and those who ate them.

How many mothers who led holy lives had children who were also sanctified! Take, for example, the mother of Elder Hadji-Georgy. Even the milk of this blessed mother, who nursed her infant Gabriel—as Elder Hadji-Georgy was called in secular life—was ascetic in nature. This woman gave birth to two children, and afterward she and her husband lived in chastity, loving one another

as brother and sister. From childhood, Hajji-George's mother was distinguished by her ascetic spirit, because her sister was a nun and an ascetic. She often visited her sister, the nun, and, even after she was married, would come to see her along with her children. Gabriel's father was also a devout man. He was a merchant and therefore spent most of his time away from home. This gave his mother a favorable opportunity to live simply, without worrying or fussing over many things,³⁹ to take her son with her and attend, together with other women, the All-Night Vigil, which was sometimes held in caves and sometimes in various chapels. That is why, later on, her son attained such a degree of holiness.⁴⁰

A mother's reverence is of great importance. If a mother possesses humility and the fear of God, then everything in the home runs smoothly. I know young mothers whose faces shine, even though these women receive no help from anywhere. When I interact with their children, I understand the state their mothers are in.

Chapter 3.

On Parents' Responsibility for Raising Their Children

Parents must entrust their children to God

God gave the first humans—Adam and Eve—the great blessing of being His co-creators. Parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, in turn, are also God's co-creators, because they give their children a body.

God, so to speak, is obligated to care for children. When a child receives Holy Baptism, God assigns a guardian angel to watch over the child. In this way, the child is protected by God, the guardian angel, and the parents.

A guardian angel is always near a child and helps him or her. The older a child gets, the more his or her parents are relieved of their responsibility. If the parents die, then God—both from on high and nearby—and the guardian angel, who is nearby, continue to watch over the child at all times.

Parents should provide spiritual guidance to their children while they are still young, because when they are young, their shortcomings are also minor and can be easily corrected. They are like new potatoes, whose skins come off easily with just a little rubbing. However, if a potato is left to sit, a knife will be needed to peel it later. And if it has gone bad, you'll have to cut deeper with that knife. If children receive guidance from a young age and are filled with Christ, they will remain close to Him forever. Even if, as they grow up, they stray a little from the path because of their age or bad company, they will come to their senses again. For the fear of God and reverence, with which their hearts were imbued at a young age, can never disappear from them.

Later, during adolescence—the most challenging stage of life—parents' anxiety about their children grows. This anxiety continues until parents have provided their children with an education and set them on the path to independent living. When children are at this stage, parents must do everything they can to help them. And whatever is beyond a parent's strength should be entrusted to the Almighty God. If parents entrust their children to God, then God is bound to help with what cannot be accomplished by human means. For example, if children do not listen to their parents, the parents should entrust them to God, rather than resorting to various methods to “break” them. In

³⁹ Cf. Luke 10:41.

⁴⁰ See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Elder Hatzis-Georgis the Athonite*, published by the Holy Hesychasterion of St. John the Theologian, Souroti, Thessaloniki, 6, 2001.

such a case, a mother should say the following to God: “My God, my children do not listen to me. I cannot do anything. Take care of them Yourself.”

I was struck by a mother who came here a few days ago for the All-Night Vigil. I had known this woman for a long time. She came over to greet me. Seeing that only her older children were with her, I asked, “Where are the little ones?” “At home, Geronda,” she replied. “On a feast day like this, my husband and I wanted to attend the vigil, so we decided: ‘Since we’re going to the vigil and not out for entertainment, God will send an angel to watch over our little ones while we’re away.’” Such trust is rare today, for in our days both children’s trust in their parents and parents’ trust in God have dried up. You often hear many parents say, “But why did our child, of all people, stray from the path and go down the wrong path? After all, we go to church!” Such parents don’t give Christ the “screwdriver” so He can tighten a few loose screws in their children. They want to handle everything themselves. Such parents are tormented by selfish anxiety until they become ill—even though there is a God who watches over their children, and their Guardian Angel is constantly near them, protecting them as well. These people—despite being believers—behave as if God does not exist, as if there is no Guardian Angel. They stand in the way of divine intervention. Yet they need to humble themselves and ask God for help. And then the Good God will watch over and protect their children.

The Spiritual Revival of Children

— Geronda, do parents alone bear the responsibility for raising children?

— Primarily, the parents. After all, whether children grow up to be good priests, good teachers, and so on depends on the kind of upbringing they receive. Later—in turn—they, too, will help children—both their own and everyone else’s. It should also be noted that the mother, not the father, bears the greater responsibility for raising children.

If, while the baby is still in the womb, the parents pray and live a spiritual life, the child will be born sanctified. And if they help him spiritually, he will become a sanctified person and, in turn, will help society—whether he serves in the Church, enters government, or takes on some other role. We must all help children become good people so that future generations will have some leaven left. After all, things are currently heading toward a situation where not even a little leaven will remain. And if there is no leaven left, where will that lead us?

Parents, by giving birth to children and providing them with a body, must, as far as possible, contribute to their spiritual rebirth. For if a person is not spiritually reborn, hellish torment awaits them. Subsequently, parents should entrust to teachers what they themselves cannot do for their children. That is why our Church prays “for parents and teachers.” However, there are also spiritual fathers. These people may not have children of their own, but their help in raising children is more effective because they work toward their spiritual rebirth.

What I mean is that everyone—each in their own way, each by their own example—must help children experience a spiritual rebirth, so that they may live peacefully in this life and enter Paradise. If children become spiritual people, then they will no longer need laws [to restrain evil]: “*The righteous have no need of the law.*”⁴¹ The law is intended for lawbreakers. Spiritual authority stands above human authority.

Parental Example

— Geronda, what should parents do if their child doesn’t listen and acts up?

— If a child doesn’t listen and behaves badly, there’s a reason for it. Perhaps they’re witnessing inappropriate scenes at home or elsewhere, or hearing inappropriate conversations. In any case, when

⁴¹ Cf. 1 Tim. 1:9.

it comes to spiritual matters, we help children primarily not through coercion, but through our own personal example.

It must be said that a mother provides great support to her children through her example, her obedience to her husband, and her respect for him. If, on any matter, a mother holds an opinion that differs from her husband's, she must never express that opinion in front of the children, lest the evil one take advantage of it. A mother should never undermine her children's opinion of their father. Even if the father is at fault, she should defend him. For example, if the father behaves badly, the mother should tell the children, "Dad is tired; he worked all night to finish an urgent task. And he's doing all this for you."

Many parents argue in front of their children, thereby teaching them a bad lesson. The poor children become sad and distressed. Then, to comfort them, the parents try to fulfill their every whim. The father, wanting to please his child, begins to "buy" his favor: "Well, my darling, tell me, what would you like me to buy for you?" The mother, for her part, indulges her child's whims, and ultimately the children grow up to be spoiled brats. Later on, if the parents are unable to give them what they want, the children threaten their parents that they will take their own lives.

I can see just how much a good parental example helps children. Today I had some guests: two little girls—one three years old and the other four—with their parents, who are very devout people. What joy these little ones brought me! They were like little angels. Sitting side by side, they covered their knees with the hems of their dresses. How much modesty they had, how much respect! And all because they saw how their parents behaved. Seeing that their parents love and respect one another, behave wisely, pray, and do things like this, the children imprint all of this on their souls. That is why I say that if parents pass on their reverence to their children, it will be the very best legacy they can leave them.

If only you could have seen this one little girl I met in Australia! She was so full of nobility! We arrived in Canberra. After receiving the last two visitors who wanted to see me, I was about to leave. I looked up and saw a car pull up, and a married couple stepped out with their little girl. "Geronda, we managed to catch you after all," they said. "Yes," I said, "we were just about to leave." "Geronda," the husband then said, "there's no need to see me—it's no big deal. Just let my wife take a little of your time so she won't be upset. She's a sensitive person." We stepped aside with his wife so she could tell me what she wanted to say. The little girl started to run after her. "Sit here," I told the girl, "your mom will be back soon." "Do you have a mom?" she asked me. "No," I replied. I saw tears glistening in her eyes. "Do you want—" she asked, "me to give you my mom?" Then I asked her, "Do you have a grandpa?" "No," she replied. "Do you want to have a grandpa?" "I do, I do," she said happily. "Will you move in with us, or do you want us to move in with you? Whatever you want!" What nobility! A little child is offering up her own mom! Just look: she copied this from her parents. Her father was a man of great nobility. I hugged this man, kissed him, and congratulated him on having such a wonderful daughter. How many blessings I bestowed upon him!

People like this can move even the hardest of hearts—let alone God!

In their parents' home, children should be showered with tenderness and love

A child needs a lot of love and tenderness, as well as a lot of guidance. He wants you to sit next to him, wants to tell you about his problems, and wants you to gently stroke and kiss him. When a little one is restless and unsettled, a mother should pick him up, cuddle him, and kiss him so that he calms down and finds peace. If, as a child, a person is filled with tenderness and love, they will later have the strength to overcome the problems they will face in life.

However, today most children see their parents for only a very short time, just in the evenings—and they don't get enough love. Many parents, whether they're teachers or doctors, deal with children

at work. They give their affection to other people's children, and by the time they return home, they no longer have any affection left for their own children. They come home tired. Their energy is already depleted. The father collapses into an armchair, picks up a newspaper to read about the latest news, and pays no attention to the children at all. The little one rubs up against him, hoping his father will talk to him or stroke his head, but the father pushes the child away. The mother, in turn, hurries to the kitchen to prepare dinner; she, too, has no time to spend with the children. And because of this, these unfortunate children grow up deprived of love. Here's another example: some military personnel, accustomed to strictly punishing soldiers who disobey them, try to force their families to live by the rules of military discipline. They are cruel to their children and slap them on the back of the head for the slightest offense. And some parents who work in the judiciary or law enforcement stage entire "trials" at home against their own children when they've done something wrong. None of these parents treat their children with tenderness and love, which is why the children later develop mental disorders.

How Children Suffer Because of Their Parents

— Geronda, a mother asked us what she should do. Her daughter is blaspheming the Most Holy Theotokos.

— Let her figure out where evil begins. Sometimes, in cases like this, the parents are to blame. By behaving badly, the parents themselves harm their children, and the children begin to speak shamelessly. Then they start falling under demonic influence and react in a simply repulsive manner [to attempts to reason with them]. In other cases, parents believe they can force their children to improve. Selfishness creeps in, and parents begin to speak to their children in irritation and anger, whereas they should always treat them with kindness.

Today, a woman drove me absolutely crazy! She has one child, and she beats him mercilessly. The poor little boy trembles with fear, can't speak, and is in a state of nervous exhaustion. "He's possessed," this woman claims, and leaves her child hungry—supposedly so that the demon will leave him. "I don't let him eat," she explained, "so that he can be freed from the evil spirit." "Listen," I said, "do you even have a brain in your head? Let the child eat. And try to get rid of the evil spirits that are inside you yourself. You're the reason your child is so disfigured. There's no demon in the child: he's trembling because he's afraid of you, because you beat him! Do you give him Communion regularly?" "No," she replies. What are you supposed to do in a situation like this? Try reasoning with someone like that!

— Geronda, could it be that she says there's a demon in the child because he sometimes uses foul language and blasphemes?

—"Swears and blasphemes"! But when that mother nearly suffocates him with her abuse, he doesn't even understand what he's doing. How pitiful this poor child is! His mother is possessed by an unclean spirit, not him."

Be that as it may, on Judgment Day we will see amazing things! During the years of idolatry, mothers burned their children before the statue of Moloch,⁴² in order to participate in the glorification of that "god"!⁴³ If those women had known the True God, what sacrifices would they have offered to Him! On the Day of Judgment, these women will have extenuating circumstances—because they were led astray by evil. However, what extenuating circumstances will today's mothers have, who treat their own children with indifference and apathy? God will say to them: "You knew the True God; you were baptized with Holy Baptism. You heard so much; you learned so much. God Himself

⁴² Moloch is a Semitic deity mentioned in the Old Testament. Typically, small children were sacrificed to the idol Moloch; they were killed and burned on iron grates.

⁴³ See Lev. 18:21 and 20:2–4; 4 Kings 23:10 and 13.

was crucified to save you. But what did you do yourselves? You were too lazy to take your children to church to receive Holy Communion! The idolaters thought that Moloch was the true god and even sacrificed their own children to him. And what did you do?”

Children pay the price for their parents’ mistakes! Some parents ruin their children. But God is not unjust. He has a great and special love for those children who have suffered injustice in this world—whether from their parents or from someone else. If a child goes astray because of his or her parents, God does not abandon that child, because the child has a right to divine help. God will arrange everything so as to help him or her. And so we see how some young men—and not only young men, but also older people—at some point make a sharp turn toward goodness. I remember one such case. There were two children in the family. The father, mother, and daughter were indifferent to faith and the Church. The son first got involved with some Marxist organization. He didn’t like it there, so he turned to Hinduism. He didn’t like that either, and then he came to the Holy Mountain. He often came to my kaliva and visited other cells as well. [By that time, his parents had already realized their sin] and kept repeating all that time: “My Christ! My Most Holy Mother of God! Save our child.” The young man turned out to be unsuited for monastic life. After living on Mount Athos for some time, regaining his composure and finding spiritual strength, he returned home and provided spiritual support to his parents. Now I see his father arriving at the All-Night Vigil among the very first to arrive. In his parish church, he reads the psalm of dedication,⁴⁴ and at home he reads Vespers and Compline and sings the prayer canon. How God has arranged everything in its proper place! The devil wanted to do evil, but God, counteracting that evil from one side and then the other, led these people onto the right path.

— And what about your daughter, Geronda?

— She’s slowly getting back on the right path. God is providing favorable opportunities for this.

— Geronda, some parents who begin living a spiritual life later in life worry that they didn’t give their children a Christian upbringing when they were young.

— If, with sincere repentance, they ask God to help their children, God will do for them what He can. He will throw the children a lifeline so that they may be saved from the storm raging around them. Even if there is no one capable of helping these unfortunate souls, God can arrange for something they see to help them, and they will find their way back onto the right path. Know this: the parents in question were well-meaning, but they did not receive help from their own families during their childhood, and therefore they are now entitled to God’s help.

— Geronda, sometimes children who lead a spiritual life face many difficulties because their parents are indifferent to matters of faith.

— God cares for these children more than He does for other children—those whose parents live a spiritual life. God cares for them just as He cares for orphans.

The Influence of the Environment on Children

— Geronda, at what age do children begin to be influenced by their surroundings?

— Children “make a copy” of their parents from the cradle onward. They see what adults do, make a “copy,” and record it on their blank “tape.” Therefore, parents must make a concerted effort to curb their passions. It does not matter that they inherited some of these passions from their own parents. Not only will they answer to God for failing to make the effort to cut off these passions, but they will also bear responsibility for passing these passions on to their children.

⁴⁴ Psalm 103, read at the beginning of Vespers.

— Geronda, why is it that children who have received the same upbringing in their parents' home are sometimes completely different from one another?

— Often, a child is influenced by many factors in his or her environment. But if the child has a good disposition, then when he or she grows up, God will grant him or her greater insight so that he or she may understand the negative influences to which he or she was exposed and make the effort to free himself or herself from them.

Today, malice abounds in the world. People seek to corrupt children from infancy. Instead of protecting children from evil until they reach maturity, they are even hindered from doing good. Later, having fallen into sin and suffering, these unfortunate children want to get back on their feet but don't know how. After all, once they've started rolling down the slippery slope of sin, it's not easy for them to stop. Young men aged twenty-five to twenty-seven come to my kaliva—young men who use drugs and live in sin—and these unfortunate souls ask for help.

Once, I happened to help one of these kids get back on the right track. And now they bring their friends to me—and then their friends' friends—so that they, too, can get help. These young people break your heart. One unfortunate young man was taking hard drugs and was already with one foot in the grave. His arms were covered in needle marks, his teeth were rotten... But then he stopped and helped others. There were about fifteen kids in his group. And when they came to me, these kids would introduce themselves: "I'm from so-and-so's group." He was their... "elder"! However, many of these unfortunate souls are hurtling toward ruin. They're hooked on drugs, [to get money for drugs] they sell their blood... These young people are destroying both themselves and their parents. And then you see their father dying of a stroke, their mother of heart disease, liver disease, or something else.

Love Between Brothers and Sisters

Parents should foster love among their children. In order to support the weaker child, they must lay the groundwork for this by obtaining the "consent" of the stronger child. In other words, they must help the stronger child understand that his or her brother or sister is in need. Justice is God's work, and it must be divided equally between the older and younger children. Justice is shown to the older child through respect, and to the younger through love, so that the younger child is not harmed. This is also mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy.⁴⁵ For example, if the older brother is at fault, we must defend the younger one, but without humiliating the older brother in front of the younger one. We need to speak with the one at fault in private so that he understands his mistake.

— Geronda, how can one overcome the jealousy that older brothers and sisters often feel toward their younger siblings?

— Jealousy is a passion. However, if a three-year-old sees his mom breastfeeding his newborn brother or sister, his jealousy is, in a way, justified, because he himself was being breastfed just a short time ago. Now he sees his little brother in his mom's arms and thinks: "Until yesterday, Mom was holding me in her arms, and now she's put me in last place!" If the child has a grandmother, that's fine: he has someone to turn to for comfort. However, when he turns four, he should feel less jealous. And by the time he turns six, Mom should tell him: "You've grown up so much. What kind of mom picks up such a big kid?" If the mother helps the little one overcome his jealousy, he'll turn to her for help only when there's a truly serious reason. But if the child wants to cling to Mom's skirt nonstop, there's something unhealthy about that.

⁴⁵ See Deut. 1:17.

Companies have a huge influence on children

— Geronda, why does it happen that a young man who has lived a spiritual life since childhood and has had a love for God ends up completely straying from the path?

— There are many reasons. Children who lead worldly, careless lives feel ashamed when they see other children who live chastely and spiritually and want to draw them into the kind of life they themselves lead. Once, two young boys were walking down the road. Suddenly, one of them slipped and fell into a filthy puddle. All his clothes got dirty. As soon as they walked a little further and came to another puddle, he pushed his friend into it so that he would get dirty too. The boy did this because he felt uncomfortable that he himself was dirty, while his friend was clean.

Companies have a huge impact on children. When I was little, I had a natural love for animals. It was just part of who I was. Whenever I went somewhere with mules, I would try to put one of my peers on each animal, and I would carry my younger brother on my shoulders. Once, when one of my brothers killed a little bird, I was very upset and scolded him. Then I took the little bird and buried it, crying. I was friends with children my own age. We would go into the forest, pray, read the Lives of the Saints, and fast. Then the mothers of these children began to forbid them from being friends with me. “Don’t hang out with him,” they said. “He’ll give you consumption.” So the children left me, and I felt lonely.

On top of that, they teased me, shouting from all sides, “Monk, monk!” They made my life a living hell. I got to the point where I couldn’t stand their taunts anymore. So I decided, “I’ll hang out with the older kids and pretend [to act just like them].” So I started hanging out with the older teens. I got my hands on a rubber band and made myself a slingshot. At first, I would just pull the rubber band back, pretending I wanted to shoot. Then I got some shot and became the best slingshot shooter around. And then one day, as soon as I shot a little bird and saw it dead, I came to my senses in an instant. I threw away both the rubber band and the pellets and said to myself: “When your brother killed a little bird, you cried and scolded him for what he’d done. And look what you’ve come to? You’re killing birds, and before you know it, you’ll end up killing animals, too.” And indeed, if I had continued that way of life, I would have gone from shooting with a slingshot to hunting animals—and even skinning them myself.

Just how malicious can a person—who was originally endowed with a delicate, sensitive soul—become? This can happen if he is inattentive and gets caught up in bad company. Good company, on the other hand, is of great benefit. God has endowed people with a variety of gifts. Just as a person can see another’s corruption and depravity, so too can they see another’s virtue—and emulate it.

Helping children who have strayed from the right path

There must be an atmosphere of love and peace in the home. If a child receives even a little love within his or her family, even if he or she suddenly runs away from home, he or she will still return when he or she realizes that elsewhere, he or she finds not love, but only hypocrisy. But if they remember the inappropriate scenes, the swearing, and the quarrels that took place at home, how will their heart be drawn to return home?

— Geronda, what should parents do if their child runs away from home?

— They need to try to stay in touch with him—so that when he comes to his senses, he can return to them. They should speak to him kindly and, to help him, should make him think things through. For example, if a child is wandering around at night with no one knowing where he is, his mother should say to him, “Come here, son. If you were in my shoes, would you be able to stay calm if your children came home after midnight?”

Even the most serious misstep by children should not drive parents to despair, because in our era, sin has become fashionable. Parents should also always keep the following in mind: children of

our era have extenuating circumstances regarding the misdeeds they commit. A “C” in conduct today is worth an “A+” from the era when we were young. Of course, parents should try to help their children, but they don’t need to worry excessively. The time will come when children will come to their senses. Right now, they may not understand what is good because their minds are not yet mature. Their minds are clouded, and children lack the clarity of consciousness to discern both the danger they face and the irreparable harm they may inflict upon themselves.

It would be good if parents showed their child that they are upset by his misbehavior. But they shouldn’t pressure him; instead, they should pray. Prayer offered with a heavy heart leads to positive results. If, however, the child commits a very serious offense, parents should intervene carefully. If the misbehavior is minor, then parents should turn a blind eye to it a little, so as not to irritate the child or worsen the situation he is in, because the result of this irritation will be that he will drift away from them. [In such a case] parents should simply pray to Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos that They may protect their child.

The prayers of parents—especially a mother’s—are very fruitful because they come from the heart and are filled with pain. When I was living at the Iveron Skete, a young man happened to stop by. While traveling through Chalkidiki, this young man had met a group of pilgrims who were on their way to Mount Athos. After joining them, he arrived on Athos and came to my cell. Oh, what a man he was! An atheist, a blasphemer, and a shameless scoundrel if ever there was one! At the same time, he possessed a kind of demonic quick-wittedness and believed in nothing. He reviled everyone—both young and old—with foul language. Do you know how much effort it took me to bring him to his senses? It became possible to reach some kind of mutual understanding with him, and I even managed to cut his long hair!... “May God grant your mother good health,” I said to him. “It was her prayers that brought you here.” “Yes, Father,” he replied. “I was traveling around Chalkidiki and didn’t even realize how I ended up here.” “Can you imagine,” I said, “how happy your mother will be when she finds out you came to the Holy Mountain, and on top of that, sees you with a haircut!” “How did you figure that out, Father?” he asked in surprise. “Indeed, when she sees how I’ve changed, Mom will be very happy!” See how it went! God “outwitted” the young man and sent him to a “specialist”! Just think of all the prayers his poor mother had offered up to God!

When to Scold and When to Praise a Child

Parents should be very careful not to scold their children in the evening, because at night children have no way to dispel their distress. And the darkness of night casts an even darker shadow over their souls. Children begin to think about how best to resist their parents. Various ideas of “defense” pop into their heads, and the devil gets involved as well, which can lead them to despair. But during the day, even if children threaten their parents with various forms of revenge, once they go outside, they’ll be distracted, lose themselves in play, and their distress will pass.

— Geronda, do corporal punishments help children reform?

— Parents should avoid this as much as possible. They should try, with kindness and patience, to help the child understand that he or she is behaving incorrectly. Only if the child is very young and doesn’t understand that he or she is in danger can a light slap be beneficial—so that the child will be more careful next time. The fear of getting another slap on the back of the head acts as a deterrent for the child and protects them from danger. When I was little, I benefited more from my mother than from my father. Both of them loved me and wanted the best for me. However, each parent helped me in their own way. My father was a strict man. When we children misbehaved, he would spank us. The pain from the spanking helped me calm down a little, but once the pain subsided, I would forget both the spanking and my father’s advice. And it wasn’t that my father didn’t love me: no, he spanked me out of love. I remember one time—I was three years old—my father gave me such a slap on the back of the head that I flew several meters! And do you know

why? No one lived in the house next door. The owners had moved to America, and the house had fallen into disrepair. In the yard of that house grew a fig tree, whose branches extended onto the street and hung over the road. The tree was laden with fruit. When my friends and I were playing on the street, a neighbor came up to us and lifted me up so I could pick a few figs for him, because he couldn't reach the branches himself. I picked five or six figs, and he gave me two of them. When my father found out about this, he got very angry. That's when I got that slap! I burst into tears. My mother, who had witnessed the whole thing, turned to my father and said to him, "Why are you hitting the child! He's still so young—he doesn't understand anything! How can you stand to hear him cry like that?" "If he had cried when they picked him up to pick the figs," my father replied, "he wouldn't be crying now. But apparently, he wanted to feast on other people's figs himself! So let him cry!" But could I have done that again after that? As for my mother, she'd get upset when she saw my mischief, but she had a noble spirit. When she saw me misbehaving, she'd turn away and pretend not to notice me, so as not to upset me. But this maternal "trick" literally tore my heart apart. "Look, look," I'd say to myself, "you've been such a troublemaker, and not only does your mother not hit you, but she even pretends not to see you! No, this won't happen again! How could I bear to see Mom upset again?" By acting this way, my mother helped me more than if she had punished me with a slap on the back of the head. However, I didn't take advantage of this either, and I didn't say to myself, "Oh, since she doesn't see me right now, let me get up to some mischief and act up even more." But my father—no way: the slightest misstep, and it was a slap on the back of the head right away. You see: they both loved me, but my mother's noble approach helped me more.

— Geronda, some children are terribly mischievous: they scream, run around, and get into trouble. How can their parents avoid using physical punishment?

— Listen, it's not the children's fault. For children to grow up properly, they need a yard where they can run around and play. But now these poor kids are cooped up in high-rises. They can't run around freely, they can't play, and they can't have fun. Parents shouldn't get upset if their child is full of life. A lively child has inner strength, and by using it properly, they can do very well in life.

Coercion is not good for children

Some parents put a lot of pressure on their children—and they do it right in front of others. You'd think their child was a pack animal that they're prodding with a stick so it walks without veering to the right or left. It's as if they're holding the reins while saying, "Walk freely!" And then these parents go so far as to start hitting their children. Today a mother came in with her son—a strapping young man. Her child was sick. "What should I do, Father?" she asked. "My child isn't eating anything and doesn't even want to see us." But when I told her what to do, she started all over again: "So what should I do now?"

— Geronda, maybe she didn't understand what you told her?

— Of course I understood! "I couldn't stand to be with you for even an hour," I told her. "But how is your child supposed to live with you? You've driven him to the brink!" "No," she replied. "I love him." "Where's the love if he can't find his place around you? He's driven to run away from home because he wants to be in a different environment. After all, when he's not around you, he behaves perfectly. If he doesn't want to see you, then that means you're partly to blame for this, too. Don't irritate him—you're damaging him. Be kind and patient with him." I told her all this; she listened to me and then started all over again: "So what should I do? The child doesn't want to see us." How can you ever reach a mutual understanding with someone like that? The child is perfectly fine, but they think he's a fool. That means something is wrong with them.

Parental coercion doesn't help children—it stifles them. The endless "Don't touch that, don't go there, do it this way..." But you have to pull the reins just right so as not to snap them. You need to correct children tactfully, to help them realize their mistake, while at the same time preventing a

rift from forming between you. Parents should do the same thing a good gardener does when planting a small sapling. The gardener gently ties the sapling to a stake with a soft string so that it won't grow crooked or get damaged when the wind bends it to the right or left. Then the gardener builds a fence around the sapling, waters it, cares for it, and protects it from goats—until the tree's branches have grown strong. After all, if goats eat the sapling, that's it—it might as well be dead. A tree stripped bare by goats will be unable to bear fruit or provide shade. But once its branches have grown, the gardener removes the fence, and the tree begins to bear fruit, and goats, sheep, and people alike can rest in its shade.

However, parents, driven by excessive concern for their children, often want to tie them down not with a soft string but with steel wire, whereas children should be guided gently—so as not to hurt them. Parents should strive to help their children in a noble way. This will cultivate a spirit of kindness in their young hearts, and then they will be able to feel for themselves the need to do good. Parents, as much as they can, should explain what is good to their children in a kind way: with love and with sorrow. I remember one mother who, seeing that her son was behaving badly, said with tears in her eyes and a heavy heart: “Don't do that, my precious child.” And seeing this example, her children learned to strive joyfully to avoid life's temptations, not to shy away from difficulties, but to overcome them through prayer and trust in God.

Today, both adults and children live in a world that's like a madhouse, and that's why it takes a lot of patience and a lot of prayer. A huge number of children end up having strokes. [It's as if] a watch is slightly broken, but the parents wind it all the way up—and even beyond—until the spring snaps. Discernment is needed. One child needs to be “wound up” more, another less. These poor children are exposed to all kinds of [evil] influences. When they hear calls at school or on the street saying, “Don't respect your parents! Don't respect anyone or anything!”—and on top of that, their mothers want to “tighten the screws” on them—they rebel even more.

That is why I advise mothers to discipline themselves through prayer and not to discipline their children. If they constantly tell a child, “Don't do that, don't touch that”—even regarding trivial matters, and sometimes unfairly—then, in the event of serious danger, for example, if a child wants to splash gasoline into a fire, the child will disobey and, by doing so, will be seriously injured. The child does not understand that the words “don't do that” are rooted in love. But as the child grows a little older, selfishness sets in, and when they are reprimanded, they become defiant, thinking, “Am I still so young that they can treat me this way?” Parents must help the child understand that, just as they protected him from getting burned when he was little, so now that he has grown up, they are protecting him from a different kind of fire. Therefore, the child must be vigilant, not give in to the temptations of the devil, and preserve within himself the Grace of Holy Baptism.

Unwise, Excessive Parental Love

— Geronda, can a mother harm her child through unwise love?

— Of course it can. For example, a mother sees that her little one can't learn to walk and says, “Poor thing, he can't walk”—and keeps picking him up instead of holding his hand to help him walk on his own. The question is, how will the little one ever learn to walk? Of course, such a mother is motivated by love, but with her excessive care, she is actually harming her child. I knew a father whose son had completed his military service. And yet there he was, taking his grown son by the hand and leading him to the barber! “I've brought my son to you so you can cut his hair,” the father would say. “Tell me how much to pay you and when to come pick him up.” In this way—through his thoughtless overprotectiveness—this man crippled his son.

Love must be “reined in” by reason. True love is selfless. It contains no selfish bias and is characterized by prudence. Prudence is essential for much of a woman's love, so that she does not squander her love in vain. Once, a young man came to my hut, angry at his parents. His poor parents

were kind-hearted, but they didn't know how to help him. And so he began telling me that his parents were putting pressure on him, that they didn't love him, and so on. "Listen," I said to him, "when you were little and your mother wrapped you up in several layers of clothing, why did she do that? Was it so you wouldn't catch a cold, or to make you suffer from heatstroke? There was a lot of love in your mother's actions." Finally—realizing just how much his parents loved him—the young man began to cry. His mother had a lot of love, even though she couldn't help her son because she behaved toward him in a way that provoked his resistance.

When necessary, a mother must be strict with her child. If she gives in too easily to the child and agrees with him on everything, it is not in the child's best interest. In Adana⁴⁶, a widow had an only son named Yanis. When the boy was a little older, she sent him to apprentice with a shoemaker. After going to work for a week, the boy declared, "Mom, I don't need to go to the master anymore: I've already learned the shoemaking trade." "When did you have time to learn?" she asked. "Well, if you want," he replied, "I can show you how shoes are made, too. Look: this is how you cut out the sole, this is how you attach the leather, fit the heel, and nail it down..." And the master with whom Janis was apprenticed was a very kind man. He wanted to teach the boy the craft out of pity, because Janis was growing up without a father. However, when he saw that a week had passed and Janis hadn't shown up, he grew concerned—wondering if the boy had fallen ill—and went to his mother to ask how the child was doing. "What happened to Janis? Why isn't he coming to work anymore? Is he sick?" the master asked the widow. "No," she replied, "he's healthy." "Then why isn't he coming to work?" "Why would he go there?" the widow replied. "After all, Janis has already learned the shoemaking trade." "But how could he have learned it in just a few days?" the shoemaker asked in amazement. "It's very simple," the mother replied. "He takes the leather, stretches it over the last, hammers in the tacks, attaches the heel, then removes the boot from the last, and that's it!" The shoemaker laughed, said goodbye to her, and left. When he returned to the workshop, the apprentices asked him, "Master, what about Janis?" "He's alive and well," he replied. "Not only has Janis become a shoemaker—his mother has, too!"

And so I see that many parents behave just like this widow. They believe they love their children, but in reality, they are destroying them. For example, a mother, out of excessive love, showers her child with kisses and tells him, let's say, "There's no child in the whole world as wonderful as mine!" In doing so, she fosters pride and an unhealthy sense of self-confidence in him. Then such a child disobeys his parents, convinced that he knows everything himself.

Parents should help their children learn to take responsibility for themselves from an early age. Let children do age-appropriate chores around the house: they shouldn't expect everything to be handed to them on a silver platter. Otherwise, when they become adults, they'll have a hard time. One craftsman worked tirelessly and raised his children. But while he was working, they spent their days loitering in the streets. And even when they grew up and started their own families, they still expected their father to provide everything for them. And when he told them it was time for them to take care of their own homes and families, they replied, "How can that be, Father? You didn't abandon us when we were little! So how can you abandon us now—when we've grown up and are shouldering the burden of family responsibilities?"

Distribution of an Estate

If parents are financially secure, they are responsible for their children's future. Of course, the most important thing is for them to raise their children to be good people, then help them get an education or learn a trade so that the children can earn a living. After that, parents should buy them

⁴⁶ Adana—a city in Asia Minor, on the northeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. —*Translator's note.*

a small house and so on. When, in 1924, as part of the population exchange of that time,⁴⁷ our family arrived in Greece from Faras in Cappadocia, my father, as chairman of the village council, did his best to settle all our fellow villagers. He left his own family for last. Later, when my brothers and sisters grew up, they began to grumble. “You took care of everyone else, Father,” they said, “but you didn’t think about us.” If a person is alone, he can give everything to others and, out of self-sacrifice, show complete indifference toward himself, driven by nobility of character. But if a person has a family, he must think of them as well.

Of course, parents shouldn’t lose their heads and give their children everything at once, since young people are inexperienced and, in today’s insatiable world, they may spend beyond their means. Later, it will be painful for parents when they realize they have nothing left to offer. Furthermore, parents should pay special attention to the weakest child and provide him or her with more material support—and even more emotional and moral support—so that the panic of failure does not sweep him or her away like a raging torrent. But with reason and love, parents must care for all their children so that no coldness creeps into their relationships.

These days, it’s rare to find close-knit, spiritually grounded families where brothers and sisters don’t quarrel over land or inheritances and don’t end up in court. I knew a family of seven. The parents had gold jewelry. After their death, the children decided that the brother who had cared for their parents in their old age should keep the gold. However, that brother thought that their sister had a large family and therefore needed the gold more. He gave the gold to her. The sister gave the gold to the third brother, who gave it to the fourth, and, in the end, the gold returned to the first brother! In other words, the same thing happened to these people as is described in the Lavsaika.⁴⁸ In the end, since the first brother also did not want to keep the gold for himself, they decided to donate it to the temple.

Part 3.

Children and Their Responsibilities

“A parent’s blessing is the greatest inheritance for children. Therefore, children should strive to receive their parents’ blessing.”

Chapter 1.

About Children, Their Joys, and Their Challenges

Infancy

— Geronda, I’ve noticed that sometimes during the Divine Liturgy, infants smile.

— They don’t just smile during the Divine Liturgy. Infants are in constant communion with God because they have no cares. Remember what Christ said about little children? *“Their angels in*

⁴⁷ The population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1924. Greeks living in Turkey resettled in Greece, and Turks living in Greece resettled in Turkey. — *Translator’s note.*

⁴⁸ See *Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis. *Lausaikos* or *Narrative of the Lives of the Holy and Blessed Fathers**. Chapter on Serapion. Christian Life Foundation. Klin, 2001. pp. 176–177.

heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven.”⁴⁹ Little ones maintain a connection with God and with their Guardian Angel, who remains constantly by their side. In their sleep, infants sometimes laugh and sometimes cry because they see both joyful and frightening things. In some cases, they see their guardian angel and play with him. He caresses them, takes them by the hands, and they laugh. In other cases, the tempter presents them with something frightening, and they cry.

— Why does the tempter scare babies?

— The fact that he scares them is actually good for them, because their fear forces them to call for their mother. If they didn’t feel that fear, the babies wouldn’t run into their mothers’ arms. God allows everything for the good of people.

— And when children grow up, do they remember what they saw when they were babies?

— No, they forget. If a child remembered how many times he had seen his Angel, he would become proud. That’s why, as he grows up, he forgets it all. God works in mysterious ways.

— Do they see all this after Baptism?

— Of course, after Baptism.

— Geronda, is it permissible to bring an unbaptized infant to the holy relics?

— Why not? You can even make the sign of the cross over a baby with holy relics. Today I saw a little boy who looked just like a little angel. “Where are your wings?” I asked him. He was flustered and didn’t know what to say!... On Mount Athos, at my kaliva, in the spring when the trees are in bloom, I hang candies on the branches of the shrubs near the fence surrounding my cell. When visitors come to see me with small children, I say, “Kids, please pick the candies off the bushes, because if it rains, they’ll get soggy and be ruined!” Some quick-witted little ones realize that I’m the one who hung the candies on the branches, and they laugh. Others believe the candies grew on the bushes all by themselves, while still others aren’t sure whether to believe it or not... Little ones need a little joy, too.

— Geronda, do you hang up a lot of candy?

— If I’m going to hang them up, I’ll hang up a lot. When people bring me delicious sweets, I don’t give them to the adults. I treat the adults to Turkish delight. When people bring me good sweets, I save them for the children at Afonia.⁵⁰ And here, at the monastery, I also planted some caramels and chocolates yesterday, and today they’ve already bloomed! Did you notice? Well, why not: the weather is sunny, the soil is good, and you tilled it well, which is why the chocolates bloomed so quickly!⁵¹ Just wait and see what a flower garden I’ll create for you! We won’t need to buy candy or chocolates for the children anymore. What do you think? We’ll be harvesting our own crops!

— Geronda, the pilgrims saw candies and chocolate bars sticking out of the garden bed and were surprised. “It must have been one of the kids who did that,” they said.

— Why didn’t you tell them that a big kid did it?

Guardian angels watch over little children

— Geronda, why does God give every person a guardian angel? Can’t He protect us Himself?

— A guardian angel is God’s special care for His creation. A guardian angel is God’s providence, a manifestation of His care for humanity. And for this, we are indebted to God. Angels especially watch over small children. How they protect them! Once, two children were playing in the street. One wanted to throw a rock at the other’s head and had already taken aim. The second

⁴⁹ Matt. 18:10.

⁵⁰ Afoniada—a school for boys located on Mount Athos. — *Translator’s note.*

⁵¹ The day before, the Elder “planted” several pieces of candy and chocolate bars in a freshly plowed garden bed and placed lilac twigs on top so that the sweets would look like they were in bloom.

child didn't see the danger. And then, at the very last moment, apparently his guardian angel made it so that the little boy saw something, jumped out of the way—and the rock flew past his head.

One day, a mother went to work in the field and took her baby with her. After breastfeeding him, she laid him in his cradle and went to work. When she returned a little while later to check on the baby, she saw that he was holding a snake in his hand and examining it with curiosity! While the mother was breastfeeding the baby, some milk had remained around his mouth. So the snake slithered up to the baby and licked the milk off his little face. The baby grabbed the snake. Seeing this, the mother screamed; the child got scared, opened his little hand, and the snake slithered away! God protects children.

— Geronda, but then why do so many children suffer from illnesses and other misfortunes?

— God knows what is best for each person and, accordingly, gives them everything they need. He does not give a person anything that will not be for their good. For example, sometimes He sees that a physical disability or injury will help us more than if He had spared us from that injury or kept us whole and unharmed.

Holy Baptism

— Geronda, what will happen to those residents of Northern Epirus,⁵² who die unbaptized?

— Um, most of them were baptized by their parents through “air baptism.”⁵³ And many in those countries received “air baptism” from nannies or nurses in maternity wards. I know of a case where a nurse baptized a baby in a basin of water. God saw this woman's good will... And how much grace the newly baptized possess! Once, in a group of three hundred and fifty people, I spotted a baptized woman. I asked who she was, and I was told that she was a Turkish woman who had received Holy Baptism. Her face was radiant. Compared to her, the others looked like barbarians.

— Geronda, is it proper to give children two names at Baptism?

— If a couple argues and gets divorced over what to name their child, then let them give the child at least three names! But even proper Christian names have been turned into who knows what these days... Viki, Peppi, Mimi...

— Geronda, a woman who was five months pregnant lost her baby. He was stillborn, and now she's upset because they couldn't even perform an air baptism on him.

— Since she herself is not to blame for this, let her trust in God. God knows what to do with such children and where to place them.

— Geronda, my mother told me that one of my brothers died a few hours after he was born, and she didn't have time to have him baptized. I advised her to tell her spiritual father about it.

— Since she wanted to baptize him but didn't have time to do so, there are extenuating circumstances. Other women, after all, have abortions and kill their own children. God's judgment is beyond our understanding. It would have been a grave sin if she had failed to baptize her child out of negligence and he had died unbaptized. You judge such matters from the standpoint of common sense. That is the theology of rationalism. I remember once a group of pilgrims came to see me, and I told them the following story. A little baby from Northern Epirus was baptized three times. Once by his grandmother, another time by his grandfather, and then by his mother—each one secretly from the others—because they all considered the infant to be unbaptized. As I was telling this story,

⁵² Northern Epirus—a part of the Balkan Peninsula inhabited by Greeks. Since 1912, it has been part of Albania. — *Translator's note.*

⁵³ According to Greek custom, if the life of an unbaptized newborn is in immediate danger, a so-called “baptism by air” may be performed over the infant. Any Christian (male or female) takes the infant in their arms and makes the sign of the cross three times in the air, saying the words: “The servant of God (name) is baptized in the name of the Father. Amen. And of the Son. Amen. And of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” If the infant dies, he or she is considered baptized; if the infant survives, then, according to a decision of the Synod of the Church of Greece, the Sacrament of Baptism is repeated in full. — *Translator's note.*

one of the pilgrims jumped up and declared, “That’s uncanonical!” “Listen,” I said to him, “do you think they read somewhere in some dogmatic book that a child must be baptized three times? After all, this little one received a triple blessing!”

— Geronda, sometimes people see their deceased relatives in their dreams and talk to them. Does God allow this to happen in order to help people in their faith and repentance?

— Yes. Didn’t I tell you about a similar incident? A monk from the Holy Mountain was originally from a village located in Bulgaria. There were many unbaptized people there. This monk told me that, while he was still a layperson and unbaptized, he saw his little nephew—who had recently died—in a dream. The little boy was standing behind the fence of a beautiful garden, crying. And the garden was full of little children who were rejoicing and playing. “Why aren’t you going into the garden?” asked the man who had the dream. “How can I go there?” replied the child. “After all, I haven’t been baptized.” After this incident, the man immediately went and was baptized, and afterward told the priest about what he had seen in his dream. This is how God arranged it so that others, too, would understand the dignity of Holy Baptism. After that, the residents of this Bulgarian village also began to baptize their children.

— Geronda, some parents who are in a common-law marriage want to have their children baptized. Is it permissible for them to do so?

— Why not? What have those poor children done wrong? The fact that people in a common-law marriage want to have their children baptized shows that there is something [good] inside them, that these people aren’t entirely indifferent. Apparently, these people are confused about something. If someone wants to help them, they should first find out why they didn’t get married in church, and then why they want to have their children baptized.

— Geronda, if a nun was someone’s godmother at baptism before entering the monastery, should she now, in addition to praying for her godson, send him gifts—as godparents in the secular world do?

— Well, a nun is now exempt from such obligations. A monk will help [his godchild] through prayer. As for her parents—if they wish—they may maintain such ties with the godchild of their daughter, the nun.

— So the nun’s parents can have that kind of relationship with their daughter’s godson if they want to?

— Yes, on their own. A nun shouldn’t force them to do this. Let her pray that God will enlighten them. But in any case, the godfather bears a great responsibility. When I was still a layperson, my parents promised a married couple we knew that someone from our family would be the godparent of one of their children. When their child was born, all my relatives were away, so they asked me to be the baby’s godfather. I was sixteen at the time, and I didn’t want to baptize him because I felt I was taking on a great responsibility. So, finding myself in a difficult situation, I began to pray. “My God,” I pleaded, “if this baby grows up to be a good person, then take all the remaining years of my life and give them to him. But if he grows up to be a bad person, then take him to You now—while he is still like a little angel.” I baptized the baby and named him Pavel. A week later, he died. Now he is in Heaven and is in no danger of losing it.

Orphaned Children

— Geronda, if the head of the family dies, should young children see their dead father’s body?

— It’s better not to. Even when a close relative of an adult dies, you look for a way to break the news to them as gently and sensitively as possible. So imagine how much more so for children!

— Up to what age is it not beneficial for children to see their deceased loved ones?

— It depends on the child’s [personality, disposition, and state of mind].

— Is it okay to take the children to their father's grave?

— Yes, you can take children to the grave. You should tell them: “Daddy has moved from here to Heaven. If you’re good children, he’ll come down from Heaven to visit you.” I remember when my grandmother died; they took me to a friend’s house so I wouldn’t see the funeral or know that she had died. There, they played with me and kept me entertained. I was laughing, and they were crying. When they brought me back home, I started asking, “Where’s Grandma?” “She’ll be back, she’ll be back,” they told me. I waited for Grandma to return, and some time later I found out that she had died. It’s not good for children to see their loved ones dead.

— Geronda, when young children lose their mother, they grieve her death with immense pain.

— More children become orphans by losing their mother than their father. Therefore, when they lose their mother, they experience greater pain. It is rare for a father to take on the role of a mother for children who have lost their mother. However, in Paradise, such children will be comforted. They will receive what is [missing] there. An orphan will “enter” Paradise with a lower “passing score,” just as Greeks from abroad are admitted to our universities without exams, since this is provided for by the relevant law. In other words, God’s law applies to orphans, and they need to exert less effort to enter Paradise, whereas other people must undertake a considerable feat to do so. I consider children who have been deprived of their parents’ tenderness to be happy and blessed. After all, they have managed in this life to make God their Father and, at the same time, have deposited into God’s “savings account” the tenderness of their parents—which they were deprived of—and which now brings them [spiritual] interest.

But even in this life, the Good God will help such children, because from the moment God takes their parents to Himself, He is—if I may put it that way—obliged to care for their children. Remember what the prophet David says? “*He will take in the fatherless and the widow.*”⁵⁴ God naturally loves such children more and cares for them more. To such children, He grants more [spiritual] privileges in this life than to other children. If an orphan turns the dial toward kindness, he will prosper greatly. But if he says, “Since I suffered myself, I will now make others suffer,” he destroys himself.

— Geronda, do the negative effects of being an orphan stay with a person for the rest of their life?

— What are you talking about? Orphans may be a little reserved, a bit shy or timid—they lack the joy and liveliness of children who are showered with affection. However, this reserve serves as a safeguard for such children, helping them navigate life. And at the same time, they are saving up for a better life ahead. What do you think: Does God not see this reserve? Will He not help them later on? That is why we must embrace an orphan—especially one who has lost his mother—with tenderness and fervent love, so that he may first be warmed, his timidity may disappear, and he may open his heart. And if they are overly eager, we must strongly rein in their great enthusiasm so that they do not exhaust themselves trying to express their profound gratitude. Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia grew up an orphan—having lost both his mother and father. If he had not approached his orphanhood spiritually and with courage, he would have been a tormented man, suffering from mental health issues. Yet look what a fine young man he was! What feats he accomplished! What struck me was that his bones were soft, like cotton wool, like a sponge. When, during the exhumation of his relics, I removed his ribs and vertebrae from the grave, they crumbled to dust the moment I touched them. Only two vertebrae, the hip bone, and the tibia were more or less sturdy. It’s amazing: how, being so frail, could he walk such enormous distances on foot? He walked as if he were flying through the air! Here we see the supernatural strength that God gave him. So could it really be beyond Christ’s power to raise an orphan?

⁵⁴ Ps. 145:9.

Until children reach maturity, they need to be kept in check

In order not to slip down the slope of worldly decline—which fills the soul with anxiety and perpetually distances it from God—children must constantly recognize the great necessity of [their elders'] guidance—especially during the critical years of adolescence. Children must come to understand the meaning of obedience. They must realize that their own good lies in obeying their parents—so that they may obey them joyfully and move freely in the spiritual realm.

Have you ever thought about how limited a small child's freedom is? For nine months, the child is confined to the womb. A newborn is placed in a crib. Five or six months pass, and they're placed behind a high fence. Then, as the child grows older, they aren't allowed to leave the house alone, so they won't bump into something or fall down the stairs. After all, if a child's freedom isn't restricted, they'll fall and hurt themselves.

All of this is necessary to ensure that a child grows up safely. At first glance, all these measures take away a child's freedom—yet without them, the child would be in danger of dying from the very first moment of life. However, when children are young, they do not understand that they need limits. And when they grow older, they still do not understand that they need a different kind of limit, and so they strive for freedom. But what kind of freedom is this? The freedom to become disabled? Such “freedom” leads to children's deaths. They must understand that until they finish their studies, until they receive their diploma, until they become mature—so that they may be upright people—they need boundaries. After all, if they were to become disabled even once, they would perish. Children must perceive limits as a necessity, understand that they are a blessing from God. They must be grateful to their parents, who set limits for them. They must know that parents set limits out of love. No father and no mother has ever set limits on their child out of malice—even if they behaved extremely harshly toward them. And if parents tighten the screws on their children just a little too much, then there is also a great deal of love hidden in this. They do this out of goodwill, so that their children will be more composed, disciplined, and protected from danger. After all, even a gardener, when planting a sapling, may secure it with wire a little tighter than necessary for greater stability, thereby causing a slight injury. However, the Good God soon heals the wound in the tree's bark. If God heals a tree's wound, how much more does He care for [human beings]—His own creation! Surely, if parents have tightened the screws a little too tightly on their child and caused a minor injury, will God not heal that wound?

Furthermore, children should talk with their parents and open up to them about their thoughts. Just as a monk in a monastery has an elder to whom he confides his thoughts and from whom he receives guidance, so too should a child open up to his parents. It is right for a child to first confide in his mother and then in his spiritual father. Just as parents, if a child bruises his leg, go with him to the doctor and ask what they need to do to heal the bruise, so they must also know what [spiritual] problems their child is facing—in order to help him. If a child talks about his problems only to his spiritual father, how can his parents help him? After all, they don't know what's troubling him.

Challenges Children Face in School

Children who possess good judgment and quick wits sometimes encounter difficulties and struggle. Such children want to organize everything according to their own reasoning and strive to do things that are beyond their capabilities. They have strong minds, but they don't know how to put on the brakes. They experiment on themselves, as if to test their limits! This causes them to suffer. If they learn humility, their capacity for judgment will help them succeed. Children who lack this capacity for judgment and quick-wittedness do not face such difficulties, but, in turn, they do not exert themselves [internally] or reflect [on life]—in the best sense of the word.

Do you know how many students, even after preparing for exams and knowing everything by heart, are afraid they'll fail and therefore don't show up for the exams? Although they are capable of handling their studies, such students plunge themselves into panic because of their own cowardice. However, if they humbly ask, "Please pray for me, because I cannot manage my studies on my own, but with your prayers I will try my best to do well on the exams," then because of their humility, they will receive both God's grace and divine enlightenment. In addition, before taking their exams, students should pray to their patron saint, who will help them in accordance with their faith and piety.

— Geronda, a young woman who is studying abroad wrote to me: "A thought keeps telling me that I'll never be able to grow spiritually. It seems I'll always be this way."

— What an eccentric! Sitting in Europe and coming to such conclusions! After all, she didn't go there to achieve spiritual growth or to stay there forever, but to gain the knowledge she'll need for her field of study. Let her try to maintain the spiritual state she has now and not strive for spiritual growth there. After all, Europeans are a people who have excelled in the [earthly] sciences, not in spirituality. Let her not put pressure on herself or take everything to heart. She shouldn't take all this to heart and suffer because of it. Let her regard her stay there as compulsory military service. In the army, a soldier toils with the sweat of his brow, works himself to exhaustion, and sometimes others treat him very harshly. But in Europe, people treat her, at the very least, with politeness—even if it's superficial and hypocritical—in keeping with the European mindset. It was to be expected that she would encounter these difficulties, because we see the same thing in Greece. The only difference is that in Greece—since we are an Orthodox people—there is also spiritual support for those concerned with their spiritual life. A little patience and a little attention, and the difficulties will be overcome. Since she finds herself there, she should devote her free time to reading and prayer so that she may also be nourished spiritually. The efforts she makes to succeed in her studies will help her immerse herself in them completely, and then all evil thoughts and youthful temptations will be foreign to her.

Chapter 2.

On Children's Respect and Love for Their Parents

Children's Respect for Their Parents and Elders

When a child is young, he or she doesn't do any work. Parents take care of the child's food, clothing, and other such needs. Parents help their child out of love. A child doesn't work—he can only perform small chores around the house. But can this work really compare to the effort and sacrifice their parents make for them? If, as an adult, a child fails to understand what his parents have given him, that is a great act of ingratitude!

In the past, parents would physically discipline their children, and the children would accept the punishment without harboring any resentment. Often, they didn't even understand why they were being hit. But today's children are constantly asking, "Why? What for?" It's nothing but constant arguing. They lack simplicity. They subject everything that happens to judgment and evaluation. However, Divine Grace does not come in this way. If a child does not see his father as a father and does not accept his father's discipline, then he is an illegitimate child.⁵⁵ Some children, as soon as

⁵⁵ Cf. Heb. 12:6–11.

their parents make even a small remark to them, immediately start threatening, “I’ll slit my wrists!” And what are the parents to do? They give in, and in the end, the children go astray and perish.

A child must understand that even if parents sometimes give him a slap on the back of the head, they do so not out of malice but out of love—so that he will mend his ways, become a better person, and ultimately find joy. When we were little, we accepted everything: our parents’ affection, their slaps, and their kisses. We understood that our parents did all this for our own good. We had great trust in [our parents]. Sometimes this would happen: one brother was at fault for something, but our mother would scold the other because she didn’t have time to hold a “trial.” However, the guilty one, seeing that another—the innocent one—was being punished because of him, would confess his guilt, because his conscience condemned him. And in this way, the guilty brother or sister would be exonerated.

In a family, younger members should show respect both to their parents and to their older [brothers and sisters]. Younger members must feel that respect, obedience, and gratitude toward their elders are essential. Older siblings, in turn, should love, help, and protect their younger siblings. When a younger sibling respects an older one, and an older sibling loves a younger one, a wonderful family atmosphere is created. My father used to tell us, “Obey your older brother.” We knew that our father loved us all, and we behaved very freely around him. But toward our older brother, not finding the same fatherly love in him, we showed greater obedience.⁵⁶

When spouses respect each other and children respect their parents, family life runs smoothly, like clockwork. In such a family, the eldest son would never say something to his mother like, “Listen, Mom, make sure you don’t do that again,” or “Why did you do everything all backwards?” But in such a family, the father doesn’t speak to the mother in that tone either. An adult may joke with a child to make him happy, but the child, while enjoying the adult’s jokes, shouldn’t behave informally or familiarly toward him. When I was at the Stomion Monastery and would sometimes go down from the monastery to town to shop, a little boy whose house was right on the road would run up to me as soon as he saw me, and I would kiss his hand. Then he got used to it, and when he ran up to me, he would hold out his hand himself so that I could kiss it! I did what he wanted. But then his parents asked, “Father, please don’t kiss his hand, because he runs after the priests, holds out his hand for them to kiss, and if they don’t, he starts crying.”

How Can Children Continue to Love Their Parents After They Start Their Own Families?

The Good God has arranged it so that a husband and wife are bound together by such love that they even leave their own parents. If this love did not exist, people would not be able to start their own families. A parent’s role is fulfilled as soon as their children start their own families [or become monks]. After that, children owe their parents only [two things]: immense respect and as much love as one ought to have for one’s parents. I do not mean to say that a husband and wife should not love their parents. No. But first they must have great love for one another and [only] then love their parents. Spouses should love one another so deeply that their love overflows. And it is from this overflow of marital love that they should show their parents all respect and gratitude. The love between spouses should be noble, so that each spouse cares for the other’s parents as much as possible.

Here’s what will really help ensure peace and harmony in the family: a husband should love his wife more than his mother and more than any of his other close relatives. A husband’s love for his parents should flow through his wife. Of course, the wife should do the same.

I know of families in which, at the beginning of their married life, the husband and wife had problems and disagreements because one of them loved his or her mother excessively. This love

⁵⁶ Elder Paissios had seven brothers and sisters.

begins with the affection a son or daughter feels for their mother, born of deep gratitude. However, little by little, as the spouses grow closer to one another, this problem disappears. After all, if immediately after the wedding one spouse were to give the other a kind of love that would replace a mother's love, it would be unnatural.

If a husband respects his mother-in-law and father-in-law, it reflects well on him, just as it reflects well on a daughter-in-law to respect and love her mother-in-law—the woman who gave birth to her husband, raised him, and whose son is now her husband and her joy. If a husband and wife share these feelings and thoughts, all of this quietly shapes the souls of their own children.

Before her son's marriage, his mother found considerable comfort in his love. But the elderly become like infants again. After marrying off her son, a mother feels the same way the oldest child feels when he sees another—a newborn baby—in his mother's arms. You see: if a person does not curb their passions in their youth, then, over the years, their willpower will weaken and their passions will grow stronger.

However, the daughter-in-law shouldn't take offense at this. And if she is also caring for her elderly mother-in-law, let her be patient for a little while so as not to lose the reward she is due for the care she provides. If she patiently cares for her mother-in-law now, then later, when all sorrows are behind her, she will rejoice in the good she has done.

But, of course, a mother-in-law should love her daughters-in-law as if they were her own daughters. My paternal grandmother loved my mom more than she loved my dad. When my brothers got married, the neighbors shook their heads and warned my mother: "Well, now the new daughters-in-law will be coming around..." And my mother replied: "Why do you say that? My mother-in-law loved me more than her own daughter. So why shouldn't I love my daughters-in-law?" And indeed, she loved them as her own daughters, too.

Old age brings humility

How humble a person becomes in old age! An elderly person gradually loses strength and comes to resemble an aging falcon. When a falcon grows old, its feathers fall out and its wings come to resemble broken combs. I remember that in 1914, a member of the Holy Synod,⁵⁷ from the Philotheos Monastery⁵⁸—while still a layperson—volunteered to travel from Smyrna to fight in Albania in order to take revenge on the Turks who had slaughtered his father. Once, he captured a Turk and was about to slit his throat. The Turk pleaded: "Our faith is crude. It teaches us to cut and kill. But your faith is not like that. Christ does not teach you to kill." These words shook him so deeply that he threw down his rifle and immediately withdrew to the Holy Mountain. He became a monk and a member of the Holy Synod, yet his spirit of a chieftain never left him. He was in charge of all the monastic duties, and all the keys to the storerooms hung from his belt. None of the brethren dared to contradict him. If any of the monks forgot to address him properly—"Elder Spiridon"—he would fly into a rage. Once, during Great Lent, a band of robbers came to the monastery and demanded cheese from the monks. Then Father Spiridon went out to the bandits and "greeted" them thus: "You pigs! You came asking for cheese during Great Lent?"—he said, and then threw them out the gate. On another occasion, the monks took apart a chandelier⁵⁹—to clean it. The bandits, seeing the various shiny curlicues from the chandelier, thought they were made of gold. Upon arriving at the monastery, they threw these curlicues into sacks and gathered mules from all over the area to load the sacks onto them. As soon as Father Spiridon saw this, he grabbed the bandits by the collar, took their sacks, and dumped the contents onto the ground. "You're a bunch of scum, a bunch

⁵⁷ The Spiritual Council is the elected governing body of an idiorhythmic (non-communal) monastery. — *Translator's note.*

⁵⁸ One of the twenty monasteries of Mount Athos. At the time described by the Elder, it was still idiorhythmic (non-communal). — *Translator's note.*

⁵⁹ A large chandelier or multi-branched candelabrum in an Orthodox church. — *Translator's note.*

of scum!” he told them. “But these are just cheap pieces of metal! Just as cheap as your copper foreheads!” This man did not know what cowardice was. However, in his old age he fell ill and became submissive. I was assigned the task of caring for him. Once he asked me, “Pray, Averky,⁶⁰ I’m not feeling well.” I stood up and began to pray aloud with my rosary: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Your servant, the elder Spiridon.” “You fool,” he said, “not ‘Elder Spiridon,’ but ‘Spirka’!” How his illness and old age had humbled him! Try calling him anything other than “Elder Spiridon” back in the day!

And in his old age, my father was brought to his knees by a fly. One day, my sister found him crying. “What’s wrong, Dad?” she asked. “Did one of your grandchildren hurt your feelings?” “No, no,” he replied. “That’s just how people are... I wanted to swat a fly with a fly swatter, but I couldn’t do it. I tried to swat it from the right—it flew off to the left; I tried to swat it from the left—it flew off to the right! When I was young, I shot so accurately that I didn’t kill the chetov⁶¹ —instead, I fired at them from all sides, so that the bullets landed in a tight cluster, forcing them to surrender. “When I was sixteen, I shot a lion cub, wounded it, and fought the wounded beast. And now I can’t even kill a fly! Ah, man is a worthless creature.” The unfortunate man felt one great “nothing”—zero—as if he had accomplished nothing in his life.

Do you know how the elderly monks submit themselves in the retirement homes for elderly monks at the Holy Mountain monasteries! They undergo yet another... monastic tonsure! Their hair is cut short so it’s easier to wash. Their beards are trimmed because they drool, food falls past their mouths—and how are they supposed to clean up after themselves? This tonsure is the final one. The tonsure of humility!

Reward for caring for the elderly

What has the world come to! Even in Pharas and Epirus, they took care of old animals. Well, mules—it’s clear why [—because their meat isn’t eaten]. But even those animals whose meat was edible weren’t slaughtered; they were left alive. For example, the owners honored old oxen that had once been used for plowing. They cared for them in their old age, saying, “After all, they’re our breadwinners.” In other words, the working animals that toiled in the fields were granted a peaceful old age. And back then, people didn’t have the technological means that we have today. They had to grind feed lentils in a hand mill and crush them finely so that the poor old ox could chew them. But people today have forgotten such things: they don’t even care for the elderly, let alone old animals!

Never in my life have I felt as good as I did during those few days when I was given the task of caring for an elderly monk. Caring for the elderly brings great reward. I was told about a novice on the Holy Mountain who was possessed by a terrible demon. He was assigned the task of caring for six elderly monks at the monastery’s nursing home. Those were hard times; people lacked the resources to make their work easier. The poor fellow would hoist a bundle of the elders’ laundry onto his shoulders and drag it all the way to a distant pond, where he would wash it using lye... A short time later, he was freed from the demon that had possessed him and became a monk. This happened, first and foremost, because he sacrificed himself for the sake of others, and also because the elderly monks gave him their blessings.

Many spouses complain and grumble about the difficulties they face in their families due to the eccentricities and grumbling of the elderly people living with them. These people forget the “antics” they themselves used to get up to as children—the whining and odd behavior with which they tormented others back then. They do not remember that their own crying and tantrums used to give their parents no peace. That is why God allows such people to endure the difficulties associated with

⁶⁰ As a rasophore, the Elder bore the name Averky.

⁶¹ Cheta — Turkish bandits.

caring for the elderly—so that they may, in some small way, “pay back” for the difficulties they once caused others. Now it is their turn to lend a helping hand to their elderly parents and care for them with gratitude, remembering the sacrifices their parents made for them when they were children. Those who feel no sense of duty toward their parents will be judged by God as unjust and ungrateful people.

I see that often the cause of the suffering experienced by many worldly people is that their parents hold a grudge against them. Families suffer because they fail to care for their grandparents. What kind of blessing can children possibly have if they grow up in a family where an unhappy old woman or a poor old man was sent to a nursing home, left there to die in emotional pain, while their property was taken away and they were denied the joy of spending time with their grandchildren? An elderly woman came by today and told me that she has four married sons. They all live in the same neighborhood, but she can’t see them because one day she “dared” to advise her daughters-in-law: “Love one another, and go to church!” When they heard this, they simply flew into a rage! “Don’t ever set foot in our homes again!” they told her. The poor woman hasn’t seen her children in five years. “Pray for me, Father,” she pleaded through her tears, “for I also have grandchildren. Pray that I might see them, even if only in a dream.” Well, what kind of blessing can this woman’s children possibly have?

Having a grandmother in the family is a great blessing, but some people don’t understand that. Men usually age sooner, and their wives take care of them. When a husband dies, the children bring their grandmother to live with them so she can look after her grandchildren and not feel like she’s not needed by anyone. If the children do this, it’s a very good thing. In this way, the elderly mother finds peace, and the family receives help. After all, because of her many responsibilities, a mother doesn’t have time to give her children the tenderness and love they need. It is precisely this missing element that a grandmother provides, because a grandmother’s age is the age of love and tenderness. Just look: when a child misbehaves, the mother scolds him, but the grandmother comforts him. When the children are under their grandmother’s care, the mother has time to get all her chores done, the children are surrounded by affection and love, and the grandmother herself is warmed by the love of her grandchildren.

A person who cares for his parents receives a great blessing from God. A young man, after getting married, shared his plans with me: “Geronda, I want to build a house and set up two small apartments on the ground floor for my parents and for my mother- and father-in-law.” Do you know how moved I was by that! Do you know how many blessings I bestowed upon that man! It’s amazing: why don’t many married couples understand this?

A few days ago, a woman came to me and asked, “Father, my mother is paralyzed. I’m so tired! For eight years I’ve been turning her from one side to the other!” Do you hear what’s going on here? A daughter speaking about her mother in that tone! “Oh,” I said, “your problem can be solved very easily! Right now I’ll pray that you’ll be paralyzed for eight years, and that your mother will recover and take care of you.” “No, no, Father!” she cried out. “Four years,” I said, “at least four years—that’s what you need! How can you not be ashamed of yourself? Which is better? To be healthy, feel no pain, and care for a sick person, while receiving a reward from God, or to suffer, be unable to move a foot, humble yourself, and ask, ‘Please bring me a duck, turn me onto my other side, move me closer to the wall...?’” When this woman heard what I said to her, she felt a little ashamed.

There are no such problems in a family if children put themselves in the shoes of their aging parents, or if a daughter-in-law puts herself in her mother-in-law’s shoes and thinks: “After all, I’ll grow old someday, and one fine day I’ll become a mother-in-law—and would I like it if my daughter-in-law didn’t pay any attention to me?”

Parental Blessing

A parent's blessing is the greatest legacy parents leave their children. That is why children must make sure to receive it. Look at what Jacob went to such lengths to do in order to receive his father's blessing—he even put on a sheepskin!⁶²

A mother's blessing is a truly great thing! One man once said, "Every word my mother speaks is like a gold coin." Recently, a Greek man from Johannesburg came to visit me. Do you know what impression he made on me? He came to see me at my kaliva in the fall. "Geronda," he said, "my mother has fallen ill, and I've come to see her." Less than three months had passed when he came again for Christmas. "What—you're here again?" I asked. "Yes," he replied. "I heard that my mother is unwell again, so I came to kiss her hand, because she's getting on in years and might die. For me, my mother's blessing is my greatest treasure." This man is sixty years old—and he travels from Johannesburg to Greece just to kiss his mother's hand! And now God has blessed this man with such resources that he wants to build a large retirement home for clergy and donate it to the Church. In other words, he's, so to speak, overwhelmed with blessings and doesn't know what to do with them! A soul like that is like balm to me. It's as if you're walking through the Sahara Desert and suddenly find a little water. Little by little, it all fades away and disappears.

And another man came to my hut in tears. "Father," he began, "my mother cursed me. And now my family is plagued by illness and trouble, and everything at work is going awry..." "You must have given your mother some reason yourself," I replied. "After all, she couldn't have cursed you for no reason." "Yes," he said, "I was quite the son back then..." "Go," I said, "and ask your mother for forgiveness." "I'll go, Father," he replied. "Give me your blessing." "I give you my blessing," I told him, "but you must also receive a blessing from your mother." "I doubt," he said, "that she'll give me her blessing." "Go," I said, "to her, and if she doesn't give it to you, tell her this: 'An elder told me that you, too, will one day give your soul to God.'" He went to his mother, and she blessed him thus: "My child, may the blessing of Abraham come upon you!" A short time passed, and he returned to Mount Athos, bringing me gifts—cherry compote and Turkish delight. He was full of joy. His children were healthy, and everything was going well at work. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he kept saying, "Glory to God." This man's life had changed, and he spoke only of spiritual matters. And what can one say if a person has respect for his parents from the very beginning! How could such a person not have God's blessing?

Part 4. Spiritual Life

"By loving God, acknowledging His great Sacrifice and His blessings, and by deliberately compelling oneself to imitate the Saints, a person is quickly sanctified: he begins to humble himself, to feel his own unworthiness and his great ingratitude toward God"

⁶² See Gen. 27.

Chapter 1. On the Spiritual Life in the Family

The more a person complains, the more he destroys himself

— Geronda, where does grumbling begin, and how can it be avoided?

— Complaining stems from a sense of one's own misfortune, and it can be driven away by praising [God]. Complaining breeds more complaining, while praise breeds more praise. If a person, when faced with difficulties, does not grumble but praises God, then the devil bursts [with rage] and goes to someone else—to the one who grumbles—to cause him even greater trouble. For the more a person grumbles, the more he destroys himself. Sometimes the devil steals from us and teaches us not to be content with anything, whereas everything that happens to us can be met with spiritual joy and praise, and we can receive God's blessing. I know a monk on the Holy Mountain. If it starts to rain and you say to him, "It's raining again," he begins: "Yes, it's pouring and pouring. We'll soon rot from all this dampness." If the rain stops shortly afterward and you say to him, "The rain has stopped," he'll reply, "Yes, but is that even rain? Rain like that will dry everything out..." You can't say that there's something wrong with this man's head. No. He's just used to complaining. He's in his right mind, yet he thinks like a madman!

There is a curse in grumbling. That is to say, a person who grumbles is essentially cursing himself, and then God's wrath comes upon him. In Epirus, I knew two peasants. One had a family and two small plots of land, and he entrusted everything to God with confidence. He worked as hard as he could, without tormenting himself with anxiety. "Whatever I manage to do, I'll manage," he would say. Sometimes he didn't manage to bring in the hay in time and it rotted in the rain; sometimes the wind scattered the haystacks; yet he would say, "Glory to You, God," and everything went well for him. Another man had a lot of land, cows, and the like. He had no children. If you asked this man, "How are things going for you?"—he would reply, "Things? Don't even ask." He never said, "Glory to You, God," but was always grumbling and complaining. And just look at him: one moment a cow would die, the next some other unpleasant incident would happen to him, then something else... This man had everything, but he did not prosper.

That is why I say that giving thanks is a great thing. God gives us blessings, but whether or not we enjoy them depends on us. However, how can we enjoy them if, for example, God gives us a banana, but we start thinking about some more delicious delicacy that some millionaire is eating? Do you know how many people, eating just a single stale cracker, praise God day and night and feed on heavenly sweetness! These people develop spiritual sensitivity and understand when God's hand begins to caress them. But we don't understand this, because our hearts have grown callous and nothing satisfies us. We fail to realize that true happiness lies in what pertains to eternity, not to the vanities of this world.

Let us allow God to guide our lives

— Geronda, why is the Kingdom of God likened in the Gospel to a mustard seed: "*...which, when sown in the ground, is the smallest of all seeds on earth; yet when it is sown, it grows and becomes larger than all the herbs...*"⁶³

— A mustard seed is very small, but when the plant grows, it becomes a large shrub. Even birds can perch on its branches. The Word of God is likened to a mustard seed because, from a single small word of the Gospel, a person grows and comes to understand the Kingdom of God.

⁶³ Mark 4:31–32. See also: Matthew 13:32, Luke 13:19.

— Geronda, how can one experience what Scripture says: “*The Kingdom of God is within you*”?⁶⁴

— Listen, blessed soul: when we have a part of heavenly joy within us, then the Kingdom of God is within us. Conversely, when we have inner turmoil and pangs of conscience, then we carry within us a part of hellish torment. It is a great thing if a person begins to feel a part of the joy of paradise already in this life. And it is not difficult to achieve this; however, unfortunately, our selfishness prevents us from attaining this spiritual greatness.

A person, by accepting God’s guidance as a Good Father, can make his or her life a paradise. We must trust in God, rely on Him in everything we set out to do—and glorify Him for everything. We must not let anxiety take hold of our hearts. Anxiety leads to emotional breakdown; it paralyzes the soul. If a person seeks the Kingdom of Heaven, everything else will be given to him. The Gospel says: “*Seek first the Kingdom of God*,”⁶⁵ and also, “*The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor*.”⁶⁶

Today, people have made their own lives more complicated because they are not content with little, but are constantly chasing after material possessions. However, those who wish to live a true, authentic spiritual life must, first and foremost, learn to be content with little. If people simplify their lives—if their lives are not burdened by many worries—this will free them from worldly concerns and give them free time for spiritual pursuits. Otherwise, in their efforts to keep up with trends, people will grow weary, lose their peace and quiet, and experience great inner turmoil.

I see how people sometimes make their own lives a real ordeal! Today, as I was leaving Mount Athos, a man from Uranopolis gave me a ride in his car all the way here to the monastery, and on the way he asked me to stop by his house for a little while. Since he insisted, I didn’t want to disappoint him. As soon as we approached the door of his house, I saw that he was taking off his shoes and tiptoeing down the hallway. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you walking so strangely?” I asked him. “It’s nothing serious, Geronda,” he replied, “I’m just trying to step carefully so as not to damage the hardwood floor.” Well, what can you say? People torment themselves for no reason.

Empathy for others helps the family

The more [material] wealth people acquire today, the more problems they face. They neither thank God for His blessings nor see the misfortunes of their neighbors. And because they do not see their neighbors’ misfortunes, they do not give them alms. People spend money aimlessly and do not think about their neighbor who has nothing to eat. How, then, can God’s grace come to them? Even if a person has a family, he must still cut back on some things and set aside money to give alms to others. He needs to explain to his wife and children that somewhere there is a sick person abandoned by everyone or a poor family in dire need. And if they don’t have the money to help the unfortunate, then he should say to his loved ones: “Let’s at least give these unfortunate people a Christian book—after all, we have plenty of them.” By giving alms to those in need, a person helps both himself and his family.

Do you know how much the poor believers in Russia are in need! Once I gave a Russian priest a small box of incense and said, “Please accept this modest gift.” “Is this really a modest gift?” he replied. “After all, you can’t find such good incense in Russia.” And do you know how refugees from Russia and other countries suffer here in Greece? In Chalkidiki, I met a man who had come from Russia. He was laying stone slabs, earning three hundred drachmas per square meter⁶⁷, and he said, “Glory to You, God, that we have bread.” So when a contractor complained to me that while

⁶⁴ Luke 17:21.

⁶⁵ Matt. 6:33.

⁶⁶ Cf. Matt. 11:12.

⁶⁷ Delivered in 1992. Approximately one U.S. dollar.

working he was “burdening” himself with sins, I replied, “If you give these refugees work and help them, you’ll free yourself from sin. After all, these poor people have nowhere to live. Compared to them, you’re Onassis.”⁶⁸

In His desire for us to cultivate virtue, God allows sickness, poverty, and the like. After all, God could heal the sick and enrich the poor; He could provide for everyone, but then we would have a false sense that we are virtuous. We would call ourselves, for example, merciful without actually being so, whereas now our virtues are evident in our deeds. Thank God, there are people who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their neighbor. I knew a man who, after being discharged from the army, was immediately and unjustly sentenced to a long prison term. He consciously chose to do this in order to save a family. This man did not think about compromising himself or about his future career.

I see that God arranges things so that in every family, at least one person has faith and piety, so that the other members of that family may also receive help! In Konica, I knew a family in which all the members were indifferent to the Church, except for one of the daughters. As soon as this young woman heard the bell ring, she would take off her apron, leave all her chores unfinished, and hurry to church. Even when the Germans came to the village and the sexton began ringing the bell to warn the people, this young woman ran to church for Vespers! And although her parents were very stingy people, she herself was very compassionate. Out of stinginess, this young woman’s father did not eat proper food but rather dry bread that he soaked in water. Her mother was also very stingy! Even though her children held positions of responsibility and were wealthy, she—so as not to waste even a match—would rummage through the ashes in search of a still-glowing ember and use a piece of hay to light a fire from it. To avoid buying a coffee pot, they brewed coffee in a tin can!

But her mother loved me. At that time, I was living at the Stomion Monastery. And whenever this girl wanted to take something from her stingy parents’ home to give as alms to some poor person—and couldn’t take it secretly—she would say to her mother, “Mom, a monk needs this.” “Give it to him, give it to him,” her mother would reply. That stingy woman would agree to give anything only to monks. And even before, during the occupation, her daughter had secretly helped the poor. She would quietly take wheat from the granaries, carry it on her shoulders to the mill, grind it, and distribute the flour to poor families. Once, her mother caught her “red-handed.” Oh, how the girl got an earful! Then she made a vow to God. “My God,” she said, “help me find some kind of job, and I’ll give my entire salary to charity.” And the very next day, she was invited to work at a charitable organization. Oh, how happy she was! She kept her promise: she didn’t even buy herself a pair of stockings with the money she earned—she gave it all to charity. Do you know how many people now say to her, “May God save you. May the ashes of your parents be blessed!” And so, because of her charity, God later had mercy on her mother as well.

Cultivating Virtue in the Family

— Geronda, how can a person with a family cultivate virtue within themselves?

— God provides favorable opportunities for this. But many, even though they ask God to give them favorable opportunities to cultivate virtue, begin to grumble when they encounter some difficulty. For example, sometimes the Good God, out of His boundless love and desiring that a husband cultivate humility and patience within himself, withdraws His grace from his wife, who then begins to act in a “tricky” manner and treat her husband rudely. In this case, the husband should not grumble, but rejoice and thank God for the favorable opportunity He is giving him to perform a feat of virtue. Or, for example, a mother asks God to grant her patience. Then she sets the table; her

⁶⁸ Aristotle Onassis (1900–1975)—a Greek multimillionaire and the largest shipowner—was one of the richest people in the world.

child approaches the table, pulls on the edge of the tablecloth, and all the dishes spill onto the floor. It's as if the little one is saying to his mother, "Mom, be patient!"

In general, the difficulties that exist in today's world force people who wish to live even a little spiritually not to let their guard down or sleep. When, God forbid, a war breaks out, people don't let their guard down or close their eyes. Something similar, as I see it, is happening now to those who strive to live spiritually. Just take, for example, those young people who live a church-centered life. What difficulties they, poor souls, have to endure! However, the hostility they face from the corrupt world in which they live somehow helps them stay alert. But in times of peace, when there are no difficulties, you see that most people are indifferent to matters of faith and morality. Yet people should also use these peaceful times for spiritual growth: they must strive to cut away their shortcomings and cultivate virtues.

Silence is very helpful in the spiritual life. It is good to structure one's daily routine so that it includes a set time for silence. During this hour, let a person look deep within themselves to recognize their passions and muster the strength to cut them off and purify their heart. And it is especially good if there is a quiet room in the house whose atmosphere resembles that of a monastic cell. There, "*in secret*"⁶⁹, one can fulfill one's spiritual duties, read spiritual books, and pray. If prayer is preceded by a brief period of spiritual reading, it greatly aids the prayer, because such reading warms the soul and transports the mind into the spiritual realm. Therefore, if a person who is distracted by many things throughout the day has ten minutes for prayer, it is preferable for him to spend two of those minutes reading something profound in order to dispel his distraction.

— Geronda, don't you think it's not very easy these days to live the kind of life you're describing in the secular world?

— No, there are laypeople who live very spiritually. They live like ascetics: they observe fasts, attend services, pray with rosaries, and prostrate themselves—even though they have children and grandchildren. On Sundays, such people go to church, receive Communion, and return to their "cell," much like hermits who come to the monastery's cathedral on Sunday and then return to their cells to live in silence. Thank God, there are many such souls in the world. And to be specific, I know one head of a household who constantly recites the Jesus Prayer—no matter where he is. This man always prays with tears. His prayer has become spontaneous, and his tears are sweet—they are tears of divine joy. I also remember a worker on the Holy Mountain. His name was Yannis. He did very hard labor and worked for two people. I taught him to recite the Jesus Prayer while working, and gradually he grew accustomed to it. Once he came to me and said that, while reciting the Jesus Prayer, he felt great joy. "Dawn is breaking," I replied. A short time later, I learned that this man had been killed by two drunken hooligans. How deeply I grieved! A few more days passed, and one monk began looking for a tool that Janis had put away somewhere but couldn't find. And then Janis appeared to him in a dream and told him where he had put the tool. This man had attained a spiritual state and was able to help others even from the afterlife.

How simple the spiritual life is! By loving God, acknowledging His great Sacrifice and His blessings, and consciously striving to imitate the Saints, a person is quickly sanctified. All that is required is that he humble himself, recognize his wretchedness, and acknowledge his great ingratitude toward God.

Prayer in the Family

— Geronda, should the whole family recite Vespers together?

— Adults should act with dignity in this regard. They should recite the Vespers service and say to young children, "If you'd like, you can pray with us for a little while." When children get a little

⁶⁹ See Matt. 6:4.

older, they can follow a certain “routine” regarding prayer: for example, if adults pray for fifteen minutes, then children can pray for two or five—and if they want to pray longer, let them pray as long as they like. If parents force their children to stand through the entire evening prayer with them, the children will eventually start to “kick up a fuss.” Don’t put pressure on children, because they haven’t yet grasped the power and value of prayer. For example, parents can eat beans, meat, and any other solid food. However, if a baby is still fed only milk, would parents force him to eat meat—simply because it’s higher in calories? It is indeed higher in calories, but the infant cannot digest it yet. Therefore, at first, to get the baby used to eating meat, parents give it to him little by little—a small piece in a spoonful of meat broth—so that later the child himself will want such food.

— Geronda, sometimes not only children but also adults get so tired by evening that they can’t even read the evening prayers.

— If they are very tired or sick, let them recite half of the evening prayers instead of the whole set. Or at least let them recite the “Our Father” once. You must not skip prayer entirely. Just as a soldier during wartime, surrounded by enemies on high ground, fires a shot from his rifle from time to time to keep the enemies afraid and prevent them from attacking, so too must people who no longer have the strength for a full prayer fire [spiritual] shots to keep the tangalashka afraid and make it flee.

Prayer within the family is very powerful. I know two brothers who, through their prayers, managed not only to prevent their quarreling parents from divorcing but also to bring them even closer together than before. Our father used to tell us, “No matter what you’re doing, you must report to God twice a day—so that He knows where you are.” Every morning and every evening, all of us—father, mother, brothers, and sisters—would pray before the iconostasis, and at the end of the prayer, we would bow before the icon of Christ. And whenever our family faced a temptation or a difficulty, we would pray for it to be resolved. I remember when my younger brother fell ill one time; my father said, “Let’s go and ask God to either heal him or take him to Himself so that he won’t suffer.” We prayed as a family, and our brother recovered. And we also sat down to eat together as a family. First we said grace, and then we began to eat. If anyone started eating before the meal was blessed, we would say, “He has committed adultery.” We considered a lack of self-restraint to be adultery. If every family member comes home whenever they please without a valid reason and sits down to eat alone, it leads to the breakdown of the family.

The Spiritual Life of a Married Couple

— Geronda, what should a wife do if her husband isn’t living a spiritual life?

— Let her entrust her husband to Christ and pray that his heart will soften a little. As time goes by, Christ will quietly plant a “seeding” in his heart, and her husband will begin to reflect [on what really matters]. And as soon as her husband’s heart softens a little, the wife can ask him, for example, to give her a ride to church. She doesn’t need to try to persuade him by saying, “Why don’t you go to church?” but simply ask: “Could you, if it’s not too much trouble, give me a ride to church?” And after driving her to church, the husband might say, “Well, since I’m already here, let me go into the house of God and light a candle.” And it’s quite possible that he’ll then gradually continue on his spiritual journey.

— Geronda, can a wife’s spiritual father help her husband in any way?

— Sometimes, in order to help the husband, the spiritual father must work spiritually with the wife. And then the good qualities the wife possesses will be passed on to her husband. If he has a good heart, God will help him change.

A woman has a reverent nature. But if a man, having been indifferent to the Church at first, later comes to his spiritual senses, he moves forward confidently in spiritual matters, while his wife

cannot keep up with him. It can also happen that the wife begins to envy him because she herself is spiritually stagnating. That is why, in such cases, I advise husbands to be attentive. After all, what happens? The further the husband advances spiritually, the more the wife—if she does not live a spiritual life—goes against him. If, for example, the husband says, “We’re running late; get up and let’s go to church,” she replies: “Go by yourself! No, you don’t understand me—I have a ton of work...” Or if the husband, for example, says, “Listen, why isn’t your oil lamp lit?” or wants to light the extinguished lamp himself, he hurts her pride, and she shouts, “What, are you planning to become a priest? Or become a monk?” She might even retort, “Why do we even light this lamp in the first place? We’d be better off giving the oil to some poor person.” Yes, yes, she can even go that far—all the way to Protestant nonsense. Of course, later the wife gets upset herself because of all the excuses she’s come up with, but at the same time she continues to be upset by the spiritual progress she sees in her husband. That’s why, in such cases, it’s a thousand times better for the lamp to remain unlit than for the husband to light it. And so, to protect families from falling apart, I advise husbands: “When your wife is in a calm frame of mind, say this to her: ‘You know, when I go to church, pray, make a little bow, or read some spiritual book, I don’t do it out of any great piety—no. But because all of this slows me down, restrains me, and keeps the current of this terrible society we live in from sweeping me away. Otherwise, you know how it would drag me into all those bars and parties...’” If a husband frames the issue this way, his wife is pleased and may also change and even surpass him spiritually. But if he frames the issue differently, he makes her terribly resentful and drives her to a state of despair. They may even end up getting a divorce. If a husband wants to help his wife spiritually, let him try to connect her with a family that leads a spiritual life, where the mother and wife are devout—so that she will want to imitate them.

Children and Spiritual Life

— Geronda, a mother gives her child holy water, but the child spits it out. What should be done in this case?

— She needs to pray for her child. Perhaps she’s giving him holy water in a way that causes him to resist it. For children to follow God’s path, parents must also lead a righteous spiritual life. Some parents who attend church try to help their children become good kids, not because they care about the salvation of their souls, but because they want to have good children. In other words, they are more concerned about what other people will say about their children than about the possibility that their children might face eternal torment. But how, then, will God help? The goal is not for children to go to church under duress, but for them to come to love the Church. They should do good not because they are forced to, but because they feel it is a necessity. The holy lives of parents touch their children’s souls, and then the children readily obey [their father and mother]. Thus they grow up with piety and robust health, avoiding spiritual harm. If parents keep a tight rein on their children, motivated by the fear of God, then God helps and the child receives help. However, if they do so out of selfishness, then God does not help. Children often suffer because of their parents’ pride.

— Geronda, sometimes mothers ask us how and how much three- or four-year-old children should pray.

— Tell them: “You’re the mom, so just see how much energy your little one has.” There’s no need for a set rule here.

— Geronda, parents bring their little ones to our monastery for the All-Night Vigil. Could this be tiring for the children?

— During morning prayers, let them give the children a little time to rest. And for the Divine Liturgy, let them bring them back to the church.

Mothers, without pressuring their children, should teach them to pray from a very young age. The inhabitants of the Cappadocian villages fervently observed [and preserved] the ascetic tradition. They took their children to caves, churches, and chapels, where they prostrated themselves and prayed with tears, and in this way their children also learned to pray. When bands of robbers came at night to plunder them, as they passed by these little churches, they heard weeping and were puzzled. “What is happening?” they asked. “What kind of people are these? Why do they laugh by day and weep by night?” The robbers could not understand what was going on.

The prayers of little children can work miracles. God grants them what they ask of Him. After all, children are pure and innocent, and that is why God hears their pure prayers. I remember one time when our parents went to work in the fields and left me at home with my two younger brothers. Suddenly, the sky darkened, and a terrible downpour began. “Oh, I wonder how our parents are doing right now!” we worried. “How will they be able to get home?” The little ones started crying. “Come here,” I called to them. “Let’s ask Christ to stop the rain.” The three of us fell to our knees before the iconostasis and began to pray. A few minutes later, the rain stopped.

Thoughtful parents should help their children draw closer to Christ from a very young age and experience the highest spiritual joys from the very beginning. When children start going to school, parents should gradually teach them to read spiritual books and help them live a spiritual life. Then they will be like little angels and will have great boldness before God in their prayers. Such children are a true spiritual treasure for their families. The lives of the saints are especially helpful to them in their spiritual lives. When I was little, I would take small booklets containing the lives of the saints—published in those years—and go into the woods. There I would read, pray, and simply soar with joy. From the age of ten to sixteen (until the Greco-Italian War began⁷⁰), unburdened by worldly cares, I lived a spiritual life. A child’s joys are pure: they leave an imprint on a person, and when he grows up, they deeply touch his heart. If children live spiritually, they will be joyful in this life, and in the life to come they will rejoice eternally alongside Christ.

Relationships with Family and Friends

— Geronda, a woman asked us what she should do about her two cousins who have been a burden to her for many years.

— What does she want? What, should we write a new Gospel? God wants her to help them, and He Himself will do what is best for their souls.

— Geronda, if a misunderstanding arises among family members, should we say something to help them?

— Yes, we need to talk to them, but tactfully. After all, if we remain silent, it could lead to trouble. If, however, a person who has offered good advice to quarreling relatives is misunderstood and they take offense at him, then he should say, “I’m sorry for upsetting you”—and after that, leave them alone and pray for them.

A person who wants to live peacefully must be especially careful in their relationships with family and friends. They must not be deceived by the politeness and good manners they may encounter in others. Worldly politeness and good manners can lead to considerable harm—because they are rooted in hypocrisy. A person’s outward behavior may make them appear to be a perfect saint in the eyes of others, but when their inner world is revealed to others, it will turn out that in reality, the opposite was true.

— Geronda, if a person feels and understands that his neighbor treats him kindly, is it right to express gratitude for that?

⁷⁰ The 1940 war between Greece and Fascist Italy. — *Translator’s note.*

— If it's someone very close to him, then there's no need, because, first of all, he, too, once helped and did favors for that person, and second, he himself feels the inner gratitude that the other person feels toward him. However, if the person who did him a favor or treated him kindly isn't that close, then he needs to express his gratitude as best he can. To strangers, we say, "Thank you." And if, for example, a child wants to express gratitude to his parents, he has no choice but to say "thank you" to them day and night, without ceasing, for everything they do for him.

It is very beneficial for a person to be straightforward in their relationships with others, to always think well of them, and not to take everyone too seriously. One should avoid arguments and conversations that supposedly begin for spiritual benefit but more often than not lead to headaches. Do not expect spiritual understanding from people who do not believe in God. It is better to pray for such people, that God may forgive and enlighten them. One should speak to everyone in a language they understand, and [a believer] should not reveal to others the great truths in which he himself believes and which he experiences, because others will not understand him—he speaks on a different frequency and is on a different [spiritual] wavelength.

Some say, "I want others to come to know Christ—just as I have come to know Him." And these people begin to act as teachers toward others. However, their lives must be in harmony with what they teach. By teaching others a "Christ" through their own lives—while failing to live up to what they say—they cannot claim to have come to know Christ. Without experience [of the spiritual life], a person is out of touch with reality, and sooner or later his inner self will "betray" him to others. When we approach our neighbor with compassion and true love, this true love of Christ transforms him. A person who possesses holiness—wherever he may be—creates around himself, so to speak, a kind of spiritual electromagnetic field and influences those who enter that field. Of course, we must be careful not to squander our love or give our hearts away to others too easily, because often some people take our hearts into their own hands, and afterward it is [pointlessly] drenched in blood. Or else they cannot understand us and take offense at us.

Temptations During the Holidays

— Geronda, why do temptations usually arise during the holidays?

— Don't you know yourself? On feast days, Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints rejoice and [spiritually] treat others. They bless people and bestow spiritual gifts upon them. After all, parents also throw parties on their children's name days, and kings grant amnesties when a prince is born. So why can't the saints treat people to [something spiritual] on their feast days? And it must be said that the joy the saints bestow lasts a long time, and people's souls derive immense benefit from it. Therefore, the devil, knowing this, sets traps to tempt people so that they may lose the divine gifts they have received, and so that the feast may bring them neither joy nor benefit. You see, often in a family, when everyone is preparing for Holy Communion, the devil incites them to quarrel, and not only do they fail to receive Communion, but they don't even go to church. The devil does everything he can to deprive people of divine help.

The same can be observed in our monastic life. Often, the tempter—knowing from experience that we will derive spiritual benefit on a feast day—arranges some kind of temptation on that day, or more often, the day before. After all, he is the tempter [— what else could he possibly do?]. And in this way, he spoils our inner disposition. For example, he may provoke us into an argument or a quarrel with a fellow brother, and then bring us sorrow and break us down both spiritually and physically. By doing all this, he prevents us from deriving benefit from the feast, [from experiencing the feast] in the joy of glorifying God. However, if the Good God sees that we ourselves did not give the devil any cause for temptation, that it occurred solely because of his envy, then He helps us. And He helps us derive even greater benefit if we humbly take upon ourselves the blame for the temptation that occurred and do not condemn not only our brother, but even the devil, who hates

what is good. After all, that is his work: to set traps and spread malice. Whereas a person, being made in the image of God, must spread peace and kindness.

Chapter 2. **Work and Spiritual Life**

Work Is a Blessing

— Geronda, in the old days they used to say, “It’s better to wipe the soles of your shoes than to wipe the blankets.” What did they mean by that?

— By this they meant to say: “It’s better to wear out your shoes working than to lie in bed and laze about.” Work is a blessing; it is a gift from God. It invigorates the body and refreshes the mind. If God had not given man work, man would have grown moldy. Hardworking people never stop working, even in old age. If they stop working while they still have the strength, they’ll begin to lose heart. For such people, stopping work is tantamount to death. I remember a ninety-year-old man in Konitsa who worked without ceasing. In the end, he died right there in the field—a two-hour walk from home.

But it must also be said that the physical rest some people seek is not a stable state. When at physical rest, people can only temporarily forget their inner turmoil. They have everything: lunch, dessert, a shower, relaxation... However, as soon as all of this ends, they yearn for even greater peace. Thus, people are constantly lacking something, and that is why they are constantly upset. They feel a void, and their soul strives to fill that void. But those who grow weary from labor have constant joy—spiritual joy.

— Geronda, but if, for example, you have lower back problems, then you can't do any kind of work.

— So, do you think the lower back doesn’t need to be exercised? Wouldn’t work that serves as a workout for the lower back actually help it? Let me tell you this: if a person eats, drinks, sleeps, and doesn’t work, all his internal “cogs” start to “slack off,” and he constantly feels like sleeping because his body and his nerves relax and become flabby. Little by little, such a person reaches the point where he can’t do anything. All it takes is a short walk, and they start to get out of breath. But if they start working and moving around little by little, both their legs and arms will get stronger. Look: people who love work don’t sleep for long periods or may even be unable to fall asleep at all due to fatigue; yet, despite this, they have strength. This is because, through work, they toughen up and strengthen their bodies.

Work is good for your health, especially for young people. I’ve noticed that some mama’s boys mature and toughen up when they join the army. The army is very beneficial for guys like that. Of course, what I’m talking about mainly applies to the past. Today, the military is afraid to bother soldiers or force them to do anything, because if they’re “bothered” in any way, they slit their wrists or “suffer a nervous breakdown”... To ensure that children stay healthy, I advise parents to send them to work for someone—and even to pay that person. The main thing is that the children enjoy the work they’ll be doing. After all, if a young man has the strength and intelligence but doesn’t work, he becomes complacent, lethargic, and flabby. And if, on top of that, he sees others succeeding, he becomes entangled in his own selfishness and finds no joy in anything. He is constantly plagued by thoughts, and his mind is as if stuffed with straw. Then the devil comes to him and begins to whisper: “You wretch, what a good-for-nothing you are! One of your peers has become a teacher, another has

started his own business and is making money—but what will you ever amount to?” In this way, the devil plunges this person into despair. But if the young man starts working, he’ll gain self-confidence—in the best sense of the word. He’ll see that he, too, can overcome difficulties, and besides that, his mind will be occupied with work, leaving him no time for negative thoughts. In other words, the benefit will be twofold.

Choosing a Career

— Geronda, some parents encourage their children to choose the same career as they did, and they often do so very insistently.

— No, they’re doing the wrong thing. You shouldn’t pressure children into doing what their parents want if it’s not what the children themselves want. I knew a young man who wanted to enroll in the theology department and become a priest. However, his mother was against it; she insisted that he go to medical school. This young man had learned Byzantine chant and sang in church. He built his own musical instrument and used it to play the church modes. He knew many church hymns by heart. He was quite talented; he wrote troparia and composed liturgical services. After graduating from high school, the young man enrolled in the theology department. His mother suffered a nervous breakdown from the distress. Later, she came to me and asked, “Pray, Father, that I may recover, and then let my child do what he likes.” But once she recovered, she again began to prevent her son from studying theology. And in the end, he left the theology department, gave up singing, and ruined his life for no good reason.

Seeing that young people are having trouble choosing a field of study, I advise them as follows: “See which profession or field of study appeals to you. You should pursue what you have a natural inclination toward.” If, however, young men or women are considering a path for which they have no inclination, I advise them to devote themselves to what they do have a natural inclination for, so that it may be to their benefit. In other words, I help them choose a line of work they enjoy and a profession that suits their abilities. It is enough that what they do be pleasing to God. Does someone have a talent for music? Let him become, for example, a good musician or a good church singer and, through his singing, help those who listen to him so that they may come to love the Church and prayer. Does someone have a calling to painting? Let them become an artist or an iconographer and, with reverence, paint icons that will work miracles. Does someone have a calling to science? Let them devote themselves to it and work with zeal.

And just look: a person’s calling is evident from childhood. Once, a man came to the Stomion Monastery with two little boys—his nephews. One of them, about six or seven years old, sat down next to us and asked us all sorts of questions nonstop. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I asked him. “A lawyer!” he replied. The other child had disappeared somewhere. “Where is he?” I asked his uncle. “Did he fall off the cliff?” We went out to look for him and heard the sound of hammer blows coming from the carpenter’s shop. We walked into the shop and saw that the little boy had so thoroughly ruined the smoothly planed workbench top with his chisel that it was now only good for the stove! “What are you going to be when you grow up?” I asked him. “A cabinetmaker!” the boy replied. “You will be,” I said, “you will be. It’s okay that you ruined the board! Big deal.”

Love for One's Work

— Geronda, why do some people get bored while they’re working?

— Maybe they don’t like their jobs? Or maybe they’re constantly doing the same thing over and over again while they work? Often in certain manufacturing settings—for example, at a factory that produces windows and doors—one worker glues boards together from morning till night, another constantly inserts glass into them, and a third coats them with putty every day. These people

constantly perform the same monotonous task, while the boss walks around supervising them. And this goes on for more than just a day or two. But if you do the same thing over and over, people get bored. It wasn't like that in the old days: a carpenter would receive four walls from the builders and had to hand over a turnkey house to the owner. He had to lay the floor, install windows and doors, caulk the glass, and so on. Then he would set to work on various spiral staircases and carved railings, then paint it all, then it was time for the cabinets and shelves... And finally, he would tackle the furniture. And even if a single craftsman didn't handle all of that himself, he still knew how to do everything. If necessary, a carpenter could even lay roof tiles.

Today, many people are exhausted because they don't like their jobs. They keep glancing at the clock, eagerly waiting for the moment when they can go home. But if a person has a sense of responsibility, a passion for their work, and truly cares about what they do, then the more they work, the more that passion is kindled. Then the person immerses themselves in their work, and when it's time to leave, they ask in surprise, "Where did the time go?" They forget about food and sleep—they forget about everything. Even if they haven't eaten anything, they still don't feel hungry, and even if they haven't slept, they don't feel sleepy. Not only do they not feel sleepy—they're actually glad they're not sleeping! They don't suffer from hunger or lack of sleep: for such a person, work is a celebration, a feast.

— Geronda, let's say two people are doing the same work. Why does one derive spiritual benefit from it, while the other suffers spiritual harm?

— It all depends on how they do this work and what they possess within themselves. If a person works with humility and love, then everything [he does] will be enlightened, purified, and joyfully blessed, and he himself will feel an inner renewal of strength. But if a person harbors the proud thought that they do their work better than others, they may feel a certain satisfaction; however, this satisfaction does not fill their heart, because the soul does not receive [spiritual] enlightenment and has no peace.

Furthermore, if a person does their work without love, they get tired. For example, if someone doesn't like their work and has to climb a mountain to finish it, just the sight of that mountain alone drains their energy. Whereas another person, doing the same thing wholeheartedly, walks and climbs the mountain without even noticing it. For example, if a person is tilling the garden beds or weeding the vegetable garden wholeheartedly, they can work for several hours without getting tired—despite the scorching sun. But if a person isn't working wholeheartedly, they keep stopping, yawning, complaining about the heat, and suffering.

— Geronda, can work or academic pursuits consume a person to the point that they become indifferent to their family and other responsibilities?

— You should simply love your work; you don't have to be in love with it. If a person doesn't love their work, they'll grow twice as tired—both physically and mentally. And once their spirit is weary, even physical rest won't restore their strength. Mental fatigue—that's what really wears a person down. When a person works from the heart and feels joy, they don't exhaust their mental strength, and physical fatigue disappears as well. I know a general who even performs menial tasks. Do you know how he cares for his soldiers? Like a father. And do you know what joy he feels? This man fulfills his duty and rejoices. Once, at midnight, he left Evros,⁷¹ to travel to Larissa for the feast of Saint Achillius⁷² and make it in time for the Divine Liturgy, even though he could have arrived later, just in time for the prayer service. However, he decided to leave earlier in order to honor the Saint. Everything this man does, he does from the heart.

⁷¹ The Evros is a river in northeastern Greece, on the border with Turkey. — *Translator's note.*

⁷² The feast day of St. Achillius of Larissa († c. 330) is celebrated on May 15. — *Translator's note.*

The pleasure felt by a person who performs their work with love is a wholesome pleasure. God gave this pleasure so that His creation would not grow weary. It is a restoration of strength through fatigue.

Everyone should use the gifts they have in a spiritual way.

Every person should use the gifts they have been given for the greater good. After all, God, having endowed a person with a certain gift, will hold them accountable for it. For example, a person's intellect is a power [given to them], but depending on how each person uses their intellect, they can do good or evil. If a very intelligent person uses their abilities correctly, they can make inventions that will help people. However, by misusing the abilities given to them, a person may devise, for example, ways to rob their neighbor. Or, for instance, take artists who publish their drawings in newspapers and magazines. A single cartoon or drawing can conceal an entire event. In other words, if these artists used the flexibility of their minds for good, they would sanctify it and help both themselves and others. Whereas now, many of these people are doing wrong: if they are shameless, they do the most shameless things; if they are jesters, they do the most ridiculous things.

In other words, gifted people—those endowed with special abilities—either benefit others or destroy them. Whereas those who lack special abilities certainly cannot do much good, but at least they cannot do much harm either.

Work and Mental Anxiety

— Geronda, many people are on edge when they come home from work.

— I advise men to stop by a church after work, light a candle, stay for ten to fifteen minutes during the service, or sit somewhere in a park and read a passage from the Gospel to find peace. After that, let them go home—at peace and smiling. Otherwise, they'll come home irritated and start arguments with their loved ones. They shouldn't bring home the problems they face at work: those problems should be left at the door.

— Geronda, however, some people justify their agitation and nervousness by citing the responsibilities they bear at work, which fill them with anxiety.

— It fills them with inner anxiety because they forget to make God their helper in their affairs. A slacker, with his constant refrain, "It's okay, God won't abandon me...", is better than people like that. As far as I'm concerned, it's better for a person to work as a simple employee, doing their job properly and with love, striving to simplify their life, limiting themselves to the essentials, and keeping a clear head, than to be the owner of a business and constantly repeat, "Oh, what am I to do?" And usually, such "big" people have large debts. And then pride creeps in. "Once I get another big loan, I'll build this, set up that, and live the good life..."—such people say, but then they miscalculate, go bankrupt, and their property is sold at auction.

Furthermore, many people do not use their heads at work. They wear themselves out needlessly and fail to accomplish the tasks assigned to them. As a result, they lose the respect of others, and their hearts are filled with anxiety. For example, a person wants to learn a certain art or craft, spends years studying with a teacher or attending a school, but, because they are inattentive, cannot succeed because they do not use their head. A person must understand what they need to do their work and make up for what is lacking. For example, when I was in the secular world working as a carpenter, I realized that I needed a lathe to make the furniture I was crafting. So what? Was I supposed to look for a lathe operator and ask him to help me?

No. I bought a lathe and taught myself how to use it. Some time passed, and I realized I needed to make spiral staircases. I sat down, brushed up on my geometry and arithmetic, and learned how to make them. If you don't use your head, you'll struggle. What I mean is that a person has to use

their head, because a whole host of problems and complications often arise while working. By using your head, you'll become a skilled craftsman, and knowing how to act in every specific situation will help you move forward. That's the whole foundation. Your mind must be the driving force in everything. Otherwise, you'll remain underdeveloped and waste your time.

The Sanctification of Work

Each person must sanctify their work and sanctify themselves through their prayers and their [Christian] life. If, at work, others are under a person's authority and they bear responsibility for them, then they must also provide spiritual guidance to them. If someone is in a good inner state, they also sanctify their work. For example, if young men come to a master to learn his trade, he must at the same time help them learn to live spiritually. Such an attitude will benefit the boss himself, his subordinates, and his clients, because God will bless his work.

Any profession can be sanctified.⁷³ For example, a doctor must not forget that what primarily helps in medicine is God's grace. Therefore, he must strive to become a vessel of divine grace. A doctor who is a good, kind Christian and, at the same time, a skilled professional helps the sick through his kindness and faith, since he inspires them to face their illness with courage and faith. In the case of a serious illness, such a doctor might say to the patient: "Medicine as a science has reached this level. However, where human knowledge falls short, there is God, Who works miracles."

And a teacher must strive to carry out his or her calling with joy and help children in their spiritual rebirth. After all, not all parents are capable of bringing about their children's spiritual rebirth, even if they have the best of intentions. While teaching children knowledge, a teacher must at the same time strive to help them become true human beings. Otherwise, what good will their academic knowledge do them? Society needs upright people who—no matter what they do—will do it well. A teacher must not only ensure that the lesson is well learned but also take into account the students' other virtues and positive traits—such as reverence, kindness, and generosity. The grades God gives children do not always coincide with the grades their teachers give them. A "D" for someone might be an "A+" in God's eyes, while an "A+" for someone might turn out to be a "D" in God's eyes.

A profession does not make a person a person

— Geronda, if a person feels anxious while working, what is the reason for this?

— Perhaps they do not approach their work with good intentions? If they approach their work correctly, then whatever the work may be, it will be a celebration, a joy for them.

— Geronda, what if a person gets discouraged because they're doing hard or dirty work? For example, working on a construction site, cleaning pots in a cafeteria, or doing something similar? How should they approach this?

— If he reflects on the fact that Christ washed His disciples' feet,⁷⁴ he will stop feeling down. Christ did what He did as if to tell us, "You must do the same." No matter what a person does—whether he's washing boilers, scrubbing pots, or digging the ground—he should rejoice. After all, there are those who even clean sewers because they can't find any other work. All day long, the poor fellow is surrounded by filth and germs. But isn't he a human being? Isn't he made in God's image? One head of a household worked as a sewer cleaner and attained a high spiritual state. He fell ill with

⁷³ Of course, this excludes professions incompatible with the title of Christian, of which there are now particularly many—for example, a gangster, a thief, a purveyor of immorality, a moneylender, a sorcerer, a doctor who performs abortions, a fashion model, a buffoon, and so on. Such professions not only cannot be sanctified but also require healing through repentance. — *Translator's note*

⁷⁴ See 1 John 13:4–14.

tuberculosis, and although he could have left that job, he did not want someone else to suffer in his place. This man loved a humble life, one despised by others, and for this, God filled him with His Grace.

A profession does not make a person who they are. I knew a dockworker who raised a dead man from the dead. When I was a deacon⁷⁵ at the Iversky Skete, a man of about fifty-five came to see me one day. Arriving late in the evening, he did not knock on the door, not wanting to disturb the fathers, but lay down to sleep on the street. When the brothers of the skete saw this, they brought him inside and informed me of it. “Why didn’t you ring the bell?” I asked him. “We would have opened the door for you and given you a room in the guesthouse.” “What are you saying, Father?” he replied. “How could I dare to disturb the brothers?” Seeing the radiance on his face, I realized that he lived a very spiritual life. Then this man told me that he had lost his father at a young age and, as a result, loved his father-in-law dearly after getting married. After work, he would first stop by his father-in-law and mother-in-law’s house before going home. However, he was very upset because his father-in-law was a terrible swearer. Many times he asked his father-in-law to stop swearing, but the man wouldn’t stop. One day, his father-in-law became seriously ill. He was taken to the hospital, and a few days later he died. When his father-in-law was dying, the stevedore wasn’t by his side because at that time he was unloading a ship at the port. When he arrived at the hospital and was told that his father-in-law had died, he went to the morgue and, with great anguish, began to pray: “My God, I beg You, bring him back to life so that he may repent, and then take him back.” Immediately, the dead man opened his eyes and began to move his hands. The morgue workers, seeing what was happening, fled in terror. The stevedore took his father-in-law home, and he made a full recovery. After that, he lived for another five years in repentance. “My Father,” the stevedore told me, “I thank God for showing me this mercy. Who am I that God would show me such mercy?” This man was very simple. And yet he was so humble that it never even occurred to him that he had raised the dead. He literally crumbled to dust out of gratitude to God for what He had done for him.

Many people are tormented by the fact that they cannot achieve vain glory or amass wealth through worldly possessions. They do not stop to consider that all this glory and wealth will be of no use in the life to come—that is, in the true life. After all, it will be impossible to carry them over into that other, true life.

We will take with us only those of our deeds that will enable us, here on earth, to obtain the necessary “passport” for the great and eternal journey that lies ahead.

Chapter 3.

On Abstinence in Daily Life

Through asceticism, a person becomes like the incorporeal Angels

— Geronda, you once told us: “In the spiritual struggle, it is necessary to block [the enemy].” What did you mean by that?

— During wartime, they try to block the enemy. They surround him, drive him inside the city walls, and leave him to starve. Then they cut off his water supply as well. After all, if the enemy has no reserves of water, food, or ammunition, he is forced to surrender. What I mean is that if we fight

⁷⁵ Dikeos—in the sketes of Mount Athos, a monk elected or appointed for one year to coordinate the life of the skete’s inhabitants.
— *Translator’s note.*

the devil in the same way—through fasting and vigil—he lays down his weapons and retreats. “*Through fasting, vigil, and prayer, may we receive heavenly gifts...*”⁷⁶ — says the hymn writer.

Through asceticism and self-discipline, a person becomes like incorporeal forces. Of course, one must practice self-restraint with a higher spiritual goal in mind. If a person practices self-restraint, in order to rid themselves of fats that are harmful to their health, then they are concerned [only] with the well-being of their body. In this case, their asceticism is similar to that of those who practice yoga.

Unfortunately, even people who belong to the Church have pushed the issues of asceticism and devotion to the background. “Well, what can you do,” such people say, “we have to eat, enjoy this and that... After all, God created everything for us.” Do you know what one archimandrite told me during a dinner held in our honor? Noticing that I couldn’t bring myself to eat more than usual, the archimandrite said: “*If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him!*”⁷⁷ “By any chance,” I asked him, “didn’t you get something mixed up? To what does this passage from Scripture refer? To asceticism or to a promiscuous, dissolute life? Holy Scripture refers to those who defile—that is, destroy [their body—] the temple of God through fornication and excesses. Scripture does not refer to those who practice asceticism out of love for Christ.” And he, you see, was trying to justify his thoughts and said: “We must eat properly so as not to ‘corrupt’ [through our abstinence] the temple of God [— our body]”! And another man, after visiting a monastery, shared his impressions with me: “I was at a monastery where the monks had fasted so severely that they fell ill. Their oil-filled wineskins were completely untouched. That’s what fasting and all-night vigils lead to, Father!” What can you say to that? Such people don’t want to give up anything. They eat their lunch, their fruit, and their pastries, and then, wanting to justify themselves, they start accusing others—those who are performing ascetic feats. Such people have [never] felt the spiritual joy that asceticism and self-restraint bring. “I need to drink so many glasses of milk,” says a person of this disposition. “No, of course I’ll abstain during the fast. But afterward, I’ll make up for those missing glasses of milk that my body was deprived of during the fast! After all, I need to get a certain amount of protein.” And it’s not that his body actually needs protein. No, he says he has the right [to drink this milk], and he reassures himself that everything is fine, that it is not a sin. But even if a person simply thinks this way, it is already a sin. To what lengths human logic goes! A person [manages] to observe the fasts established by the Church, yet at the same time does not deprive himself of what he has lost during those fasts. Well, how can the Holy Spirit dwell in such a person after that?

And just look at how generous some family people are! Once, a very simple man with nine children came to confession, and his confessor blessed him to receive Communion. “Oh, Father,” he replied, “How could I possibly receive Communion! After all, we eat with butter. I have to work, after all. And so do my children.” “How many children do you have?” his confessor asked. “Nine.” “And how much oil do you add to your food?” “Two spoons of vegetable oil.” “How much oil do you actually get, you poor soul?” exclaimed the confessor. “Go and receive Communion!” For eleven people—a mere two teaspoons of vegetable oil. And yet he was still tormented by a guilty thought!

I knew laypeople who had been sanctified by the asceticism they practiced. Just a few years ago, a layman and his son were working on the Holy Mountain. They worked on Athos for a long time. Then a good job became available back home, and the father decided to leave the Holy Mountain, taking his son with him so that the whole family could live together. However, the son was deeply moved by the ascetic life of the monks, and, remembering secular life with all its spiritual turmoil, he did not want to return. “After all, Father,” he said, “you have other children. Leave just

⁷⁶ From the common troparion to the venerable ones: “*Desert dweller and angel in the flesh...*”

⁷⁷ 1 Cor. 3:17.

one here in the Garden of the Most Holy Mother of God.” He did not yield to his father’s entreaties, and his father was forced to leave him on the Holy Mountain. This young man was illiterate but very sensitive; he possessed great kindness and simplicity. He felt completely unworthy of monastic tonsure, since he believed that observing the monastic rule and the like would be beyond his strength. And so he found a tiny hut that had previously been used as a stable for pack animals, blocked the door and window with stones and fern branches, and left only a small round slit—a hole—through which to crawl into and out of his dwelling. From the inside, he covered the hole with an old, tattered coat he had picked up somewhere. He didn’t even light a fire. Birds’ nests were better dwellings than his own, and animals’ dens were better homes than the one in which he lived. Yet even those who live in rich palaces do not experience the joy that this soul felt. For this man labored for Christ’s sake, and Christ was with him—not only in his hut, but also within his spiritual home—in his body, in his heart. Therefore, he lived in Paradise. Occasionally he would emerge from his den and go to some cell where the brothers were working in the gardens. He helped the brothers with their labors, and in return they gave him a few pieces of dry bread and some olives. If they did not let him work, he would not take the dry bread or the olives. For the blessings he received, he considered it necessary to repay them doubly with his labor. Of course, only God knew about his spiritual life, because he lived in obscurity, simply and quietly. But from one incident, which later became known, much can be understood. Once he stopped by a monastery and asked when Great Lent began, even though Great Lent was practically a year-round reality for this man. Then he went back to his “den” and locked himself inside. Almost three months passed, and he didn’t even notice. One day he came out of his cell and went to one of the monasteries to ask if Easter was coming soon. He attended the service, received Communion during the Divine Liturgy, and then went to the meal with the monks. At the meal, he saw red eggs. That day was the Feast of the Resurrection.⁷⁸ He was surprised and asked one of the brothers, “Listen, is it really Easter already?” “What do you mean, Easter?” the other replied. “Tomorrow is the Ascension!” In other words, this man had fasted throughout the entire Great Lent and for an additional forty days leading up to the Ascension! In this way, he persevered until his very last breath. A hunter found him two months after his death and reported what had happened to the police and a doctor. “Not only was there no smell of decay coming from him,” the doctor told me, “but, on the contrary, his body gave off a sweet fragrance.”

Fasting for Children

— Geronda, should five- or six-year-old children fast before Holy Communion?

— At the very least, on the evening before the day they are to receive Holy Communion, they should eat a Lenten meal with oil. But this matter falls under the spiritual father’s authority. It would be best for the mother to ask the spiritual father how her child should fast, because the child might have health issues and, for example, need to drink milk.

— Geronda, how long should a small child fast?

— If a child is strong and in good health, then he or she can fast. Besides, there is now a huge variety of Lenten foods available for purchase. In the past, children would fast and still run around and play all day long. In Faras, during Great Lent, everyone—children and adults alike—fasted until nine o’clock.⁷⁹ Parents would gather their children in the fortress, leave them toys to play with, and at three o’clock in the afternoon, when the church bell rang for the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, they would go to church and receive Communion. St. Arsenius of Cappadocia said: “Children, if

⁷⁸ The thirty-ninth day after Easter, when “Christ Is Risen” and other Easter hymns are sung in church for the last time. — *Translator’s note.*

⁷⁹ That is, they ate and drank nothing until three o’clock in the afternoon—nine o’clock according to Byzantine time.

they play all day, don't even think about food. So surely they can endure fasting now, when Christ Himself is helping them to fast?"

And even adults who don't fast begin to feel a pang of conscience when they see children fasting. I remember when I was little and worked with my master in the same house. We had lunch there, too. On Wednesdays and Fridays, I would leave without staying for lunch and go home to eat because those people weren't fasting. I remember one Wednesday; they brought some pastries and wanted to offer me some. "Thank you," I told them, "but I'm fasting." "Look at that," they said in surprise, "a little boy is fasting, while we, grown men, eat everything in sight."

Fasting Out of Love

Through fasting, a person demonstrates his free will. Out of love, he undertakes a feat of self-discipline, and God helps him. However, if a person forces himself and says, "What can I do? Here comes Friday again—and I have to fast," then he torments himself. But if he grasps the meaning [of fasting] and fasts out of love for Christ, he will rejoice. "On this day," such a person will think, "Christ was crucified. They didn't even give Him water to drink—they gave Him vinegar.⁸⁰ And today I won't drink any water all day." By doing so, a person will feel a greater joy within themselves than someone who drinks the finest refreshing beverages.

And just look—many worldly people can't even fast on Good Friday. Yet there they are, sitting on the sidewalk across from some government ministry, staging a hunger strike—out of stubbornness and persistence—to get their way. The devil gives them the strength to do this. What they're doing is suicide. But others, when Easter comes, joyfully sing out loud, "Christ is Risen," while thinking about how well they're going to eat. Such people are like the Jews who wanted to make Christ their king because He fed them in the desert.⁸¹

And do you remember what the Prophet says? "*Cursed is he who does the Lord's work carelessly.*"⁸² It's one thing if a person is willing to fast but cannot do so because, if he doesn't eat, his legs will tremble, he'll start falling, and so on.

In other words, his strength and health do not allow him to fast. It is a different matter if a person chooses not to fast even though he has the strength to do so. Where is the goodwill in that? But the distress and sorrow of the person who wants to but cannot practice asceticism makes up for many feats, and that person himself receives a greater reward than the one who has the strength and practices asceticism. After all, the one who has the strength and practices asceticism feels a certain satisfaction. Today, a poor woman of about fifty-five came to see me. She was crying because she cannot fast. Her husband divorced her. She had one child who was in an accident and died, and she was left alone. Her mother has also died, and she has neither a roof over her head nor a piece of bread. One after another, her acquaintances take this woman into their homes, and she does some kind of work there. "I carry a heavy burden on my conscience, Father," the poor woman told me, "because I do nothing. And worst of all, I can't fast. I eat whatever they give me. Sometimes, on Wednesdays and Fridays, they give me vegetarian food, but often they give me meat, and I'm forced to eat it because if I don't eat, I lose my strength and can't stand on my feet." "Eat," I told her, "since you have no strength." A person must take care of themselves. If they see that they lack strength, then let them eat more. "Set your own limits," says the Venerable Nilus the Faster.⁸³

— Geronda, how was it in the old days that some women in the villages didn't eat anything from Clean Monday until the Saturday of St. Theodore Tyron?⁸⁴ How did they have enough strength

⁸⁰ See Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; and John 19:29.

⁸¹ See John 6:5–15.

⁸² Jer. 48:10.

⁸³ See The Works of Our Venerable Father Nilus of Sinai. Moscow, 2000. p. 130.

⁸⁴ That is, they abstained from food and water for five days.

for such a fast—with all their chores, the house, the children, the livestock, and the vegetable gardens?

— In their hearts, these women thought: “If we were truly fasting, we would have to eat nothing until Great Saturday.” Well, they thought, I’ll at least fast until the Saturday of the first week—after all, that Saturday will come soon. Or perhaps they thought: “Christ fasted for forty days.⁸⁵ So what, can’t I fast for just one week?” Moreover, these women were distinguished by their simplicity, and that is why they were able to endure such a fast. If a person possesses simplicity and humility, then he receives God’s grace, fasts humbly, and is nourished by God. Then they possess divine strength, and during prolonged fasts they have a great “reserve of endurance.” In Australia, a young man of twenty-seven reached the point where he could go without eating for twenty-eight days. His spiritual father sent him to me so that he could tell me about it. This young man was very devout and had the spirit of an ascetic. He went to confession, attended church, read the works of the Church Fathers, and above all—the New Testament. Once, while reading in the Gospel about how Christ fasted for forty days, the young man’s heart was moved, and he thought: “If the Lord, being God and, in His humanity, the Sinless Man, fasted for forty days,⁸⁶ then what should I—a very sinful person—do?” Therefore, he asked his spiritual father for a blessing to fast, though he did not even think to share with him his intention to eat or drink absolutely nothing for forty days. So, he began his fast on Monday of the First Week of Great Lent and fasted until the Week of the Veneration of the Cross, without even taking a sip of water. He worked at a factory, and his job was hard—stacking boxes, placing them one on top of another. When the twenty-eighth day of the fast arrived, he felt a little dizzy while working and so sat down briefly. Then he drank some tea and ate a small cracker. He thought that if he fainted and was taken to the hospital, they would realize there that he had exhausted himself from fasting and say, “Look, these Christians are dying from fasting.” “Geronda,” he told me, “after fasting for so many days, I feel a revulsion toward food. But I force myself to eat something, because otherwise I can’t work.” However, this young man was troubled by the thought that he had not completed the forty days of the fast he had begun, and he shared this thought with his spiritual father. The spiritual father replied with reasoned words: “The days you did fast were enough; don’t torment yourself with such thoughts.” Then the spiritual father sent him to me so that, if the thought that was tormenting him still remained, I could help him drive it away. Wanting to make sure that the young man’s motives were pure, I asked him, “Did you take a vow to fast for forty days?” “No,” he replied. “When you received your spiritual father’s blessing for the fast, did you simply fail to mention to him your intention to eat and drink nothing for forty days, or did you deliberately conceal this—supposedly good—intention from him in order to fast for forty days of your own free will?” I asked again. “No, Father,” he replied again. Then I said, “Of course, I understood your intention myself. But I asked you this so that you yourself would realize that for the days you fasted, you will receive a heavenly reward. Those days were enough. And do not torment yourself with thoughts that you were unable to complete a forty-day fast. However, next time, tell your spiritual father about the good thoughts you have and the goodness you keep hidden in your heart. And the spiritual father will decide whether you need to undertake such a feat or something similar to it.” This young man possessed great humility thanks to the humble thoughts he cultivated within himself. And he undertook this fast out of great love, for the sake of Christ. And it was only natural that Christ strengthened him with His Divine Grace. But if someone [who lacks such humility and] speaks selfishly—saying, “Why can’t I do the same thing, since someone else did it?”—wishes to undertake such a fast, he will fast for only one or two days and then give up. And his mind will also be clouded, because the Grace of God will depart from him. Such a person will even come to

⁸⁵ See Matt. 4:2 and Luke 4:2.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

regret the effort spent on that fast, which he barely managed to endure. He may even go so far as to say, “So what did this fast give me?”

Through fasting, a person is transformed into a lamb. If he is transformed into a beast, it means one of two things: either that the ascetic practice he has undertaken exceeds his strength, or that he is engaging in it out of selfishness and therefore does not receive divine help. Even wild animals are sometimes tamed and subdued by fasting. Just look: when animals are hungry, they approach people. Instinctively, animals understand that they will die of hunger, but by approaching people, they can find food and stay alive. Once I happened to see a wolf that had become as docile as a lamb from hunger. In the winter, when there was a lot of snow, it came down from the mountains and wandered into our yard. My brother and I went out to feed the livestock, and I was holding a lantern. When he saw the wolf, my brother grabbed a poker and started hitting it. But the wolf didn’t react at all.

If a person does not reach the point where he does what he does out of love for God and out of love for his fellow man—his neighbor—then he is wasting his energy in vain. If they fast while harboring a proud thought that they are doing something important, then their entire fast is wasted. Then such a person becomes like a leaky bucket that can’t hold anything. Try pouring water into a leaky bucket—it will all slowly leak out.

The Pleasure of a Light Stomach

If a person does not practice moderation, they carry around a whole store of [fat]. But if they practice moderation and eat only as much as they need, their body burns off what they’ve eaten, and it isn’t stored in the body.

A variety of dishes stretches the stomach and whets the appetite, but beyond that, it makes a person flabby and causes physical agitation. If only one dish is served at a meal and it isn’t very tasty, a person might not even finish it—or, if it is tasty and they get carried away with gluttony, they might eat a little more. However, if you see fish, soup, potatoes, cheese, eggs, salad, fruit, and dessert in front of you, you’ll want to eat it all and even ask for seconds. Your appetite flares up for one thing and then another; after eating one thing, you’ll want to eat the next thing standing right next to it. And just look: a person can’t stand or tolerate even a simple word from their neighbor. They can’t stomach this, they can’t stomach that... But the poor stomach endures and puts up with everything we throw at it. And yet we ask it, “Can you digest this?” In other words, the stomach, which has no reason, surpasses us in virtue! It makes an effort to digest everything! And if one food we’ve eaten is incompatible with another, then, once they enter the stomach, they begin to “quarrel” with one another. And what is left for the stomach to do then? It begins to suffer from indigestion.

— Geronda, how can one break the habit of eating too much?

— You have to rein yourself in a little. Don’t eat what you like, so as not to whet your appetite, because little by little, the “barn” just keeps getting bigger and bigger. Then your stomach—that wicked “tax collector,” as Abba Macarius says—constantly asks for more and more. When you taste something, you enjoy it, but then you feel sleepy: you can’t even work. If, however, you eat only one kind of food, it helps curb your appetite.

— Geronda, what if there’s a variety of dishes on the table, but in small portions—does a person still face the same difficulty?

— Well, the difficulty is the same. It’s just that the political factions are small, and so they can’t form a government!... When there’s a variety of dishes, it’s like a lot of political parties gathering in the stomach. One party annoys another; they clash and fight among themselves—and indigestion sets in...

The pleasure derived from a moderate meal is greater than the pleasure provided by even the most delicious dishes. As a child, I would go into the woods and eat only a small piece of a bagel

each day. Oh, yes, I didn't want anything else! Even the most delicious dishes could not have replaced the spiritual pleasure I experienced. But I did it with joy. However, many people have never experienced the pleasure of a light stomach. At first, when they eat something delicious, they feel pleasure, but then gluttony and overindulgence set in; they eat a lot and—especially in old age—feel heavy. In this way, they deprive themselves of the pleasure of a light stomach.

Part 5.

On the Trials We Face in Life

“To enter Sweet Paradise, one must taste much bitterness in this life and receive a passport after passing the trials.”

Chapter 1.

“I have passed through fire and water...”⁸⁷

The Crosses of Trials

— Geronda, I always wear the little cross you blessed me with. This cross helps me through my difficulties.

— You know, each of our crosses is just a little cross. They're like the little crosses we wear around our necks, the ones that protect us in our lives. Do you really think we're carrying some kind of great cross? Only the Cross of Christ was very heavy, because Christ—out of love for us, human beings—chose not to use His divine power for Himself. And after the Crucifixion, He took, takes, and will continue to take upon Himself the burden of every person's cross, and through His divine help and His sweet comfort, He relieves us of the pain of our trials.

The Good God gives each person a cross in accordance with their strength. God gives a person a cross not so that they may suffer, but so that, through the cross, they may ascend to Heaven. For, in essence, the cross is a ladder to Heaven. Realizing what riches we are storing up in the [heavenly] treasury as we endure the pain of trials, we will not grumble, but will glorify God by taking up the little cross He has given us. By doing so, we will rejoice already in this life, and in the life to come, we will receive both a [spiritual] “pension” and a “lump-sum payment.” There, in Heaven, we are guaranteed possessions and inheritances— —which God has prepared for us. However, if we ask God to spare us from trials, He gives these possessions and inheritances to others, and we are deprived of them. But if we endure, He will also give us spiritual interest.

A person who suffers here is blessed, because the more he suffers in this life, the greater the benefit he receives for the life to come. This is because he is atoning for his sins. The crosses of trials are greater than the talents and gifts that God bestows upon us. Blessed is the person who bears not just one, but five crosses. Suffering or a martyr's death brings with it a pure reward. Therefore, in every trial, let us say: “I thank You, my God, because this was necessary for my salvation.”

⁸⁷ Ps. 65:12.

Trials help people come to their senses

— Geronda, I've received news that my loved ones' suffering shows no sign of ending. Will there ever be an end to their sorrow?

— Be patient, sister, and do not lose hope in God. Looking at all the trials that have befallen your loved ones, it becomes clear that God loves you and allows these trials so that your entire family may be spiritually purified. If you look at the trials that have befallen your family from a worldly perspective, you will seem unhappy. However, when viewed through a spiritual lens, [we will understand] that you are happy, and in the life to come, those who are considered happy in this life will envy you. By enduring all these trials, your parents [are, in effect,] performing a spiritual feat. After all, they do not understand or are unaware of another—a noble, spiritual kind of feat [that is, a feat performed of one's own free will]. But whatever the case may be, there is some mystery hidden in the trials that have befallen your family and certain other families. After all, so many prayers are being offered for your loved ones! Who knows the judgments of God? May God stretch out His hand and put an end to these trials.

— Geronda, isn't it possible for people to come to their senses not through sorrow and trials, but in some other way?

— Every time before allowing a trial to come, God tried to [bring a person to their senses] in a gentle way. However, they did not understand Him, and so He allowed the trial to come. Consider this: if a disobedient child does not listen to his father, the father first tries to correct him gently, allowing him to do as he pleases. However, if the child does not mend his ways, the father replaces gentleness with strictness—in order to set his child straight. So it is with God—sometimes, if a person does not understand when treated gently, He gives them trials so that they may come to their senses. If people did not experience a little pain, illness, and the like, they would turn into beasts and would not draw near to God at all.

This life is fleeting and short. And it is good that it is short, because those bitter sorrows—which, like bitter medicine, heal our souls—will pass quickly. Consider this: even doctors, when patients are suffering, give them bitter medicine, because patients are healed not by what is sweet, but by what is bitter. What I mean to say is that what is bitter brings about both the health of the body and the salvation of the soul.

When we are in pain, Christ visits us

A person who does not go through trials, who does not want to feel pain, does not want to endure sorrow, does not want to be upset or corrected, but strives to live a carefree life, is out of touch with reality. *"You have led us through fire and water and brought us to a place of rest,"*⁸⁸ — says the psalmist.

Consider this: even our Lady, the Most Holy Mother of God, suffered, and the saints of our Church also experienced suffering. Therefore, we too must experience suffering. After all, we are following the same path as they did, with the only difference being that by experiencing a little suffering or sorrow in this life, we pay off the debt [of our sins] and attain salvation. But Christ, too, came to earth through suffering. He descended from Heaven, became incarnate, suffered, and endured the Crucifixion. And now a Christian understands that Christ visits him precisely through this—through suffering.

When a person is afflicted by suffering—that is when Christ visits him. But when a person experiences no sorrow at all—it is as if God has forsaken him. Such a person neither atones for his sins nor builds up any spiritual reserves. Of course, I am speaking of those who [themselves] do not wish to suffer for the sake of their love for Christ. "I am healthy," such a person says. "I have a

⁸⁸ Ps. 65:12.

wonderful appetite. I eat my fill, live a carefree and peaceful life.” And yet such a person does not say, “Glory to You, O God!” If he at least acknowledged [with gratitude] all the blessings that God bestows upon him, that would be one thing. “I was unworthy of this,” such a person ought to say. “But since I am weak, God treats me with leniency.” The Life of Saint Ambrose recounts that on one occasion, the saint and his companions were welcomed to spend the night at the home of a wealthy man. Seeing the immeasurable riches there, Saint Ambrose asked whether this man had ever experienced sorrow even once in his life. “No, never,” replied the rich man. “My wealth is constantly growing, my fields yield bountiful harvests, I feel no pain, and I don’t even know what illness is.” Then Saint Ambrose wept and said to his companions, “Prepare the wagons, and let us leave here at once, for God has never visited this man!” And as soon as the saint and his companions stepped out onto the street, the rich man’s house collapsed! That carefree, sorrowless life this man had led was, in fact, a forsaking by God.⁸⁹

“For the Lord disciplines those He loves...”⁹⁰

— Geronda, why do people suffer so much today?

— Out of God’s love. As a nun, you rise early in the morning, follow your monastic rule, pray with your rosary, perform prostrations, and so on. For laypeople, the hardships they go through are their rule, their canon. Through these hardships and sufferings, people are purified. These sufferings are of greater benefit to them than a carefree worldly life, which does not help them either draw closer to God or accumulate spiritual savings for heaven. Therefore, people should accept sorrows and temptations as gifts from God.

The Good God, desiring His children to return to Him, disciplines them through trials, just as a Good Father does. He does this out of love, out of divine goodness, and not out of malice or worldly, legalistic justice. That is to say, desiring to save His creatures and wanting them to inherit His Heavenly Kingdom, God allows them to face trials. He allows them so that people may engage in struggle, perform acts of courage, and pass the tests of patience in suffering, so that the devil cannot say: “Why are You rewarding him, or how are You saving him? After all, he has not labored.” God is not interested in earthly life; He is interested in the life to come. First and foremost, He cares about our future life, and only then about our earthly life.

— Geronda, why does God send many trials to some people but none at all to others?

— What does Scripture say? “*For the Lord disciplines those He loves...*”⁹¹ For example, suppose a father has eight children. Five live at home with their father, while three leave home and forget about him. If the children living with their father do something wrong, he might give them a scolding, or a light slap on the back of the head, or—if they’re well-behaved—show them affection and give them a piece of chocolate. But those who live far from their father receive neither affection nor a light slap on the head. God acts in the same way. He punishes those who live with Him—and those who are well-disposed toward Him—with a “light slap on the head” when they make a mistake, and they pay for their sin. Or, if He gives them more “slaps on the head,” they accumulate heavenly reward for themselves. And to those who live far from Him, He grants long years of life so that they may repent. That is why we see worldly people committing serious sins and, despite this, enjoying material abundance and living long lives without suffering. This happens by God’s providence—so that these people may repent. If they do not repent, they will have no defense in the life to come.

⁸⁹ See The Great Synaxarion of the Orthodox Church, vol. 12, pp. 243–244.

⁹⁰ Prov. 3:12.

⁹¹ Prov. 3:12.

God is pained by the suffering that people endure

What suffering people go through! How many problems they have! Some come here to tell me about their pain in just two minutes, on the fly, and to get a little comfort. One exhausted mother told me: “Geronda, there are moments when I no longer have the strength to endure. Then I pray: ‘My Christ, give me a little break, and then let the suffering come again.’” How much people need prayer! But beyond that, every trial is also a gift from God. It’s another “point” toward entering the next life. This hope of a reward in the life to come gives me joy, comfort, and strength, and I am able to endure the pain of the sorrows that torment so many, many people.

Our God is not Baal, but the God of love. He is the Father who sees the suffering of His children as they face various temptations and trials that torment them. And He will reward us, provided we endure this small martyrdom of the trial—or, rather, the blessing—that has come upon us.

— Geronda, some people ask: “But isn’t it cruel that God has allowed this to happen? Doesn’t it pain God?”

— God’s sorrow for people who suffer from illness, demons, barbarians, and the like is accompanied by joy over the heavenly reward He has prepared for them. In other words, God has in mind the reward that a person undergoing temptation will receive in Heaven. He knows what awaits such a person in the life to come, and this gives God the “strength to endure” this pain. After all, God allowed Herod to commit so many crimes!⁹² Herod had fourteen thousand infants slaughtered, along with countless parents who refused to let the soldiers kill their children! For those parents were killed as well. The barbaric soldiers, eager to please their commanders, hacked the infants into tiny pieces. And the greater the torment these infants endured, the greater the pain God felt. But His joy was just as great. He rejoiced at the greatest glory that awaited them in Heaven. He rejoiced for these little angels, who were to form the angelic order of martyrs. Angels made of martyrs!

In times of sorrow, God comforts people with true comfort

God, being close to us, sees the sorrows of His children and comforts us like a Good Father. What do you think—does He really want to see His child suffer? God takes into account all his suffering, all his weeping, and then rewards him for it. Only God gives true comfort in times of sorrow. Therefore, a person who, not believing in true life or in God, does not ask for His mercy during soul-wrenching trials, remains in utter despair. Such a person’s life has no meaning. He always remains helpless, inconsolable, and tormented in this life, but on top of that, he condemns his soul for all eternity.

However, spiritual people have no sorrows of their own, because they overcome all the trials that befall them by remaining close to Christ. Such people bear the great bitterness of others’ sorrows, but at the same time, they also receive God’s abundant love. When I sing, “*Do not entrust me to human intercession, All-Holy Lady,*” I sometimes pause at the words ... “*but accept the prayers of Your servant...*” If I have no sorrow, how can I utter the words: “*...for sorrow overwhelms me; I cannot bear it...*”?⁹³ How can I speak a lie? Spiritually speaking, there is no sorrow in trials, because if a person positions himself correctly, spiritually, then everything changes. If a person touches the Sweet Jesus with the bitterness of his pain, then all his bitterness and suffering are transformed into honey.

Having come to understand the mysteries of the spiritual life and the mysterious way in which God works, a person ceases to be distressed by what happens to him. He joyfully accepts the bitter medicine that God gives him for the health of his soul. Such a person regards everything [that happens to him] as the result of his prayer, because he constantly asks God to purify his soul.

⁹² See Matt. 2:16.

⁹³ See The Book of Hours. Moscow, 1990. p. 288.

However, when people view trials from a worldly perspective, they suffer. But since God watches over each of us, each of us must surrender ourselves to Him completely. Otherwise, a person's life turns into torment: he wants everything in his life to go exactly as he wishes. However, things do not go as he wishes, and therefore his soul finds no peace.

Whether a person is full or hungry, whether he is praised or treated unfairly, he should rejoice and face everything with humility and patience. Then God will bestow blessings upon them—until their soul reaches a state where it can no longer contain these blessings. God's blessings will become too great for such a soul to bear. And the more a person progresses spiritually, the more they will see God's love and be moved by it.

Temptations and Sorrows by God's Permission

Sometimes the trials we face are like antibiotics that God gives us to heal the sickness of our souls. These trials provide us with great spiritual help. A person gets a gentle "tap on the back of the head" from God, and his heart softens. Of course, God [even without testing us] knows the state of each person's soul, but since we do not know this, He allows us to go through trials—so that we may come to know ourselves, uncover the passions hidden within us, and not have excessive claims on the Day of Judgment. For even if God were to turn a blind eye to our passions and take us into Paradise just as we are, we would still stir up a storm of confusion and discontent there as well. Therefore, God allows the devil to create temptations here, so that these temptations may shake the dust [of passions] from us, so that through our sorrows our soul may be humbled and purified. And after that, God fills us with His Grace.

True joy springs from the bitterness that a person gladly endures for Christ—He who endured bitterness in order to save us. A Christian should rejoice especially when a trial befalls him, even though he himself gave no cause for it.

Sometimes we say to God, "My God, not knowing what You will do, I surrender myself completely to You so that You may make me a human being." And God, hearing these words, wants to make me not only a human being, but something more than a human being. That is why He allows the devil to come and tempt and torment me. Now, as I'm battling cancer, I see the devil's tricks, and it makes me laugh. That's just the kind of devil he is! Do you know what kind of soap the devil uses to wash a person when God allows him to tempt them so that they may go through trials? The devil washes a person with the foam of his malice. What fine soap he has! Just as a camel spits foam in anger, so does the devil behave in such cases. And then he begins to scrub a person. Of course, he doesn't do this to wash away the dirt and make the person cleaner. No, he does it out of malice. However, God allows the devil to scrub a person until their dirty stains are washed away and they become clean. After all, if God allowed the devil to scrub a person the way clothes are scrubbed when they're being washed, the devil would turn the person into rags.

— Geronda, can we say that the various temptations we face in our lives happen to us by God's will?

— No, let's not confuse God's will with everything that the tempter brings. God grants the devil the freedom to tempt people up to a certain point. And He also leaves people free to choose between good and evil. However, God will not be to blame for the evil that people commit. For example, Judas was a disciple of Christ. But is it acceptable to say that it was God's will for him to become a traitor? No, it was Judas himself who allowed the devil to enter him. One man asked a priest, "Please, Father, say a memorial service for Judas." It was as if he were saying, "You, Christ, are unjust. The fact that Judas betrayed You was Your will. Therefore, help him now."

It rarely happens that God allows certain devout people to go through trials so that someone living a wicked life might come to their senses and repent. Some people, while going through trials,

are paying for the sins of their lives, yet they grumble unjustifiably. God gives them the opportunity to receive help by seeing the example of patience shown by those who suffer without complaining, even though they are not at fault. Such devout people receive a double reward. Suppose a very good, devout head of a family is sitting at home with his wife and children. Suddenly, an earthquake strikes, the house collapses, the entire family is buried under the rubble, and after terrible suffering, they all die. Why did God allow this to happen? So that others—those who are guilty and are being punished—would not grumble.

Therefore, anyone who reflects on the great crosses borne by the righteous never becomes discouraged by their own small trials. Such people see that, even though they have committed various sins in their lives, they suffer less than the righteous, and so they confess, like the wise thief:⁹⁴ “These people have done nothing wrong, yet they have endured such suffering. What kind of suffering do we deserve?” Unfortunately, however, some are like the criminal who was crucified on Christ’s left.⁹⁵ Such people say of the righteous who have endured suffering: “Look, they never let go of the cross their whole lives, and what misfortune has befallen them!”

There are also cases—though very, very rare—when God, out of love, allows certain chosen ascetics to endure great trials. He does this in order to crown them with glory. Such people are imitators of Christ. Consider this: since Saint Syncletica spiritually helped many people through her exhortations, the devil wanted to hinder her in this work, and for three and a half years the venerable one remained silent due to illness.⁹⁶

In other cases, however, a true follower of Christ asks God for the mercy to forgive the sins of his neighbors and not to subject them to His righteous wrath. Such a person asks that God punish him instead of these sinful people, even though he himself is not at fault. Such a person is in close communion with God, and God is deeply moved and touched by the great and noble love of His child. God not only grants such a person the mercy he asks for—that is, not only does He forgive the sins of others—but He also allows this person to suffer a martyr’s death, in accordance with his earnest plea. At the same time, God prepares for such a person the very best heavenly royal palace with even greater glory, because many people, judging by outward appearances, unjustly condemned this person and thought that God was punishing him, supposedly for his own sins.

Ingratitude for God’s Love

— Geronda, are trials always for people’s benefit?

— It depends on how a person responds to trials. Those who lack a good disposition begin to blaspheme God when trials come their way. “Why did this happen to me?” such people complain. “Look, so-and-so has it so good! What kind of God is this who allows all this to happen?” Such people do not say, “*I have sinned*,” but they suffer. Pious people, on the other hand, thank God this way: “Glory to God! This trial has brought me closer to Him. God allowed this for my own good.” Before, such people might not have gone to church at all, but after their trials, they begin attending services, going to confession, and receiving Communion. Moreover, God often leads very hardened people, at some point during their trials, to such a state of remorse that they themselves do a complete about-face and are crushed to dust by the pain they feel for all they have done.

— Geronda, when things are going well for us, should we say, “Glory to You, O God”?

— Well, if we don’t say “Glory to You, O God” in times of joy, how will we say it in times of sorrow? Do you thank God in times of sorrow but refuse to thank Him in times of joy? But, of course,

⁹⁴ See Luke 23:39 and following.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ The commemoration of St. Syncletica is observed on January 5. See *Lives of the Saints in Russian*. January. Moscow, 1904. p. 189

if a person is ungrateful, then God's love is unknown to him. Ingratitude is a great sin. For me, it is a mortal sin. An ungrateful person is never satisfied with anything; nothing brings him joy. He complains about everything. Everything and everyone is to blame in his eyes. Back home in Faras, grape must was a very popular treat. And one night, a young girl started crying because she craved some grape must. What could be done? Her mother had to go to the neighbors and ask for some. After eating a little must, the girl started crying again, stomping her feet on the floor and shouting, "Mom, I want sour cream, too!" "Sweetheart, where am I supposed to find sour cream at a time like this?" her mother asked. No, "I want sour cream," and that's that. What to do? The poor mother trudged over to the neighbor's and asked to borrow some sour cream as well. After tasting the sour cream, the daughter burst into tears again. "Well, why are you crying now?" her mother asked. "Mom, I want you to mix them together for me!" Well then, the mother took the buttermilk and the sour cream and mixed them together. But the daughter wouldn't have it: she wouldn't stop wailing. "Mom, I can't eat them together! I want you to separate them for me!" At that point, the mother had no choice but to give her daughter a good slap on the cheeks! And just like that, the buttermilk was separated from the sour cream.

What I mean is that some people behave just like this young woman, and then God's punishment comes upon them. We must, at the very least—having acknowledged our ingratitude—thank God day and night for the blessings He bestows upon us. By doing so, we will be stepping on the heels of the cowardly devil, who, having gathered all his minions, will vanish like black smoke, because [by acknowledging our ingratitude and thanking God for His blessings], we will be striking the devil where it hurts.

Our Small Trials and the Great Trials of Those Close to Us

In every temptation that befalls us, the best remedy is the even greater trial that has befallen our neighbors. We need only compare it to the trial that has befallen us and see the great difference between them—and the great love that God has shown us by allowing us only a small trial. By doing so, we will give thanks to Him; we will feel pain for our neighbor who is suffering more than we are, and we will pray from the heart that God may send him help. For example, my leg was amputated. "Glory to You, God," I will say, "that I have at least one leg left. After all, someone else has had both legs amputated. And even if I were to become a cripple—if both my arms and legs were cut off—I would still say: 'Glory to You, God, for allowing me to walk on my own two feet for so many years, for others were born unable to move, as cripples.'"

When I heard that a certain head of a household had been suffering from bleeding for eleven years, I said, "I'm nowhere near as bad off as he is! A worldly person has been suffering from bleeding for eleven years—and he has children, has to get up in the morning and go to work—whereas I haven't even suffered from this bleeding for seven years!"⁹⁷ When I think of others—of those who endure such suffering—I cannot justify myself. But when I start thinking about how I'm suffering while others are living the good life—about how I'm forced to get up every half hour at night because of my bowel problems and can't fall asleep, while others sleep soundly—I justify myself, even if I complain. Sister, how long have you been suffering from herpes?⁹⁸

— Eight months, Geronda.

— See? God lets one person suffer from this illness for two months, another for ten months, and a third for fifteen. I understand you. You're in a lot of pain. Some people are driven to despair by this illness. But if a worldly person, after suffering for a month or two from herpes and falling

⁹⁷ Since 1988, the Elder had been suffering from constant intestinal bleeding.

⁹⁸ Shingles is a viral disease characterized by clusters of blisters on the skin set against a red, swollen background. It causes severe pain and various complications in the body. — *Translator's note*

into despair because of the intense pain, learns that a spiritual person has been suffering from the same illness for a whole year and yet endures it without complaining, then he immediately finds comfort. “Look,” says the sick person, “I got sick two months ago and have already reached the point of despair, but this other poor soul has been suffering for a whole year—and nothing! And I’m even a sinner, whereas he lives a spiritual life.” Thus, no one has yet reasoned with or instructed this person, yet he is already receiving help!

The Sorrows That People Cause Us

— Geronda, if a person endures sorrows and injustices from others in accordance with God’s will, does that patience purify him of his passions?

— She’s still asking! It doesn’t just purify him—it distills him! Is there anything greater than that kind of patience? In this way, a person can atone for his sins. Look: a captured criminal is beaten, imprisoned, and there he serves his own little “penance.” And if such a person repents sincerely, he is saved from eternal darkness. Is it a trivial matter if, through earthly suffering, a person pays his debt in eternity?

Endure any sorrow with joy. The sorrows that people inflict on us are sweeter than those sweet “syrups” that those who love us feed us. Consider this: in the Beatitudes, Christ does not say: “Blessed are you when they praise you,” but “*Blessed are you when they revile you...*”⁹⁹ and furthermore, “*when they lie about you.*” When a person is subjected to unjust reviling, he deposits spiritual savings into the heavenly treasury. And if the slander they have suffered is deserved, then they are paying for their sins. Therefore, we must not only endure without complaint those who tempt us, but also feel gratitude toward them, because these people give us a favorable opportunity to exercise ourselves in love, humility, and patience.

Of course, the slanderers are working in cahoots with the troublemaker. But usually, strong winds break and uproot those frail trees with shallow roots. As for the trees with deep roots, strong winds help them grow even deeper.

We must pray for all who slander us and ask God to grant them repentance, enlightenment, and health. We must not harbor even a trace of hatred toward these people. Let us retain only the lesson learned from the temptation we have faced, cast aside all bitterness [from grievances and animosity], and remember the words of the Venerable Ephrem the Syrian: “If you endure slander and afterward the purity of your conscience becomes evident, do not become conceited, but serve the Lord in humility, He who has delivered you from human slander, so that you may not fall as a pitiful victim.”¹⁰⁰

Chapter 2. About Illness

Illnesses Help People

— Geronda, what does the expression “May you find Paradise” mean?

— “May you have a good journey to Paradise.”

— Geronda, could this expression mean, “May you find yourself in a good Paradise”?

⁹⁹ Matt. 5:11.

¹⁰⁰ St. Ephraim the Syrian. Works. Volume I. Thessaloniki, 1988. p. 253.

— Have you ever heard anyone speak ill of Paradise? But be that as it may, to reach that sweet Paradise, a person must taste much bitterness in this life. That way, they'll receive a "passport" to the trials they've endured. What's going on in hospitals! What tragedies! What pain people endure! How many unhappy mothers, on their way to surgery, think of their little ones and are torn with worry about their families! How many fathers have cancer, undergo radiation therapy, and suffer so terribly! These people can't work, yet they have to pay for housing—they have so many expenses! Then there are others, in perfect health, who still can't make ends meet—let alone those who are sick and yet are working themselves to the bone just to somehow cover their family's expenses. I feel terribly weighed down by human suffering. So much I hear every day! Endless suffering, endless hardships!... All day long, my mouth is filled with bitterness from people's suffering, and in the evening I go to bed hungry to get a little rest. I feel immense physical exhaustion, but at the same time, I find inner peace.

— Geronda, does illness always benefit a person?

— Yes, it always brings immense benefit. Illnesses help people who lack virtues to appease God.¹⁰¹ Health is a great thing, but the good that illness brings to a person is something that health cannot provide! Illness brings spiritual good to a person. Illness is a great, great blessing. It purifies a person from sin, and sometimes "guarantees" him [heavenly] reward. A person's soul is like gold, and illness is like fire that purifies that gold. Consider that even Christ said to the Apostle Paul: "*My strength is made perfect in weakness.*"¹⁰² The more a person suffers from illness, the purer and holier he becomes—provided he endures and accepts his illness with joy.

The only thing needed for some illnesses is a little patience. God allows illness so that a person may receive a small reward, and through this illness, God purifies a person of their shortcomings. After all, physical illness helps heal spiritual illness. Physical illness brings humility to a person and thus neutralizes their spiritual illness. God turns everything to the good of the person! Everything He allows brings us spiritual benefit. He knows what each of us needs, and accordingly, He gives us illness—either so that we may receive a reward for it, or so that we may atone for certain sins.

Divine Retribution for Illness

— How is your mother doing?

— Not well, Geronda. From time to time, her fever spikes very high, and it causes her unbearable pain. Her skin cracks and becomes covered with sores, and she can't sleep at night.

— You know, people like that are martyrs. If not fully martyrs, then certainly half-martyrs.

— But for her, Geronda, her whole life is one continuous torment.

— So the reward she'll receive will be all the greater. Do you know how much she's going to receive? She is guaranteed Paradise. Seeing that a person can endure a serious illness, Christ gives him that illness so that, in exchange for a little suffering in this earthly life, he may receive a great reward in eternal life in heaven. He suffers here, but he will receive his reward there, in the life to come, because there is Paradise, and there is a reward [for his sorrows].

A woman with kidney problems came to see me today. She has been undergoing hemodialysis for many years.¹⁰³ "Father," she asked me, "please make the sign of the cross on my arm. There isn't a single healthy spot left on my veins, and I can't even undergo hemodialysis properly." "These wounds and sores on your hands," I said, "will one day turn into diamonds of greater value than the diamonds of this world. How many years have you been undergoing hemodialysis?" "Twelve," she

¹⁰¹ The concept of "apology" to God in Orthodox theology does not have the legal character of Western theology, but expresses God's merciful punishment of the sinner for the sake of his salvation.

¹⁰² 1 Cor. 12:9.

¹⁰³ Hemodialysis—dialysis and ultrafiltration of blood using an "artificial kidney" machine. — *Translator's note.*

replied. “In that case,” I replied, “you’re entitled to both the [spiritual] ‘lump-sum allowance’ and the ‘minimum pension.’” Then she showed me a wound on her other arm and said, “Father, this wound won’t heal. You can see the bone through it.” “Yes,” I replied, “but through you can also see Heaven. Be patient; I wish you much patience. I pray that Christ will multiply His love within you so that you may forget the pain. Of course, I could wish you something else: that your pain might subside, but then much of your reward would vanish. Therefore, what I wished for you at first is better.” These words brought comfort to the unfortunate woman.

When the body undergoes trials, the soul is sanctified. The body—our little mud-brick house—suffers from illness, but the master of that house—our soul—will rejoice eternally in the heavenly palace that Christ is preparing for us. According to this spiritual logic—which seems illogical to the people of this world—I, too, rejoice in and take pride in the physical illnesses and imperfections I have. The only thing I do not think about is the fact that I am to receive my heavenly reward. I understand [my pain] in this way: [through it] I am paying for my ingratitude toward God, since I have not responded appropriately to His great gifts and blessings. For everything in my life is one continuous [spiritual] feast: both my monastic life and my illnesses. God treats me with love in everything; He is merciful to me in all things. However, pray that He will not count all this against me [only] in this life, for then—woe is me, woe! Christ would bestow a great honor upon me if, for the sake of His love, I were to suffer even more. If only He would strengthen me so that I might endure [this pain]. And I do not need any reward.

When a person is in perfect health, that actually means something is wrong with him. It would be better for him to be sick with something. I have gained more benefit from my illness than I did from all the ascetic practices I undertook before I fell ill. That is why I say that if a person has no obligations [toward others], it is better for him to choose illness over health. When healthy, a person remains in debt, but by enduring illness with patience, he will receive a reward. When I lived in a communal monastery,¹⁰⁴ a holy bishop named Hierotheos, who was very old, once came there. He had retired and was living as a hermit at the Skete of Saint Anne. As he was mounting his horse to leave, his trousers rode up, and everyone saw his terribly swollen legs. The monks who were helping him mount the horse were horrified. The bishop sensed this and said, “These are the very best gifts God has bestowed upon me. I ask Him not to take them away from me.”

Patience in the Face of Pain

When we fall ill, it is best to entrust ourselves entirely to Christ. We must remember that our soul has a far greater need for patience and praise during times of suffering than for a “steel-like” body with which we can perform great physical feats. After all, these feats put us at risk of pride and boasting without even realizing it, because it may seem to us as if we are capable of conquering Paradise through our own “cavalry charge.”

Do you know how many years I’ve been in pain? Sometimes it’s bearable, and sometimes it’s unbearable. The pain that’s bearable is a constant state. Do you know how much I’ve suffered from bronchiectasis¹⁰⁵ and from the surgery I had! Then all these problems with my intestines started. After that, for half a year, I suffered from a herniated disc and was in severe pain. I couldn’t bow as much as I used to, and even though it was hard for me to take care of myself, I still had to help the people who came to see me. Then something hard appeared in my abdomen, and I was told it was a hernia. When I got tired, it would start to hurt and swell up a lot. Once, on the eve of the feast of St. Panteleimon the Great Martyr, the hernia swelled up and was painful. However, I had to go to the Panteleimon Hermitage for the All-Night Vigil. “I’ll go, come what may,” I decided, because I

¹⁰⁴ At the Esfigmen Monastery in 1953–1955.

¹⁰⁵ Bronchiectasis—dilation of the bronchi and bronchioles due to prolonged inflammation or obstruction of the small bronchi—*Translator’s note.*

absolutely had to be there for this feast. During the vigil, I wanted to sit down for a moment, but I thought that if I lowered the seat of the stasidia and sat down, everyone else would sit down too. So I chose not to sit at all and stood. After the twelve-hour All-Night Vigil, I thought my condition would get much worse. No sooner had I returned to my cell than someone knocked on the iron knocker by the gate. “Open up, Father!” I heard a voice say. I laughed. “Well, that’s it,” I said to myself, “now just get ready for a nonstop stream of visitors.” And indeed: soon other visitors arrived, then more and more. And in the evening, after seeing off the last visitors, I saw that my hernia... had completely disappeared! But the next day, after I’d rested, it reappeared! After that, it bothered me and caused me pain, but at the same time, it brought me joy. After all, Christ knew about my condition; He also knew what would be good for me. That’s why He left me with this hernia for five years. Do you know how much I suffered because of it?

— Geronda, do you remember when you had problems with your legs?

— That’s another story. I couldn’t stand on my own two feet. And when people came to visit, it wasn’t easy for me. Then the pain in my legs went away, but the bleeding started. The doctors said it was ulcerative colitis. A new chapter began... Seven years of bleeding, of pain... But don’t be discouraged; just pray for the health of my soul. I’m glad that God has honored me and rewarded me with this gift, and I don’t want Him to take it away from me. Praise God, He allows me to benefit from my illnesses. In this way, we’re being tested in patience. Today one thing, tomorrow another... *“For you need patience.”*¹⁰⁶ After all, if we—people who have even a little fear of God—do not endure, what will be left for worldly people to do? However, I see that many laypeople surpass us monks in virtue. My parents told me that when the Farasiots fell ill with something, they did not immediately run to Hajj Fendi to be healed by him. First, they endured the pain. They endured as much as they could—in accordance with their love of God and their patience—because they considered suffering a blessing. “Let me,” they would say, “also torment my soul a little for Christ’s sake, since Christ endured great suffering to save me.” They would go to Hajj Fendi¹⁰⁷ for healing only when they saw that the illness was hindering their work and their families were beginning to suffer. See what self-discipline they had! Since these people, being laypeople, thought this way and endured, how should I—a monk—think? Christ said: *“By your patience you will save your souls.”*¹⁰⁸ Consider this: Job’s acts of charity at the time when he possessed all good things were not as pleasing to God as Job’s patience was during the trials that befell him.¹⁰⁹

— Geronda, when you say that a person endures pain, do you mean that they don’t show at all that they’re in pain?

— At the very least, he can give those around him a hint that he is in pain. He can tell them about his pain, but not reveal just how severe it is. After all, if he completely hides his pain from others, they might be misled by some of his actions. For example, if a monk is suffering from pain and cannot attend a service, and if he does not tell others about his condition, someone with ill intentions might take offense.

Attitude Toward Pain

— Geronda, what kind of pain would you call unbearable?

— Pain that brings tears to one’s eyes. These are not tears of repentance, nor are they tears of joy. To which category do you think these tears belong?

— Perhaps, Geronda, the category of martyrdom?

¹⁰⁶ Heb. 10:36.

¹⁰⁷ This is what the residents of Faras called the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia. — *Translator’s note.*

¹⁰⁸ Luke 21:19.

¹⁰⁹ See the Book of Job.

— Of course—they fall into the category of martyrdom.

— Geronda, when I'm in severe pain, it's hard for me to say the words "Glory to You, O God."

— Why is it so hard for you to say those words? Think about what Christ endured: beatings, humiliation, flogging, crucifixion!¹¹⁰ He endured all of this—"the Sinless One"—¹¹¹—in order to save us. And you, when you are in pain, say: "For the sake of Your love, my Christ, I will endure."

— Geronda, what does it take to overcome pain?

— It takes courage and effort.

— And how can a person overcome unbearable pain?

— If he is a worldly man, then with a worldly song; if he is a spiritual man, then with a spiritual hymn... Once, my father developed a high fever and a terrible headache. Do you know what he did? He ate his fill of salted herring, drank a small glass of wine, and broke into a song: "Awake, my wretched, oppressed people." Then he sang a few more partisan songs, and his headache went away! So—to make the pain go away—we'll sing spiritual hymns! I remember once when I caught a cold and got such a terrible headache that my head felt like it was splitting open. Well, I started singing a very beautiful hymn, and the headache went away. Indeed, singing psalms along with the Jesus Prayer helps a great deal in such cases. It softens the soul and soothes it, because constant sorrows and pains weigh down the soul, and it grows cold. And last night, too, I couldn't sleep because of the pain. I even thought that if I died before dawn, then a single long day would follow for me. After all, in the afterlife there are neither sunsets nor sunrises... But then I took... a pain-relieving "pill"—I sang the troparion: "*Through the sufferings of the saints who endured them for Your sake, we beseech You, O Lord, to heal all our ailments...*"¹¹² The effect of this pill turned out to be long-lasting; it lasted the whole night! Do doctors have pills like this?

— Geronda, they say the pain gets worse at night.

— Yes, people feel worse at night. But besides that, during the day, when they're interacting with others and talking, patients forget about their pain. At night, they're left alone with their thoughts; their minds dwell on the pain, and it seems to them that it's getting worse. You can't escape the pain of illness, but the goal is to tune your [spiritual] mindset to a different frequency so that you can forget about that pain. After all, if you approach pain the wrong way, it hurts twice as much. If you dwell on the pain, it intensifies. But if you bring a kind thought into the mix—for example, by remembering those who are suffering even more than you are, or by singing a hymn—then the pain fades away.

— Geronda, pain usually signals that something is wrong in the body. In that regard, how much attention should we pay to pain?

— You need to see how much energy you have left and adjust your driving accordingly. This is especially true when it comes to an elderly person. Caution is essential here, because if you keep driving an old car at the same speed it used to go when it was new, it will fall apart: the wheels will fly off in one direction, the carburetor in another... When my lower back was aching, I couldn't pray with my rosary while standing. Seeing that my condition had improved slightly, I tried standing up: I prayed with my rosary while standing and made prostrations. My lower back started hurting again. I crouched down a little. Then I said to myself, "Come on, try again." The same thing happened. My lower back started hurting again. After that, I refrained from standing and bowing, but my mind remained calm.

— Geronda, if I know that my pain has no other adverse effects on my body, then it doesn't bother me. However, it does bother me if I know that the pain is a symptom of a serious illness.

¹¹⁰ See Matt. 27:26–44; Mark 15:15–32; Luke 23:23–43; and John 19:1–23.

¹¹¹ See Isaiah 53:9.

¹¹² Troparion to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste; their feast day is celebrated on March 9.

— Look, for example, lower back pain may not have serious consequences for the body, but this pain restricts movement, “paralyzes” a person, and they cannot move. But the body can endure other kinds of pain.

— Geronda, does pain make a person bitter?

— If a person does not approach pain spiritually, it can harden his heart. However, by approaching it spiritually, he finds peace and is comforted by divine consolation. Then illness becomes a feast, a celebration. A person rejoices because he will be counted among the confessors and martyrs. The holy martyrs forgot their pain because their love for Christ was stronger than their pain and neutralized it.

— But isn’t a person who experiences pain and does not approach it spiritually purified?

— A layperson is purified, but a monk is not.

Sharing in Another’s Pain

When a person feels pain for their neighbor, it in some way moves God to compassion. God rejoices because such a person, through their love, shows that they are in communion with God, and this gives them divine consolation. [If this divine consolation did not exist], then a person would not be able to bear the pain for their neighbor.

— Geronda, how can one feel another’s pain?

— If you, too, are in pain, you think about another person’s pain, put yourself in their shoes, and feel a greater pain—not for yourself, but for them. In other words, your own pain helps you understand the pain of others. And when you accept your own pain with joy, you bring comfort to those who are suffering. But, of course, it’s one thing to simply learn that someone has fallen ill, and quite another to fall ill yourself. Only then do you truly understand the sick person. Before, when I heard the word “chemotherapy,”¹¹³ I thought it was “chemo-therapy”—that is, I thought cancer patients were given juices and natural foods as medicine. How was I supposed to know what “chemotherapy” really was? But now I understand what a torment it is.

— Geronda, which is harder to endure—chemotherapy or radiation therapy?

— Which is harder? Neither is any easier—radiation therapy or chemotherapy... And the worst part is that all these treatments kill your appetite. You’re supposed to eat well, but you can’t eat anything. And the doctors keep insisting, “You need to eat well.” I know I should, but how am I supposed to eat when all this chemo and radiation kill my appetite and turn me into a skeleton! When I was undergoing radiation, even though I was burning up, I couldn’t drink any water at all. Even water made me feel sick. It made me want to throw up.¹¹⁴

— Geronda, if you had agreed to the surgery just a little sooner...

— “Before” my illness? I don’t pray for my own recovery because, as a cancer patient, I suffer alongside those who are suffering. I understand those who are in pain better, and I share in their pain. But beyond that, this illness is spiritually beneficial to me as well. I ask only to be able to take care of myself and help others. However, may it be as God wills.

If you have an illness and it doesn’t bother you [that is, you don’t pay any attention to it], then you, so to speak, have the right to ask God to improve the health of other people. But even someone who isn’t in any pain should suffer at least a little for those who are in pain. As the Pharasiots used to say: “I will carry your knapsack”—that is, I will take upon myself your pain, your suffering, your grief.

— Geronda, how did they take this upon themselves?

¹¹³ From the Greek word “χυμός” — juice. — *Translator’s note.*

¹¹⁴ Delivered in June 1994, one month before his death.

— With love. If a person says to someone with love, “I will take your pain,” then he takes it. However, if he takes it, he will then need a great deal of patience, a great deal of courage, and a great deal of strength to bear it. Some people come and say to me, “Geronda, I want to take on your pain.” Some say this out of true courage, but some cowards don’t even know what they’re babbling about. They themselves run to the doctor at the slightest thing and very quickly fall into despair. They can’t even endure their own minor pain, yet they claim they’ll take on my pain! It would be better if they simply endured their own pain, joyfully accepted the afflictions God allows them to face, and didn’t ask—supposedly out of love—to take on someone else’s illness. For if God were suddenly to grant their request, but by that time they themselves had already forgotten what they had asked of Him and began to grumble, then perhaps they would even blame God for what had happened to them.

Patient Care

Last night, as I was walking to church for the vigil, I saw a father in a corner with a little boy in a wheelchair. I went over to them, hugged the little boy, and kissed him. “Do you know that you’re an angel?” I asked him. And to his father I said, “It’s a great honor for you to care for an angel. Rejoice, because you’ll both go to Heaven.” Their faces lit up with joy because they felt divine comfort.

Those who care for the sick, the disabled, and others like them with love and patience wash away their sins through their sacrifice. If they have no sins, then they are sanctified. Once, a woman told me about miraculous events in her life. I was surprised, because the experiences she described are the kind we find in the lives of the saints, yet she was an ordinary, simple woman. But when she told me how she had lived most of her life, I realized that her entire life had been one continuous sacrifice. Even as a young girl, she began caring for the sick because her grandparents, who were ill, lived in her parents’ home. When she got married, her father-in-law and mother-in-law, who were also ill, lived with them. Then her husband fell ill. He was bedridden, and she cared for him. In other words, this woman spent her entire life caring for the sick. All those years, she longed to read spiritual books and attend all-night vigils at the church, but she had no time for it. However, since she had a valid reason, God granted her all His Grace, gathered together.

— Geronda, you know, some people start acting really strange when they get sick.

— Yes, that really does happen. But even healthy people should be at least a little understanding of the anxiety, complaints, grumbling, or odd behavior of the sick, because it’s natural for them. Especially if a person has never been sick himself, he can’t understand someone who is sick. He’s never been sick himself, and that’s why his heart is a little hard.

Those who care for the sick or bedridden must be very attentive and try not to cause the person they are caring for to grumble. They may care for him for many years, but if, in the end, they cause him to grumble even once, they will lose everything. If a person’s soul leaves this world in a state of resentment, then those who caused that resentment are committing a grave sin. Then the Evil One will torment them, ostensibly “refining” their conscience [by reminding them that they drove the person to resentment, and he died].

— Geronda, when you care for a sick person, it’s not just fatigue that drains your strength, but also the emotional strain, because you see a loved one slowly fading away.

— Look, when one family member gets sick, the whole family feels his pain. And if the one who’s sick is the father and he can’t work, then the whole family suffers and falls into hardship. They all worry, wondering whether their father will survive or not. He suffers, and so do his loved ones. As he fades away, so do those around him. And the mother then bears an even heavier burden. She has to take care of the children and go to the hospital to care for the sick man. What I mean is that when a person falls seriously ill, it is not only the person himself who suffers, becomes

exhausted, and wishes to die, but also his loved ones, who care for him—they lose heart, suffer, and become exhausted. And the closer the bonds between loved ones, the more they love one another, the more God allows both the sick person and those caring for them to experience great suffering and great pain toward the end of the illness. They reach the point where they say, “May God take him so that he may rest,” but they, too, will find rest after his passing. Consider this: when, in a very close-knit family, parents die suddenly, without any prior illness, and neither the parents themselves nor their children experience suffering while caring for them, the pain of loss—the pain of separation from their parents—is very great for the children.

— Geronda, to what extent can a person’s mental state affect their physical health?

— If a person is in a good state of mind, it alleviates physical pain. If they are in a bad state of mind, that negative state worsens their [physical] health. Take, for example, a cancer patient whom doctors have given up on. By believing in God and finding themselves in a joyful spiritual atmosphere, they may live longer. Otherwise, their distress could cause them to fade away within a few weeks. Sometimes, from a medical standpoint, a person may appear healthy—their test results and examinations may be normal—but if they carry within themselves something that is crippling their spirit, then in reality they are unhealthy. After all, for the most part, illnesses begin with emotional distress. Everyone has some kind of weak spot. For one person, distress “strikes” the stomach; for another, the head.

The best remedy for illness is the spiritual joy that Divine Grace pours into the soul. Spiritual joy possesses the greatest healing power for all illnesses. It is a divine ointment that heals wounds, whereas distress irritates them.

The Suffering of the Sick and Trust in God

— Geronda, is a person who is seriously ill and has decided to surrender himself completely to God doing the right thing?

— If he has no obligations [to others], let him do as he pleases. However, if he does have obligations to others, then it is up to them to decide whether he should seek medical help or put himself in God’s hands. After all, I didn’t go to the doctor of my own free will either... If I hadn’t gone for what the doctor called a “simple checkup,” the tumor would have completely blocked my intestines. I would have been able to drink only a little liquid, and then it would all have been over... You see how it went: I went for a “simple checkup,” and ended up caught up in such a mess... First a CT scan, then to the cardiologist; my blood protein levels keep going up and down. They cut me open, stitch me up, put in patches... And what came of all this in the end? It looks like I’m going to be stuck here forever...

We usually say, “First, the sick should try to get help from others, and only when they cannot receive human help will God help them.” But we must not forget that, even while receiving help from others, people suffering from serious illnesses endure great suffering.

They are forced to endure a real ordeal. They have to go through countless tests, surgeries, organ transplants, chemotherapy, radiation therapy... Their arms are punctured to insert IVs; the poor souls’ veins burst; they are fed through a tube up their nose; they can’t sleep... And all of this just to do what can be done in a humane way. Do you understand? It’s not a simple matter. For example, pus has accumulated in a wound, and to clean it out, the wound has to be cut open—then everything turns out fine. No, here a person is caught up in a veritable whirlwind. That’s why we shouldn’t say, “Everything’s fine; this patient is in the hands of good doctors”—and use that to reassure ourselves. No, we must keep the following in mind: in order for the patient to receive medical care, he must go through real trials and suffering. We must pray earnestly that Christ will

grant him patience and enlighten the doctors, because doctors—especially if they lack humility—can make mistakes.

Think about it: when a house falls apart, the owner can't stay in it. In the same way, the owner of the body—the soul—cannot remain in its home—the body—if it falls apart. And now they're trying to keep the owner in his house with the help of iron, steel, and vitamins A, B, and C... That is, they're trying to help the sick through science. But not all the sick receive help. And with such help, their lives simply continue with pain—or, rather, their pain continues. After all, science alone is not enough. Faith and prayer are also necessary. Sometimes even here, in the monastery, I see how sisters who were doctors in the secular world want to help the sick more through medical science than through trust in God and prayer. However, heartfelt prayer will make these sisters possessors of the highest medical degree, because, having attained it, they will cease to place their hope in human science. If love is cultivated within a person, accompanied by compassion for all people in general, then divine powers come into play. The only requirement is that deep humility be present in the soul, so that a person does not become proud and offend God by thinking that these powers are their own.

We must not forget that Christ can heal even those illnesses that doctors cannot cure, but there must be a serious reason for Christ to intervene, and the person praying for the sick must be a person of deep faith and great devotion to Christ.

— Geronda, so does that mean that if people are suffering, they shouldn't seek medical help?

— But that's not what I mean, my brother! I'm not saying, for example, that we shouldn't give oxygen to a sick person and let them suffocate. I want to emphasize how much a sick person suffers even while receiving human help, and that we must pray to Christ to help the sick so they won't suffer. If the illness is severe, let us ask Christ to take away this illness with His grace alone. After all, if Christ were to gently stroke the sick on the hand, all their illnesses would vanish and they would recover! Then neither medicine nor poisons would be needed.

And if He gently strokes a person's face, that's even better. And if He also embraces them, the human heart is softened. Do you understand this? However, a great deal of faith is necessary. If the sick person themselves lacks faith, they will not recover.

Sick Children

— Geronda, that sick child whose parents brought him in today is suffering greatly.

— It's all right; his illness will gradually go away. But he will retain this sensitivity for the rest of his life, and he will remember his illness. This sensitivity will help him spiritually.

— Geronda, children with leukemia also suffer greatly.

— Holy Communion is of great help to such children. Many children have been healed of their illnesses through Holy Communion. As we read Psalm 145, in which we ask God to stop the bleeding of those who suffer from it,¹¹⁵ let us pray that God will help children suffering from leukemia, and also that there will be enough blood in hospitals for children suffering from thalassemia.¹¹⁶ These children suffer more than the infants Herod had slaughtered.¹¹⁷ Suffering from illness, little children have a pure reward, because they have no sins. How many little ones will we see in the life to come, together with the martyred, angelic host of the slain infants of Bethlehem! Two-month-old babies undergo surgeries, receive injections, and have IVs inserted! Where on earth can you find a vein on such a tiny little hand! And yet they prick them, prick them... An infant has a brain tumor, and

¹¹⁵ Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia read Psalm 145 on such occasions.

¹¹⁶ Thalassemia—an inherited hemolytic anemia characterized by impaired synthesis of the globin protein, common in Mediterranean countries. The disease leads to progressive anemia, enlargement of the liver and spleen, jaundice, etc.—*Translator's note*.

¹¹⁷ See Matt. 2:16.

they're giving him radiation; his little head lies between thick electrical wires... Even an adult couldn't endure that, let alone infants!

— Geronda, do these babies eventually recover or do they die?

— Well, many of them, of course, die, but what about their parents—how can they leave them without medical care?

— Geronda, is there any point in pediatricians trying to save the lives of premature babies?

— Doctors must do everything they can and, at the same time, pray for these babies. “My God,” the doctors should say, “if this child survives and suffers for the rest of his or her life, I beg You to take him or her to You.” At the same time, however, they must ensure that the infants receive Holy Baptism. Then these infants will welcome their doctors in Paradise with lit candles.

And when children are old enough to understand, doctors need to be very careful not to traumatize them when telling them their diagnosis. A doctor once told an eight-year-old child, “You're going to go blind.” His father came to see me with the child and said right in front of him, “We took him abroad for an examination. They told us he would go blind.” Even a healthy child, if he heard something like that, could be so upset that it would aggravate his own condition. Let alone a sick child!

For a sick person to get well, some sacrifice must be made

If we ask God for something without making any sacrifice ourselves, then our request is of little value. If I sit idly by and say, “My God, I beg You, heal so-and-so who is sick,” but at the same time make no sacrifice myself, then I might as well just be uttering fine words [— throwing them to the wind]. But if I have love, if I make a sacrifice, then Christ, seeing this, will grant my request—provided, of course, that it benefits another. Therefore, when people ask you to pray for a sick person, tell them to pray themselves as well, or at least to try to rid themselves of their own shortcomings.

Some people come to me and ask, “Heal me—I've heard you can help me.” However, these people want help without making any effort themselves. For example, you tell someone, “Don't eat sweets; make this sacrifice so that God will help you.” And they reply, “Why? Can't God help me even without this sacrifice?” Such people can't even sacrifice anything for themselves. How much less would they sacrifice themselves for someone else! But there are also those who refrain from eating sweets so that Christ might help those suffering from diabetes, or who stay awake so that Christ might grant a little sleep to those suffering from insomnia. By acting in this way, a person enters into communion with God. And then God bestows His Grace upon people.

When someone tells me that they can't pray for one of their sick relatives, I advise them to make a sacrifice for that person's sake—to give up something that is harmful to their own health.

Once, a man from Germany came to visit me at my kaliva. He had a paralyzed daughter. The doctors had given up on the girl. The poor father was in utter despair. “Make some kind of sacrifice for the sake of your child's health,” I advised him. “You can't bow in prayer, and you can't pray either. All right, never mind that. Tell me: how many cigarettes do you smoke a day?” “Four and a half packs,” he replied. “Smoke just one pack,” I told him, “and give the money you'd spend on the other three and a half packs as alms to some poor person.” “Father,” he said to me, “if my child gets well, I'll quit smoking altogether.” “No,” I said, “by the time he recovers, it won't matter anymore. You have to quit smoking now. Give up smoking. Don't you love your child?” “I don't love my child?! I'd throw myself off the sixth floor for him,” he replied. “I'm not telling you to jump off the sixth floor; I'm telling you to quit smoking. If you do something crazy like jumping off the sixth floor, you'll leave your child homeless and lose your own soul. I'm advising you to do something much easier: quit smoking. Quit right now!” But he refused to quit smoking under any

circumstances, and in the end, he walked away from me in tears! How can you help someone like that? But those who listen to you do receive help.

Another time, a man came in, gasping for breath from walking. I could tell he smoked a lot, so I said to him, “You’re a strange one—why do you smoke so much? You’ll make yourself sick.” After catching his breath a little, he said, “My wife is very sick, and she might die. Please pray for a miracle. The doctors have given up.” “Do you love your wife?” I asked him. “I do.” “Then why don’t you want to help her yourself? She’s done everything she could, and the doctors have done everything possible, too. Now you’ve come here and are asking me to do what I can as well—that is, to pray that God will help her. But what have you done yourself to ensure your wife receives help?” “What can I do, Geronda?” he asked, surprised. “If,” I told him, “you quit smoking, your wife will recover.” I thought that if God saw that recovery wouldn’t spiritually help his wife, then by quitting smoking, this man would at least rid himself of the harm that smoking causes. A month passed, and he came back, overjoyed, to thank me. “Geronda,” he told me, “I quit smoking, and my wife has recovered.” Some time later, he came to see me again; he was very upset and told me that he had quietly started smoking again, and his wife had fallen seriously ill once more. “Well,” I told him, “now you know the cure yourself. Quit smoking.”

Prayer for the Sick

— Geronda, some people have come asking you to pray for a sick child. They’re also asking if the child will recover. What should I tell them?

— Tell them this: “The Elder will pray. Christ loves this child and will do whatever is best for him. If He sees that the child will become a better person as he grows up, then He will hear the Elder’s prayer. However, if Christ sees that, upon becoming an adult, the child will not be in a good spiritual state, then He will take him to Himself now. He will do this because He loves him.” “Ask,” He says, “and I will give you [what you ask for].”¹¹⁸ But God will give me what I ask for only if I have given myself to God. Otherwise, why would He give me life? So that I might turn away from Him? If I pray for a sick person, I rejoice both when he recovers and when he dies.

— Geronda, are we doing the right thing when we pray for our own health?

— It would be better if we asked God to free us from our passions. In other words, let us first seek and ask for the Kingdom of God. By asking God to heal us from illness, we squander our heavenly inheritance. However, if we cannot endure the suffering that illness brings, then let us ask God to heal us, and He will act in accordance with [what is best for us].

— Geronda, will our prayers help a sick person if he himself is asking God for something else?

— If a sick person asks God to heal only himself, without praying for the healing of other sick people, then he is doing wrong. You, Sister, when you were in the world, worked in a hospital. What did you do when a patient was unable to recite the Jesus Prayer?

— I said it myself, Geronda.

— You certainly did the right thing, but the sick man himself should have prayed as well.

— He prayed, too. He would say, “Most Holy Mother of God, my Lady, save me.” But, Geronda, isn’t enduring pain a form of prayer?

— Well done! Yes, of course, that’s a prayer too! If someone asks you to pray for them because they have surgery scheduled for a certain day, then start praying as soon as they ask you to. Don’t wait until the day and hour when they take them into the operating room to start praying then. And during services, when the priest says, “*For those who are infirm,*” sing “Lord, have mercy” with all your heart. If you take a deep breath and start humming “oo-oo-oo” to the pitch of a tuning fork in

¹¹⁸ See Matt. 7:7; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:10; and John 16:24.

order to sing “Lord, have mercy” more melodiously, then your mind will also be wandering in that “oo-oo-oo...” and all sorts of nonsense, while the unfortunate sick, who are suffering and in agony, will be waiting for a little help from you! After all, the sick are suffering from pain. You are not in pain. So pray for them, that they may receive help. If you do not groan in pain or moan as you toss and turn in your hospital bed, then at least sigh in prayer for the sick. If the healthy do not pray even a little for the sick, then very soon Christ will say to them: “You were healthy and did not pray for those who were suffering? *‘I do not know you...’*”¹¹⁹

If we do not pray for the sick, the illness will follow its natural course. However, if we pray for them, it may alter its natural course. Therefore, always pray for the sick.

Chapter 3.

On the Fact That a Physical Disability Is a Blessing from God

The Proper Attitude Toward Physical Disability

— Geronda, can a physical disability lead a person to develop an inferiority complex?

— Oh, what nonsense!

— However, Geronda, that is exactly what sometimes happens to people with disabilities.

— This happens because they have the wrong mindset. Once they realize that a physical disability is a blessing from God, people adopt the right mindset and are freed from their inferiority complex. When a child who has not received spiritual guidance to find joy in a physical disability has that disability, there are extenuating circumstances if the child suffers from an inferiority complex. But if the child grows up and the sense of inferiority remains, it means that he or she has not grasped the deepest meaning of life. A nine-year-old girl developed a tumor in her eye, and the doctors removed her eye. The children at school teased the poor girl, and she suffered. Her father came to see me at my kaliva and told me what had happened. “Geronda,” he said to me, “I thought that if I bought her everything she asked for, I would be helping her, because she would be happy and forget the distress caused by her disability. I did think about it, but how can I do that? After all, I have five other young children who are jealous of her because they don’t understand anything yet.” “What are you saying?” I replied. “The comfort you’re talking about is false comfort. It won’t solve the problem. If you buy her every dress she asks for now, in a few years she’ll ask you to buy her a ‘Mercedes.’ Where will you find that kind of money? And then she’ll hear that some people on the ranch have their own airplanes, and she’ll demand that you buy her an airplane. What will you do then? Try instead to help your child find joy in having only one eye. Let her think of herself as a martyr. Many holy martyrs had their eyes gouged out, their ears and noses cut off, yet the world laughed at them. However, the saints, suffering from illness and human mockery, did not give in and endured their torments with unyielding patience. If the girl understands this and regards her disability as a reason to glorify God, then God will place her among the ranks of the confessors. Think about it: God arranged for the child’s eye to be removed in such a way that she felt no pain, and then He will even place her among the confessors! Do you think this is a trifling matter? After all, the girl has no sins for which she is paying with her disability. And from this disability, she will receive a pure reward.” The distraught father thanked me and left in good spirits. And he truly helped his daughter understand that her disability was a blessing from God. He helped her glorify God.

¹¹⁹ See Matt. 25:12.

So the girl grew up without any problems, enrolled in the university's philology department, graduated, and now works as a teacher—and she finds more joy in life than other young women, who have everything but are tormented because they haven't grasped the deepest meaning of life.

If people fail to grasp the deepest meaning of life, they suffer even from the blessings and favorable opportunities that God gives them for their salvation. But the one who has the right attitude rejoices in everything. Is he lame? Yet he rejoices in it! Is he not very intelligent? Yet he rejoices in it! As poor as a church mouse? He rejoices in that, too.

Of course, I understand the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, and I pray fervently for them, especially for young women. After all, for a young man, a disability or physical impairment isn't quite as difficult to bear. However, for a young woman who wants to get married, a physical impairment is very hard to endure.

And how the blind suffer! These poor souls cannot take care of themselves. When they walk, they stumble and fall... In my prayers, I ask God to give the blind at least a little light so that they can somehow take care of their own needs.

— That's exactly why I'm upset, Geronda—because I can't read even a single chapter from the Gospel since my eyesight is so poor. And you told us that if a person reads a chapter from the Gospel every day, he becomes sanctified.

— Why are you getting upset over this? Do you think that if you read not a whole chapter, but just a few verses from the Gospel, or just one word from it, or simply reverently kiss this holy book, you won't be sanctified? Besides, you didn't come to Christ just yesterday. Why don't you reflect on what you've read and heard up to this day? The main thing is to set your mind right. Tell yourself this: "Right now, God wants me to be in this state. A few years ago, He wanted me to be in a different state." A devout lawyer lost his sight in his old age. Once he said to me, "Pray, holy elder, that I may be able to read at least a little and that I may be able to recognize my loved ones." "You can recognize your loved ones," I replied, "by their voices. As for reading... you've been reading for so many years! Now pray the Jesus Prayer. In all likelihood, this is exactly what God wants from you right now." After that conversation, the unfortunate man began to experience greater joy than he had when he could still see.

Divine Retribution for a Disability

If, despite our disability, we endure without complaining, we receive a great reward. This is because all people with disabilities set aside some kind of [spiritual] savings for themselves. For example, in the heavenly savings bank, an account is opened for a deaf person for the ear with which he cannot hear, for a blind person—for the blind eye, and for a lame person—for the lame leg. This is a great thing! If these people perform even a small feat in overcoming their passions, they will be rewarded with crowns from God. Just look—after all, war veterans receive a special pension and, in addition, are awarded medals.

If a person possesses beauty, courage, and health, yet does not strive to improve himself or work to overcome his shortcomings, then God will say to him: "In your earthly life, you enjoyed the blessings given to you: courage and the like! What else do I owe you? Nothing." But a person with a disability—whether born with it, inherited it from their parents, or acquired it later—should rejoice, because in the life to come they will receive their reward. Especially if he is not to blame for his disability. In this case, he will receive a pure reward, without any "deductions" or "withholdings." After all, if a person, for example, cannot straighten his leg his entire life, cannot sit down, cannot bow, and so on, this is no small [trial]. In the next life, God will say to such a person: "Come here, My child, and take your seat on this throne forever." That is why I say that it would have been a

thousand times better for me to have been born mentally disabled, blind, or deaf, because in that case, a reward from God would have awaited me.

If people with physical disabilities do not grumble but humbly glorify God and live with Him, they will occupy the best place in Paradise. God will place them alongside the confessors and martyrs who, , gave up their hands and feet for the sake of Christ's love, and now in Paradise they reverently kiss the hands and feet of Christ.

— Geronda, what if, for example, a person suffers from deafness and at the same time whines and complains about his fate?

— Little children whine, too. God doesn't make a big deal out of many things. Consider this: good parents, while loving all their children equally, shower special care on those who are frail or disabled. In the same way, God, our loving Father, treats His children who are physically or spiritually weak—as long as they have a good disposition and allow Him to intervene in their lives.

Mentally disabled children

How those poor mothers with mentally disabled children must suffer. These children are constantly causing a ruckus and making a mess of everything... It's pure torment! I knew a mother whose child was mentally disabled. He's all grown up now—a healthy young man—and she still can't handle him because he does the most unimaginable things! He smears excrement all over the walls, furniture, and sheets... His mother tidies up the house, cleans and washes, puts everything in its place, but he turns everything upside down and smears it with filth. The poor woman hides the cleaning supplies from him, but he finds them and drinks them! He throws entire wardrobes off the balcony. By the grace of God, he hasn't killed anyone yet. And this hasn't been going on for just a day or two. It's been going on for years.

— Geronda, can a person with an intellectual disability possess humility and kindness?

— Of course he can! Just take, for example, that mentally disabled little boy whose parents often bring him here to the monastery. What sensible person possesses the kindness that he has? Just look at how he prays, just look at how he bows! When I was suffering from a hernia and couldn't bow, his parents told him, "Father is sick; he can't bow." "I'll do them for him!" said the little boy, and began to bow on my behalf! And he kept bowing for me, drenched in sweat. What love, what generosity he had! Once, one of the neighborhood children beat him up, but in response to the beating, he held out his hand to the boy and said, "Be well!" Do you see? Which of the so-called "wise" people acts this way, even if they read the Gospel and a whole pile of spiritual books? A few days ago, this boy's entire family came here so that he could meet with me. When they arrived, he sat down next to me, and his little sister sat a little further away. Seeing that his sister was sitting far from me, he said to her, "Go sit next to Father"—and moved her to his place. This child touched my heart, and I gave him a large enamel cross as a blessing—one that had been brought to me from Jerusalem. Taking the cross in his hands, he said, "Grandma, Grandma!"—and showed how he would place this cross on his grandmother's grave! Can you imagine! This little one wants nothing for himself—he wants everything for others! He himself will go to Heaven "without any tests," but he'll bring his parents to Heaven too.

How I wish I were in his place! Even if I didn't understand a thing, even if I couldn't speak! God has given me every blessing, yet despite this, I have ungratefully squandered them. In a life like this little one's, even theologians would pale in comparison. It occurs to me that in Heaven, holy theologians will not be in a better position to know God than such children. And perhaps the Righteous God will give such children something even greater, because in their earthly lives, they were deprived of so much.

Mental Illnesses

— Geronda, if a person falls into melancholy, what should he do to overcome it?

— Divine consolation is necessary.

— And how does one obtain this consolation?

— A person must “cling” to Christ, and Christ will give him that comfort. After all, self-love is often intertwined with selfishness. Most people with schizophrenia are highly sensitive souls. A trivial incident happens to them, or they are unable to overcome some difficulty, and they suffer greatly. Another might kill a person and act as if nothing had happened. Whereas a sensitive person, having accidentally stepped on a kitten’s paw, suffers and can’t sleep because of the distress. And if he can’t sleep for two or three nights, then, of course, he’ll rush to the doctor.

— Geronda, psychologists say that a person with a mental illness will get help if the cause [of their illness] is addressed.

— Yes, but only if there is a valid reason. After all, sometimes people get caught up in thoughts that can drive them mad even in situations where what’s happening is natural and, if I may say so, justified. “Maybe I have a hereditary mental illness? Maybe I’m sick?”—such people torment themselves with these questions. I knew a young man who, while he was a student, read for eleven hours a day. He received a scholarship and helped support his family, since his father was ill. By the end of his studies, he was completely exhausted because he was a sensitive, delicate person. He had constant headaches, and he defended his thesis with great difficulty. Afterward, he began to torment himself with thoughts that he might be suffering from a hereditary mental illness. Heredity? Nonsense! Even if a person simply reads for eleven hours a day, it will lead to exhaustion. And what can one say if a person is studying, helping his parents, and, on top of that, has a sensitive soul!

— Geronda, a child began to sink into melancholy and despondency after his father committed suicide. Could this be hereditary?

— It’s possible that the child suffered emotional trauma. We can’t say with absolute certainty that heredity is the cause here. Furthermore, we don’t know what state his father was in or what led to his suicide. Of course, if the father is a withdrawn person, then the child needs help. After all, if the child also becomes withdrawn and begins to believe that he has a bad genetic predisposition, he could actually become ill.

God always allows a person to go through trials that are within their capacity. But in addition to the burden of the trials themselves, the weight of people’s mockery is added to them, so that the soul bends under this additional weight and begins to grumble. With their taunts, people drive the insane even further out of their minds. After all, in the beginning, madness can be kept within certain limits. In the old days, there were no psychiatric hospitals, and if a person went mad, they were locked in a room with iron bolts. I remember one madwoman; her name was Peristera. She was kept locked up in the house. The children threw stones at her windows and taunted her. The poor woman would fly into a rage, bang on the bolts, scream, and throw everything she could get her hands on out of the house. However, in a different life, you’ll see that Peristera would be superior to many so-called “smart” and “sensible” people.

I remember another incident. In one family, the eldest daughter was slightly mentally disabled. But she had a very kind heart. She was forty years old, but she acted as if she were five. What temptations both adults and children set up for her! One day, her parents left her to cook a meal while they went to work in the fields. The girl’s brother was supposed to come back from the fields, bring some corn, and pick up the prepared lunch so that both her parents and the workers could eat. The poor girl picked zucchini, eggplant, and green beans from the garden and got ready to cook them all, but her younger sister—not a girl, but a veritable temptation—grabbed the donkey by the ear, led him over to the harvested vegetables, and the donkey ate it all. The poor girl didn’t say a word to

anyone and went back to the garden for more vegetables. While she was picking them again, her brother returned from the field, just as she was putting the food on the stove. Her brother unloaded the mules and, seeing that the food wasn't ready yet, began to beat her! What suffering she had to endure every single day! Her poor mother prayed to God that her daughter would die first, and then she herself, because she thought there would be no one to care for her daughter. And indeed, the daughter died first, and then the mother.

But whatever one may say, those with intellectual disabilities are in a better position than others. Nothing can be demanded of such people, and therefore they pass into the next life without having to take any tests.

The Proper Attitude of Parents Toward Their Children's Disabilities

There are mothers who, upon learning during pregnancy that their child will be born disabled or mentally retarded, have an abortion and kill their child. They do not consider that this child also has a soul. Many fathers come to me and say, "My child will be disabled? Why does God do this? I can't bear it." What shamelessness toward God such an attitude embodies—what stubbornness, what selfishness! Such people, if God helps them, will become even worse. Once, a student whose mind had been damaged by his own thoughts came to my kaliva with his father. This young man had been treated with electroshock therapy. The poor fellow endured considerable hardship at home. He was distinguished by his piety. As he performed prostrations, he would bang his head against the ground. "Perhaps God will have mercy on the earth," he would say, "and will have mercy on me, who struck it." In other words, he thought that God, having mercy on the earth—which had been hurt by his blow—would also have mercy on him! This made a deep impression on me! This young man considered himself unworthy. When his condition worsened, he would come to the Holy Mountain. I would set his thoughts aright; for a month or two he would live more or less well, and then it would all start over again. His father did not want their acquaintances to see his son, because it hurt his pride. He suffered from his own selfishness. "My son is compromising me in the eyes of others," he told me. Upon hearing this, his son said to him, "Listen, you'd better accept it! Here I am—a nutcase—and I'm acting naturally! Are you trying to force me into the narrow confines of propriety? Accept that you have a crazy kid, and act naturally. Are you the only one with a crazy kid?" "Wow!" I thought. "Which one of them is actually crazy?"

Do you see how far selfishness can often lead? A father might even wish for his child's death! When I was living in the secular world, I knew a mentally disabled child. His parents wouldn't take him with them when they went to visit friends, so they wouldn't be embarrassed by him! And people laughed at me because I talked to that child. Yet that child held a better place in my heart than those who laughed at him.

Chapter 4. On Spiritual Laws

How Spiritual Laws Work

— Geronda, what are the laws referred to as spiritual?

— Let me explain. Just as there are laws of nature, so too are there spiritual laws in the spiritual life. Suppose a person throws a heavy object upward. The greater the force with which he throws it and the higher he throws it, the greater the force with which the object will fall and shatter. This is a

natural law. And in the spiritual life, the higher a person rises above their pride, the more severe their spiritual fall will be, and in proportion to the height of their pride, they will be shattered [spiritually]. After all, the proud person rises to a certain limit, and then falls and suffers complete failure. *“Let the one who exalts himself be humbled.”*¹²⁰ This is a spiritual law.

However, there is a significant difference between natural and spiritual laws. Natural laws are “uncompassionate,” and a person cannot change them. Spiritual laws, on the other hand, are “compassionate,” and a person can change them. This is because [in the case of spiritual laws] a person is dealing with his Creator and Maker—the All-Merciful God. That is, upon quickly realizing how “high” he has soared due to his pride, a person will say: “My God, I have nothing of my own, and yet I am still proud?! Forgive me!”—and immediately God’s caring hands catch this person and gently lower him down, so that his fall goes unnoticed. In this way, a person is not crushed by the fall, because it was preceded by heartfelt contrition and inner repentance.

The same applies to the Gospel law: *“For whoever takes the sword will perish by the sword.”*¹²¹ In other words, if I strike someone with a sword, then according to spiritual law, I must pay the price by being struck with a sword myself. However, if I recognize my sin, if my own conscience “strikes me with a sword,” and I ask God for forgiveness, then the spiritual laws cease to apply, and I receive God’s love as a healing balm.

In other words, in the depths of God’s judgments—and His judgments are an abyss—we see that God “changes” when people change. If a disobedient child comes to his senses, repents, and is tormented by his conscience, then the father lovingly caresses and comforts him. A person can change God’s decision! This is no trivial matter. Do you do evil? God gives you a slap on the back of the head. Do you say, “I have sinned”? He bestows His blessings upon you.

God’s noble children

Some people have repented of their sin, and God has forgiven them. The spiritual laws have ceased to apply, but despite this, people do not forget their sin. They earnestly ask God to be punished for their sin in this life—to make amends for it. And since they insist on this, the Good God grants their earnest requests. However, in His Heavenly Savings Bank, in Paradise, He saves for them their reward and the spiritual interest that accumulates on it. Such people are the noble children of God, His most earnest children.

The book **The Spiritual Meadow** (¹²²) tells the story of Abba Pimen, who was a shepherd. One day, a man visited him and asked Abba to let him spend the night in his cell. Since he didn’t have a specific place for guests, Abba put the visitor where he himself slept, and went to spend the night in one of the caves. In the morning, when he returned to his cell, the visitor asked him, “How did you spend the night, Abba? Did you get cold?” “No,” replied Abba Pimen, “I spent the night well. I went into a cave and saw a lion sleeping there. I lay down too, leaning my back against its mane. The lion’s breath made the cave as hot as an oven, and I didn’t get cold.” “Weren’t you afraid the lion would eat you?” “No,” replied Abba, “I wasn’t afraid, but know this: I will be devoured by wild beasts.” “How do you know that?” “In the world, I was a shepherd,” replied Abba. “Once, while I was tending my flock, my dogs tore apart a man who was passing by. I could have saved that man, but I remained indifferent. Since then, I have constantly been asking God to let wild beasts devour me. And I believe that God will grant me this mercy.” Indeed, that Abba was devoured by wild beasts. However, in the life to come, such people will occupy the most exalted place.

¹²⁰ Luke 18:14. See also Matt. 23:12.

¹²¹ Cf. Matt. 26:52.

¹²² See *Blessed John Moschus*, **The Spiritual Meadow**. Sergiev Posad, 1915. p. 197.

— Geronda, I read in the commentary to a book by the Church Fathers that when a person commits a sin, he must be punished in order to atone for the evil he has done.

— No, that's not true. If a person repents, he is not punished: Christ grants him mercy. You have to be very careful when reading commentaries on the texts of the Church Fathers, because a "commentator" might be a good person, but his interpretations might be wrong. If you're not sure that the author of the commentary is interpreting everything correctly, it's better to read only the text of the Church Fathers. One person told me that the prophet Isaiah was sawed in half with a wooden saw,¹²³ because he was supposed to be sawed in half for the sins of the people. Whereas in reality, the Prophet himself asked God to have him sawed in half for the sins of the people, and this great love of the Prophet for the people moved God to grant his request. But for every time the saw was drawn across the Prophet's body, God granted him that many crowns. In order to understand certain things, one must have certain prerequisites—one must know something. Take Abba Pimen, whom I mentioned earlier—he could have understood the prophet Isaiah, even though what happened to them was not exactly the same, because in the case of the prophet Isaiah, there was a sacrifice made for the people.

— Geronda, do such cases still occur in our time?

— Yes, of course. I remember one incident that took place when I was living at the Philotheos Monastery. A man burned a Turk in a furnace—the very man who had murdered his father. Later, he repented, came to the Holy Mountain, became a monk, and zealously set about performing monastic deeds. However, day and night he prayed to God to allow him to be burned to death. One day, a fire broke out in the monastery. At that time, I was the cellarer. I filled buckets and other containers with water, and we all ran to put out the fire. And when we had extinguished the fire, we found this monk burned to death. That scene is still vivid in my mind... What had happened? The monk in question was eighty-five years old at the time. Another monk, who was seventy-five years old, was caring for him. That day, the monk caring for the sick man, wanting to ease his rheumatic pain even a little, rubbed kerosene on his legs, wrapped him up, and laid the old man down near the burning hearth. A burning ember flew out of the chestnut firewood. It landed on the feet of the wrapped-up monk; they caught fire, he burned to death, and a fire broke out in the monastery. I was very upset by what had happened and couldn't calm down! Then my spiritual father said to me, "Don't be upset. He himself asked God for this, to atone for his sin. What happened was a gift from God."

Spiritual Laws and God's Love

— Geronda, do spiritual laws always take effect immediately?

— It happens in all sorts of ways. Often, all one can do is marvel! As soon as someone becomes even slightly proud, they immediately suffer a complete failure—that is, the spiritual law takes effect in the blink of an eye. For example, a nun is washing windows and a proud thought crosses her mind that she's washing them better than another sister. Right then, she gets distracted by something [—a clumsy movement]—and the window shatters. In other cases, spiritual laws don't take effect immediately.

— Geronda, when spiritual laws take effect immediately, what does that mean?

— That's a good sign. In such cases, a person must realize that God's love covers him, because he atones for [each of his mistakes] individually, rather than paying for everything all at once [later on]. However, if spiritual laws do not apply to a person, this is dangerous. It shows that the person is a child who has strayed from his Father—God—and that he does not live in His house. There are people who constantly behave with pride, and nothing happens to them. This means that their pride

¹²³ See The Life of the Holy Prophet Isaiah in the book: Lives of the Saints in Russian. The Month of May. Moscow, 1907. p. 287.

is so great that it has ceased to be human. It has reached its highest degree—demonic pride, [Satanic] exaltation. Such a person also falls, but from the other side of the peak. He falls straight into hell. He falls a Luciferian fall, but those on this side of the peak do not see his fall. That is to say, the people in question are not subject to the spiritual law in this life, but the apostolic saying applies to them: *“But wicked men and sorcerers will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”*¹²⁴

— Geronda, can a creation made by human hands be ruined simply because the one who created it admires it?

— Yes, because spiritual laws come into play. God withdraws His Grace from a person, and that person then spoils the object—a work of art or something similar. This happens so that the one who has become proud of the work of his own hands may come to his senses and gain understanding.

— Geronda, so if someone ruins something made by someone else, does that mean spiritual laws have come into effect?

— Yes, of course.

— But couldn't it be that a person ruins something simply out of carelessness or lack of skill?

— Such cases are rare. Therefore, as much as possible, live humbly. Remember that we own nothing. Everything we have has been given to us by God. Everything we have belongs to God. The only things that are truly ours are our sins. If we do not humble ourselves, spiritual laws will constantly come into effect against us until our selfishness is crushed. And so be it—let God arrange everything this way and humble us until death overtakes us.

— Geronda, is it possible for a person not to realize that spiritual laws have come into effect in his life?

— If a person does not watch over himself, then he understands nothing and receives no help from anything. Nothing works in his favor.

— Geronda, does that mean spiritual laws cease to operate only when a person humbles himself?

— Yes, for the most part, they stop acting out of humility or when there's nothing left to ask of a person. Let me give you an example. One woman constantly beat her husband, and he didn't tell anyone because he was a teacher and feared losing his reputation. However, in his case, spiritual laws came into play. When he was a child, he lost his father, and his widowed mother, living on her meager pension, did her best to educate him so he could become a teacher. But instead of being grateful, he beat her. What that poor mother had to endure! And then, when he grew up and got married, God allowed his wife to start beating him. God allowed this so that he might pay for his sin. But do you know what happened next? This man died, and his son began to beat his widow—his own mother. In this way, she too paid for her sin. Then their son also grew up and got married. The young woman he married was not quite right in the head. Not only did she beat him, but she also sang, “Christ is risen from the dead; by death He has vanquished death!” Do you see how God arranged everything so that this man, too, would pay for his sins? However, the spiritual laws ceased to apply at that point, because there was nothing to hold his unfortunate [insane] wife accountable for.

— Geronda, if a person falls into sin and repents for it, is that a way for him to pay off his spiritual debts?

— Does he recognize his duty [to God], or does he grieve selfishly? If he recognizes his duty, he will no longer have to pay for his fall. However, if he does not recognize his duty, God will allow retribution to come upon him. For example, a Christian should give alms to others. If a hard-hearted person does not give alms but hoards and hoards money, then robbers will come upon him, beat him,

¹²⁴ 2 Timothy 3:13.

take his money, and in this way he pays for his mistake. If we have [spiritual] debts and do not pay them off in this life, that is a very bad sign. This means that God has abandoned us. But if a person suffers no punishment and receives only blessings, then apparently he has done something good, and for that good deed, Christ rewards him in this life—twofold or threefold. However, such a person does not pay for his mistakes. And that, too, is bad. Suppose I have done something good to the extent of ten percent, and Christ rewards me for it twenty percent, and I experience neither sorrow nor distress. But in this case, I am not paying for my sins.

As St. Isaac the Syrian says, the misfortunes of this life lessen the torments of hell.¹²⁵ In other words, in such a case, spiritual laws come into effect with regard to a person, and a certain part of the torments of hell disappears.

Part 6.

On Death and the Afterlife

“After all that God has done for us humans, it would be very ungrateful of us to end up in hell and cause Him grief. God forbid that anyone—let alone a human being, or even a little bird—should end up in hell.”

Chapter 1.

On Our Attitude Toward Death

Mortality

— Geronda, what should a person think about on their birthday?

— He should think about the day of his future death and prepare for that great journey.

— Geronda, if, upon exhumation, it turns out that the deceased’s remains have not decomposed, is the reason for this a sin for which the person did not repent?

— No, not always. The reason could be the medications he was taking, or the composition of the cemetery soil. But in any case, if the deceased’s remains are found to be undecayed when they are exhumed, he is paying for some of his sins. This happens because, even after death, he becomes a laughingstock to others.

— Geronda, death is the most certain thing that will happen to a person. Why, then, do we forget about it?

— You know, in the past, in communal monasteries, one of the monks was assigned the duty of reminding the other fathers of death. While the other brothers were carrying out their duties, this monk would approach them and say to each one: “Brothers, we are all destined to die.” Our life is clothed in mortal flesh. This great mystery is not easily understood by those who consist solely of flesh and therefore do not want to die—they do not even want to hear about death. For such people, death becomes a double death and a double sorrow. But, fortunately, the Good God has arranged things so that, at least, the elderly may benefit from certain signs of the old age that is approaching them. After all, the elderly are naturally closer to death than the young. Their hair turns gray, they

¹²⁵ In the Russian translation by S. I. Sobolevsky: “He who is punished here for his shame tastes his own Gehenna.” Our Holy Father Isaac the Syrian. Words of Asceticism. Moscow, 1993. p. 365.

no longer have the same vigor, their strength gradually leaves them, they begin to drool, and in this way they are humbled and are forced to reflect on the vanity of this world. Even if older people want to “act out,” they cannot do so, because everything that happens to them holds them back. Or when they hear that someone of the same age as they are—or even younger—has died, they, too, are reminded of death. Have you seen how, in villages, when the funeral bell rings, the elderly people sitting in the coffeehouse stand up, cross themselves, and ask who has died and when they were born? “Oh,” they say, “just look—our turn has come! We’ll all leave this world!” They understand that their years are gone, that the thread of their life has come to an end, and that death is approaching them. That’s how older people constantly think about death. Try telling a little child, “Be mindful of death.” He’ll answer you, “La-la-la”—and run off to play with his ball again. After all, if God were to help a little child understand that he will die, the poor child would become disillusioned with life and fall into complete despair, because nothing would appeal to him anymore. Therefore, God, as a Good Father, arranges everything so that the child does not understand what death is and plays carefree and joyfully with his ball. However, the older the child gets, the more he gradually comes to understand what death is.

Consider this: even a novice monk—especially if he is young—cannot have a mortal mindset. He thinks he has many years of life ahead of him, and the question of death does not concern him. Do you remember how the Apostle Peter said, “Call the young men so that they may carry away the bodies of Ananias and Sapphira”?¹²⁶ In monasteries, the dead are usually buried by young monks. The older monks, lost in thought, scatter a little earth onto the body of the deceased. They reverently scatter a handful of earth only onto the body and never onto the head of the deceased. While attending a funeral at a monastery, I witnessed an unpleasant scene. As the deceased was being buried and covered with earth, the priest recited the words: “*You are dust, and to dust you shall return.*” While all the monks, following custom, were casting a handful of earth onto the body of their departed brother with great reverence and humility, one young monk picked up his cassock, grabbed a shovel, and, without a second thought, as if on autopilot, began pelting the deceased with whatever he could scoop up onto his shovel: dirt, stones, twigs... He did this to show what a fine fellow he was! He had indeed chosen the moment to demonstrate his strength and his work ethic! It would have been a different matter if they had been planting trees or filling in a ditch at the monastery, and he, showing kindness and self-sacrifice, had said: “The other monks are old men. What can we expect from them—what kind of work? Let me do the work.” In that case, he would have gotten a little more tired, but he would have lightened the load for the others. But even if you see a dead animal, you feel sorry for it. What can I say if you see your brother lying in a grave... And you, like a shovel, indifferently cover him with dirt and stones... All of this shows that this young monk had absolutely no awareness of mortality.

If you want to die, you don't die

— Geronda, the final diagnosis is in. Your tumor is malignant. It’s one of the worst forms of cancer.

— Bring me a handkerchief, and I’ll break into a dance! I’ll dance the “Be Well, Farewell to This Wretched World!” I’ve never danced a day in my life, but now I’ll dance for joy that death is approaching.

— Geronda, the doctor said that first they’ll take you for radiation therapy to shrink the tumor, and then they’ll perform surgery.

— I see. First the air force will bomb them, and then the ground troops will launch their attack! You know what, I’d better go upstairs [right away] and tell you what’s going on up there!... Some

¹²⁶ See Acts 5:6–10.

people—even the elderly—get upset if a doctor tells them, “You’re going to die” or “There’s a fifty percent chance you’ll survive.” They want to live. But for what? It’s amazing! If a young person wants to live, that’s one thing—there’s some justification for it. But when an old person tries to survive, I don’t understand it. I understand if they’re undergoing treatment just to be able to endure the pain somehow. That is, they don’t want their life to be prolonged, but simply want to be able to bear the pain a little and take care of themselves until they die. There’s a point to that kind of treatment.

— Geronda, we pray to God that He may prolong your life.

— Why? Doesn’t the psalm say that seventy years is the span of our life?¹²⁷

— However, the psalmist adds: “*If by reason of strength, eighty years.*”..

— Yes, but then he also says that “*...He multiplies their toil and sickness.*”¹²⁸ So it’s better to find rest in the life to come!

— Geronda, is it possible that, out of humility, a person might feel spiritually unprepared for the next life and want to live a little longer in order to prepare?

— That’s certainly a good thing. But how does such a person know: perhaps if they live longer, they’ll become even worse?

— Geronda, when does a person come to terms with and accept death?

— When? If Christ lives within a person, then death is a joy for him. However, it is not right to rejoice in the fact that you will die simply because you are tired of life. When a person rejoices in death—in the positive sense of the word—death turns away from him and comes to some coward instead! If you want to die, you will not die. A person who lives a carefree life fears death because worldly life brings him pleasure, and he does not want to die. If someone mentions death to such a person, he replies, “Knock three times on a piece of wood!” But the one who suffers, who experiences pain and the like, considers death a deliverance and says, “What a pity that death hasn’t come yet to take me away... Apparently, it has encountered some obstacle along the way.”

Few people wish for death. Most people want to have time to finish something in this life and therefore do not want to die. However, the Good God arranges things so that a person dies—when he or she has reached maturity. But whatever the case may be, a spiritual person, whether young or old, should rejoice both in the fact that he is alive and in the fact that he is destined to die. One must not, however, seek death on his own, because that would be suicide.

For a person who has died to the world and been spiritually resurrected, there is absolutely no anxiety, fear, or worry regarding death, because he awaits death with joy. This is because they will go to Christ and rejoice in His presence. But even while living in this life, they also rejoice, because even in this life they live with Christ and experience a share of heavenly joy while still on earth. Such a person wonders whether there is a joy in Heaven greater than the one they experience while living on earth. The people in question strive with love and self-sacrifice. With death before their eyes and meditating on it daily, they prepare for it more spiritually, strive with greater boldness, and overcome worldly vanity.

The dying

— Geronda, we were asked to pray for a man who had been hanging by a thread for several days, but whose soul had not departed.

— Why didn’t it depart? Did he go to confession?

¹²⁷ Ps. 89:10.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

— No, he doesn't want to go to confession. So, Geronda, is a person's suffering during the departure of his soul caused by his sinfulness?

— No, that's not necessarily true. Nor is it necessarily true that if a person's soul departs quietly and peacefully, that person was in a good state. Even if people suffer and are in agony in the final moments of their lives, that doesn't necessarily mean they have many sins. Some people, out of great humility, earnestly ask God to grant them a bad death—so that after death they may remain unknown. Or someone may have a bad death in order to [spiritually] pay off a small debt. For example, during a person's lifetime, they were praised more than they deserved, so God allowed them to behave strangely at the hour of death in order to fall in the eyes of others. In other cases, God allows some to suffer at the hour of death so that those nearby will understand how hard life is for the soul in hell if it does not put its affairs in order here. But if your [spiritual] papers are in order (that is, if you are in a good spiritual state), then you pass from earthly life into eternal life in such a way that the tangalashki don't even come near you.

— Geronda, if a person is dying or has a serious illness, is it right to tell them the truth?

— It depends on what kind of person he is. Sometimes a person with cancer asks me, "What do you think, Geronda, will I survive or will I die?" If you tell him he's going to die, he'll die right then and there, right before your eyes—from the shock. If you don't tell him that, he'll take heart and face his illness without fear. "Once they've matured," the sick person takes up their cross and finds the strength to overcome whatever happens to them afterward. This means they'll be able to live a few more years, help their family, prepare themselves for death, and also give their loved ones the opportunity to prepare for it. Of course, I don't tell such people that they will live a thousand years or that their illness is a trifle, but I say to them: "It's difficult to help you in a human way. Of course, nothing is impossible for God, but try to get yourself in order spiritually."

— Geronda, sometimes the family members of a seriously ill person are afraid to give him Holy Communion, for fear that he might start thinking about his own death.

— So what, then? Does that mean a person should die without receiving Communion so that he won't realize he's dying and become distressed? Let such a person's loved ones tell him: "Holy Communion is a medicine. It will help you. It would be good for you to receive Communion." In this way, the person receives Communion, is helped, and at the same time prepares for the life to come.

— Geronda, should the Sacrament of Unction be administered to people who are passing from this life?

— For those who are unable to give their soul to God, the "*Rite for the Separation of the Soul from the Body*" is recited. The Sacrament of Unction is administered to all the sick, not just those who are on their deathbed.

— Geronda, is there a connection between the words spoken by a person at the point of death and their spiritual state?

— Let's not jump to conclusions too quickly. At the moment when a person's soul leaves the body, they may experience pain or a sense of heaviness, and their face may show an expression of pain, leading those around them to think they are in a poor spiritual state. However, an expression of pain on the face is different from an expression of anger or fear. Sometimes a person suffers and is tormented by pain, and those around them interpret this as him struggling against demons who have come to take his soul!

— Geronda, does a soul that departs this life in a spiritually orderly state undergo the trials of the afterlife?

— If the soul of a spiritually disciplined person ascends to Heaven, the tangalashki cannot harm it. But if the soul is spiritually undisciplined, the tangalashki torment it. Sometimes this happens as

well: God allows a person's soul to witness the torments of the afterlife at the very moment it leaves the body, in order to help us—those still living—so that we may perform acts of virtue and settle our debts while still in this life. Do you remember the Life of Blessed Theodora?¹²⁹ That is, God allows some people to see the torments so that others may receive help and repent. In the Life of the Venerable Euphrosynus¹³⁰, we read that the abbot of the monastery woke up after a vision with an apple in his hand, so that others might see it and receive help.

And sometimes God allows the soul of a dying person to speak with someone, so that either the dying person himself or those who hear him may repent. You see: God has many ways to save a person. In some cases, He helps a person through angels; in others, through trials or various signs. I knew a woman who treated her husband and mother-in-law brutally and inhumanely. She beat both of them. She herself would go around to the neighbors, gossiping, while she sent her elderly mother-in-law to work in the fields. The poor old woman walked two hours to the fields every day, barely dragging her feet, and worked in the fields from morning till night without complaining to anyone. And then one day, returning home utterly exhausted, she collapsed on the floor and said to her daughter-in-law, "Archangel Michael has come to take my soul. Wipe up the blood, my dear." "What blood?" the daughter-in-law asked fearfully, because she didn't see any blood. "Right here, my dear, blood—blood is flowing! Wipe it up, wipe it up!" The daughter-in-law began looking around for the blood, and in that moment, the old woman gave up her soul to God.

After that incident, the daughter-in-law came to her senses and turned her life around. She went from being a wild beast to a lamb. The fact that she saw her mother-in-law die with those words on her lips, and believed that the Archangel Michael, supposedly with his sword drawn, was taking her soul, happened by God's providence—so that she would be frightened and repent. In other words, God spoke to her in a language she understood, so that she would come to her senses. In all likelihood, this woman had a good disposition.

— Geronda, what does it mean when a dying person calls out to their deceased relatives?

— This often happens to set an example for others—those who are near the dying person. I knew a wealthy lady; she was a saintly woman. She never married and lived with her sister, to whom she had given all her wealth. Her brother-in-law—that is, her sister's husband—died after her. As he was dying, he began to call out to her: "Come here, Despina, let's ask each other for forgiveness. Forgive me... how I tormented you—forgive me!" "Where do you see Despina?" those around him asked. "She's right here—can't you see her, right over there!" he replied, and then he gave up his spirit to God.

— Geronda, do people receive forgiveness if, as they are dying, they ask for forgiveness from someone who has already died?

— God allows this so that they may receive forgiveness at least in this way, because at the hour of death, a person repents and feels the need to ask for forgiveness from those they have wronged.

Suicide

— Geronda, some people, when faced with difficulties in their lives, immediately begin to think about taking their own lives.

— Selfishness comes into play here. Most people who take their own lives are listening to the devil, who tells them that if they end their own lives, they will be spared the inner torment they are experiencing. It is out of selfishness that such people kill themselves. For example, if a person commits theft, and then the theft is discovered and becomes public knowledge, the thief says, "That's

¹²⁹ See *The Trial at the Coffin, or The Tribulations of the Venerable Theodora*. St. Petersburg, 1995.

¹³⁰ The feast day of St. Euphrosyne is celebrated on September 11. See *Lives of the Saints in Russian*. September. Moscow, 1902. pp. 257–260.

it, now I've ruined my reputation"—and instead of repenting, humbling himself, and confessing his sins to free his soul from eternal torment, he goes and kills himself. Another takes his own life because his child is paralyzed. "How can this be: I—and I have a paralyzed child?" such a person says, and falls into despair. But if the responsibility for his child's paralysis lies with him and he acknowledges his guilt, then let him repent. How can he take his own life and leave his child out in the open? Won't his guilt only grow even greater after that?

— Geronda, we often hear that someone took their own life because they were mentally ill.

— People with mental illness who take their own lives have extenuating circumstances because their minds are not right. Even at the mere sight of clouds gathering in the sky, such a person begins to feel a heavy weight on their soul. If some other disorder is added to this, the clouds become even darker. However, the Church does not pray for people who take their own lives without suffering from mental illness, just as it does not pray for deceased heretics. The Church leaves these people to God's judgment and mercy. The priest does not commemorate the names of such people during the Proskomedia nor does he take out a particle for them, because by committing suicide, such people reject life and despise it. Yet life is a gift from God. But by ending their lives by suicide, such people are effectively throwing this gift in God's face.

But we must pray fervently for those who take their own lives, so that the Good God may do something for them as well. After all, we do not know why they took their own lives, nor do we know what state of mind they were in at the very last moment of their lives. Perhaps, at the moment their soul left their body, they repented, asked God for forgiveness, and their repentance was accepted. And perhaps the Angel of the Lord received their soul.

I heard a story about a little girl who lived in a village and used to take her little goat out to graze. She would tie the goat up in a meadow and play nearby. One day, while she was playing, the goat broke free and ran away. The girl went looking for it but couldn't find it, so she returned home without the goat. Her father became terribly angry, beat her, and kicked her out of the house. "Go find the goat!" he said. "If you don't find it, you'd better hang yourself." The poor girl went to look for the goat. Night fell, and she still hadn't returned home. Her parents grew worried, went out to look for her, and found her hanging from a tree. She had made a noose out of the rope to which the goat had been tied and hanged herself. The poor girl was naive and took her father's words literally. She was buried outside the cemetery fence.

Of course, the Church did the right thing by burying her within the church grounds. The Church did this to discourage those who take their own lives over trivial matters. But Christ, too, would be doing the right thing if He were to welcome this girl into Heaven.

Chapter 2.

"Do not grieve as those who have no hope"¹³¹

The Death of Children

— Geronda, a mother lost her child nine years ago. Now she's asking you to pray that she might see him, even if only in a dream, and find comfort.

¹³¹ 1 Thess. 4:13.

— How old was the child? Was he very young? That matters. If the child was very young and if the mother is in a state where she will not lose her peace of mind when he appears, then he will appear to her. The reason the child has not appeared lies within her.

— Geronda, is it possible for a child to appear not to its own mother, who is asking for it, but to someone else?

— Of course it can! After all, God arranges everything for our benefit. When I hear that a young man has died, I grieve, but I grieve in a human way. For if we examine things more deeply, we will see that the more mature a person becomes, the more he must struggle, and the more sins he accumulates. This is especially true of the people of this world: the longer they live, the more—through their own concerns, injustices, and the like—they worsen their condition instead of improving it. Therefore, a person whom God takes from this life in childhood or youth gains more than he loses.

— Geronda, why does God allow so many young people to die?

— No one has ever signed a contract with God specifying when they will die. God takes each person at the most appropriate moment in their life, in a special way suited just for them—so as to save their soul. If God sees that a person will become better, He lets them live. However, when He sees that a person will become worse, He takes them to save them. And others—those who lead sinful lives but have a disposition to do good—He takes to Himself before they have a chance to do that good. God acts this way because He knows that these people would have done good if a favorable opportunity had presented itself. In other words, God is essentially telling them, “Don’t trouble yourselves: the good disposition you already have is enough.” And as for some others—very good people—God takes them to Himself because even flower buds are needed in Paradise.

Of course, it’s not easy for the parents and relatives of a deceased child to understand all this. Consider this: when a little one dies, Christ takes him to Himself as if he were a little angel, while his parents weep and beat their chests—when they should actually be rejoicing. After all, how could they know what he would have become when he grew up? Would he have been saved? When we left Asia Minor by ship in 1924, I was a baby. The ship was full of refugees. I was lying on the deck, wrapped in diapers by my mother. A sailor accidentally stepped on me. My mother thought I was dead and began to cry. A woman from our village unwrapped the swaddling clothes and saw that I was all right. But if I had died then, I would certainly be in Paradise. And now that I’m this old and have gone through so much, I’m still not sure whether I’ll end up there or not.

But, in addition, the death of children also helps their parents. Parents should know that from the moment their child dies, they gain an intercessor in Paradise. When the parents die, their children will come to the gates of Paradise with their angels to welcome the souls of their father and mother. And that is no small thing! Furthermore, to little children who have been tormented by illness or disability, Christ will say, “Come into Heaven and choose the very best place there.” And the children will reply to Christ: “It’s wonderful here, Christ, but we want our mommy to be with us too,” and Christ, hearing the children’s plea, will find a way to save their mother.

Of course, mothers shouldn’t go to the other extreme either. Some mothers believe that their deceased child has become a saint, and this leads them to fall into delusion. One such mother wanted to give me something that had belonged to her deceased son—as a blessing—because she believed he had become a saint. “Bless this,” she asked me, “so I can give his belongings to people as a blessing?” “No,” I told her, “it’s better not to.” Another mother, on Holy Thursday, attached a photograph of her child—who had been killed by the Germans—to the Crucifix standing in the center of the church. She said, “My son suffered just as Christ did.” The women who stayed in the church overnight before Good Friday did not try to stop her; they left her alone so as not to hurt her. And what could they say to her? After all, her soul was traumatized.

Comfort for the Grieving

— Geronda, what immense strength people need in order not to be frightened by sudden death!

— If people have grasped the deepest meaning of life, they find the strength to face death with the right attitude. After all, once they've grasped the meaning of life, they approach death with a spiritual perspective. Do you know how many teenagers get killed on mopeds? Do you know how many young people get into accidents on motorcycles? These kids lift their motorcycles onto the rear wheel, and in that position, it's very easy for them to tip over, hit their heads on the asphalt, and crack their skulls. They even consider a hero anyone who can lift their motorcycle higher than the others. "I," such teenagers boast, "made my motorcycle ride on the rear wheel, like on its hind legs, but then I flipped over." Do you see what the devil is teaching them, wanting them to smash their heads open? After all, if they rode normally, on two wheels, then even if they got into an accident, they might hit something other than their heads and survive. However, if God allows the devil to do evil or allows someone to be careless, it means that something good will come out of the devil's evil or human carelessness.

— Geronda, then why does our Church pray "*and that we may be preserved*" from sudden death?

— That's a different matter. The Church asks God that death not catch us unprepared.

— Geronda, a mother comes here, grieving inconsolably, because she sent her child out on an errand, and he was struck and killed by a car.

— Tell her: "Did the driver hit your child out of malice? No. Did you send him out on an errand so that a car would hit him? No. So say, 'Glory to You, God,' because if the car hadn't hit him, he might have gone down the wrong path. But now God has taken him at the very right moment. Now he is in Heaven, and there's no risk of losing him. Why are you crying? Don't you know that your crying is tormenting your child? What do you want: for your child to suffer, or for him to be happy? Focus on helping your other children who are living far from God. You should be weeping for them, not for the one who died." Just yesterday, a tearful mother came here. "God took my only son," she wept, and blamed God for it. "If you really think about what happened to you," I told her, "you'll come to the conclusion that God has honored you. He took a little angel to Himself—He took a baptized child, preventing him from acquiring sins and passions. God took an angel to Himself, and yet you're still scolding Him for it? Very soon you'll feel how your deceased son is praying to God for you." Then this woman told me about her life. She said that when she was young, she could have had many children, but she didn't want that at the time.

Do you know how many mothers pray and ask that their children may live with God! "I don't know what You'll do, my God," these women say, "but I want my child to be saved, to be with You." However, if God sees that a child is straying from the right path, that he is heading toward destruction and there is no other way to save him, He takes him to Himself through an unexpected death. For example, He allows a drunk driver to hit a child and thus takes the child to Himself. If there were a chance for the child to become a better person, God would have prevented the accident from happening. Later, the intoxication wears off for the person who hit the child. The person comes to his senses, and for the rest of his life, his conscience torments him. "I have committed a crime," such a person says, and constantly asks God to forgive him. In this way, this person is also saved. And the mother of the deceased child, tormented by emotional pain, begins to live more deliberately, reflects on death, and prepares for the life to come. In this way, she, too, is saved. Do you see how God, through the mother's prayers, arranges things so that human souls are saved? However, if mothers do not understand this, they begin to blame God! There's just no end to the things God has to hear from us!

If a person stops viewing things from a worldly perspective, his soul finds peace. After all, how can a person find true comfort if he does not believe in God and in true life—in life after death, in eternal life? When I was at the Stomion Monastery, there was a widow living [nearby] in Konitsa who constantly went to the cemetery and wept there uncontrollably for hours on end. She would bang her head against the gravestone, and her cries would disturb the whole neighborhood! She vented all her pain at the cemetery. People would come there, take her away, but she would always return. This went on for years. This woman's husband had been killed by the Germans, and her daughter, a few years after her father's death, barely nineteen years old, died of heart disease. So this unfortunate woman was left all alone. If someone were to look at what had happened to her from the outside, they would say: "Why did God allow this to happen?" And the woman herself, viewing what had happened to her in exactly that way—from the outside—could find no comfort. One day, when I, too, came to the cemetery to see what was going on, she began to say to me: "Why did God make everything this way? My husband was killed in the war. I had only one daughter. God took her from me too..." She kept talking and talking, blaming God. After letting her vent for a while, I said: "I'll tell you something, too. I knew your husband. He was a very good man. He died in the war for his country, fulfilling his sacred duty. God will not treat him unjustly. Then, after your husband's death, God left you with your daughter for several years. She lived with you, and you found some comfort in that. However, later, seeing that the girl might [soon] stray from the right path, God took her from the good circumstances in which she found herself. He did this to save her." This widow, although her husband was a very quiet man, was herself a little worldly. Of course, I didn't tell her this directly; I didn't say to her, "You were a worldly person," but I asked her, "What are you thinking about right now? Do you love the world?" "I don't want to see anyone or anything," she replied. "You see," I told her, "the world is dead—for you as well. Your grief is helping you, and nothing worldly interests you. Thus, very soon you will all be together in Paradise. To whom else has God granted such an honor as He has to you? Do you understand this?" After this conversation, the poor woman stopped going to the cemetery. As soon as—with someone else's help—she was able to grasp the deepest meaning of life, she immediately found peace.

— Geronda, I've heard that if a person dies a violent death, they are paying for their sins, because the murderer takes on their sins.

— The person who was killed, if I may put it that way, has extenuating circumstances. He might say to God, "I would have repented, but he killed me." Thus, the burden [of his sins] will fall on the murderer. However, some people, who lack sound judgment, say: "If God existed, He would not allow so many crimes to be committed. He would punish the criminals." Such people do not understand that God allows criminals to live so that on the Day of Judgment they will have no excuse for not repenting, even though He gave them years to do so. And God will not spare those whom the criminals kill either.

Death—a separation of just a few years

We must understand that, in reality, a person does not die. Death is simply a transition from one life to another. It is a temporary separation. For example, if a person goes abroad for a year, their loved ones get upset because they'll be apart for a year; or if they leave for ten years, they get upset because of that ten-year separation. In the same way, people should view the separation from loved ones that death brings. For example, if an elderly person loses a loved one, they should say, "We'll meet again in fifteen years." If those who have lost a loved one are still young, let them say, "We'll meet again in fifty years." Of course, a person feels pain over the death of a loved one, but death must be approached spiritually. Remember what the Apostle Paul says? *"Do not grieve as others do*

who have no hope.”¹³² For example, how often would I see my deceased relative if he were still alive? Once a month? So we must consider that there, in eternal life, I will see him constantly. Our anxiety is justified only if the person who died lived a bad life [— not in a Christian way]. For example, if he was a cruel person, then we need to pray a lot for him—if we truly love him and want to meet him in the life to come.

Chapter 3. Life After Death

The Condemned Departed

— Geronda, when a person dies, do they immediately realize what state they are in?

— Yes, he comes to his senses and asks himself, “What have I done?” But—“it’s no use” (¹³³)—in other words, the fact that he’s asking himself that question doesn’t help him anymore. For example, a drunk who has killed his mother laughs and sings songs because he doesn’t understand what he’s done. And when the intoxication wears off, he begins to cry, sob, and ask himself, “What have I done?” The same thing happens to those who live sinfully. These people are like drunkards. They do not understand what they are doing; they do not feel guilty. However, when they die, the [earthly] intoxication fades from their minds, and they come to their senses. The eyes of their souls are opened, and they realize their guilt, because the soul, having left the body, moves, sees, and perceives everything with unfathomable speed.

Some people are concerned about when the Second Coming will take place. However, for a person who is dying, the Second Coming—if I may put it that way—is already upon them. This is because a person is judged according to the state in which death finds them.

— Geronda, what are those who are currently suffering in hell experiencing right now?

— These people have been condemned. While in prison, they suffer torments commensurate with the sins they committed during their earthly lives. These people await the final judgment—the coming Judgment of Christ. But among them are those sentenced to strict and special conditions, and there are also those sentenced to milder punishments.

— And where are the saints and the repentant thief now?¹³⁴

— The saints and the repentant thief are now in Paradise, but they have not yet received their final glory, just as those condemned in hell have not yet received their final condemnation. Centuries ago, God said: “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*”¹³⁵ But despite this, He keeps extending and extending the time, because He is waiting for us to repent.¹³⁶ But we, by continuing to dwell in our passions and sins, thereby show injustice toward the saints, because [because of us] they cannot receive the ultimate glory, which they will receive after the coming Last Judgment.

Prayers for the Departed and Memorial Services

— Geronda, can the condemned pray for the departed?

¹³² 1 Thess. 4:13.

¹³³ A Turkish expression meaning “it makes no sense,” “meaningless.”

¹³⁴ See Luke 23:32–33 and 39–43.

¹³⁵ Matt. 3:2.

¹³⁶ By saying “ours,” the Elder meant all of humanity.

— They come to their senses and ask for help, but they can no longer help themselves. Those in hell want only one thing from Christ: that He grant them five minutes of earthly life so they can repent. We who live on earth have time to repent, whereas the unfortunate departed can no longer improve their situation on their own but are waiting for our help. Therefore, we are obligated to help them through our prayers.

My intuition tells me that only ten percent of the condemned dead are in a demonic state and, while in hell, blaspheme against God, just as demons do. These souls not only do not ask for help, but they also do not accept it. And why would they need help? What can God do for them? Imagine a child who leaves his father's house, squanders all his father's wealth, and, to top it all off, reviles his father with his final words. Well, how could the father help him then? However, other damned souls in hell—those who possess a modicum of love—feel their guilt, repent, and suffer for their sins. They cry out for help and receive substantial aid through the prayers of believers. In other words, God is now giving these condemned people a favorable opportunity to receive help until the Second Coming. In earthly life, a friend of the king can intercede with him to help a condemned person. Similarly, if a person is a “friend” of God, he can intercede through prayer before God and plead on behalf of the condemned departed to be transferred from one “dungeon” to another—to a better one—from one “cell” to another, a more comfortable one. He can even intercede for their transfer from a “cell” to some “room” or “apartment.”

Just as, when we visit prisoners, we bring them refreshing drinks and the like, thereby alleviating their suffering, so too do we alleviate the suffering of the departed through the prayers and alms we offer for the repose of their souls. The prayers of the living for the departed and the services performed for the repose of their souls are the last opportunity for the departed to receive the help that God grants them—until the Second Coming. After the Last Judgment, they will no longer have the opportunity to receive such help.

God wants to help the departed because He feels compassion for them, but He does not do so out of a sense of nobility. He does not want to give the devil the right to say, “How can You save this sinner, since he did not make any effort at all?” However, by praying for the departed, we give God the “right” to intervene. It should also be noted that our prayers for the departed move God's heart more deeply than our prayers for the living.

That is why our Church has established the blessing of memorial koliva, memorial services, and panikhidas. Memorial services are the best intercessors for the souls of the departed. Memorial services possess such power that they can even deliver a soul from hell. And after every Divine Liturgy, bless koliva for the departed. There is a meaning in wheat: *“It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption,”*¹³⁷ — as Holy Scripture says. In the secular world, some people are too lazy to cook a little wheat and bring raisins, cookies, and biscuits to church so that the priests will read a prayer over all of this for the repose of the departed. But on the Holy Mountain, elderly monks consecrate kolivo at every Divine Liturgy—both for the departed and for the saint being honored—in order to receive his blessing.

— Geronda, do people who have recently passed away have a greater need for prayer?

— Of course! When someone first goes to prison, isn't it especially hard for them at first? Let's pray for the departed who did not please God, so that God might help them in some way. Especially if we know that a person was harsh or cruel—or rather, if they seemed cruel, because sometimes we consider a person cruel when in reality they are not. And if such a person also lived a sinful life, then we must pray for him fervently, submit his name for commemoration during the Divine Liturgy, include him in the forty-day memorial service, and give alms to the poor for the salvation of his soul—so that, upon hearing the poor people's prayer, “Blessed be his ashes,” God may be moved to

¹³⁷ 1 Cor. 15:42.

mercy and have compassion on that person. In this way, what the person failed to do for himself, we will do for him. But if a person possessed goodness—even if he did not live a good life—then even a small prayer brings him great benefit. This is because he had a good disposition.

I know of cases that attest to the benefit the departed receive from the prayers of spiritual people. A man came to me in my cell and said, weeping, “Geronda, I had stopped praying for a deceased acquaintance, and he appeared to me in a dream. ‘You,’ he said, ‘haven’t helped me for twenty days now. ‘You’ve forgotten me, and I’m suffering.’ And indeed, I had forgotten about him exactly twenty days ago because of my many worries, and during those days I hadn’t even prayed for myself.”

— Geronda, when someone dies and we are asked to pray for them, is it proper to say one rosary for the repose of their soul during the first forty days after their passing?

— If you’re praying for the deceased using prayer beads, pray for other departed souls as well. Why should a train travel such a long distance with only one passenger? After all, it can take others along too. Do you know how many of the departed are in need of prayer? These poor souls are asking for help, and they have no one to pray for them! Some people very often hold memorial services for one of their deceased relatives. But even the person for whom the prayer is offered does not receive help from this, because such a prayer is not very pleasing to God. Since they have already held so many memorial services for this deceased person, let them pray for other departed souls at the same time.

— Geronda, sometimes I start to worry about my father’s salvation because he had no connection to the Church.

— You can’t know until the very last moment what God’s Judgment will be like. When does this worry you? Every Saturday?

— I haven’t been keeping track. But why every Saturday?

— Because Saturday is the day of the departed; the departed have a claim to it.

— Geronda, what about those who have passed away—for whom there is no one to pray? Do they receive help from the prayers of people who pray for the departed in general—without mentioning specific names?

— Of course they do. When I pray for all the departed, I see my own parents in my dreams, because they rejoice in the prayers I offer. Every time the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in my cell, I also perform a general memorial service for all the departed, praying for departed kings, bishops, and so on. And at the end, I say, “*and those whose names we have not mentioned.*” And if I sometimes omit the prayer for the departed, the deceased people I know appear to me. One of my relatives was killed in the war, and I did not write down his name for commemoration in the memorial service because it had already been recorded for commemoration during the Proskomedie along with others who had died a heroic death. And so I saw this man standing before me in full height during the memorial service. And you, too, should submit for remembrance at the Proskomedie not only the names of the sick, but also the names of the departed, because the departed have a great need for prayers.

The Best Way to Remember the Deceased

More beneficial than all the commemorations and memorial services we can perform for the departed will be our mindful way of life—the struggle we undertake to cut away our shortcomings and purify our souls. For the result of our freedom from material things and from the passions of the soul will not only be that we ourselves feel relief. Our departed forefathers of the entire lineage will also find relief. The departed experience joy when their descendant lives with God. If we are not in a good spiritual state, then our departed parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—all our ancestors—suffer. “Look at how our descendant is living!”—they say, and they become distressed.

However, if we are in a good spiritual state, they rejoice, because they were God's co-workers in our birth, and God is, in a sense, obligated to help them. In other words, it will bring joy to the departed if we make an effort and strive to please God with our lives. By doing so, we will be reunited with our departed loved ones in Paradise, and together we will live in eternal life.

It follows, then, that it is worth striving and waging a battle against our old self so that, having become new, it may no longer harm either itself or others, but may help both itself and others—whether they are living or deceased.

The Boldness of the Righteous Before God

— Geronda, in your letter to novice monks, you write: “Although true monks understand that what they receive in this life is only a part of the joy of Paradise and that in Paradise it will be greater, they nevertheless, out of great love for their neighbor, wish to live on earth a little longer to help people through prayer, so that God may intervene in the affairs of the world and the world may receive help.”¹³⁸

— Read: “Monks want to live on earth so that they may suffer alongside people and help them through prayer.”

— Geronda, in the next life, will a true monk also help people through his prayers?

— He will continue to help them through his prayers in the life to come, but then he will not suffer, whereas now he suffers with them. He does not live on earth singing and dancing, “with happy eyes and a radiant face”! However, the greater the suffering a monk experiences for his neighbor, the greater the divine consolation he receives, and this reward in a way lets the monk know that his neighbor has benefited. This heavenly joy is the divine reward for the pain he experiences for his brother.

— Geronda, do the saints—the ones we ask for help—not share in our suffering?

— Yes, my brother, — after all, there's no pain there! Where would they suffer? In Paradise? “*Where there is no sickness, no sorrow, no sighing.*”¹³⁹ Isn't that what is said about Paradise? Moreover, the saints know [from experience] about the divine reward that will be bestowed upon those who suffer in this life, and this knowledge brings them joy. After all, how else could God Himself, possessing so much love and compassion, bear this great human suffering? He can bear it because He knows of the divine reward that awaits those who suffer. That is, the more people suffer here, the greater the heavenly reward God sets aside for them in Heaven. But we do not see any of this, and that is why we feel compassion for those who are in pain. However, if a person can see even a little of what awaits the suffering in the life to come, and knows about the divine reward they will receive, then their suffering is not so great.

— Geronda, what if we ask God to help a departed soul who doesn't need that help? Is our prayer then in vain?

— How could it possibly be in vain? When we say, “*Grant rest to Your servant (so-and-so),*” and that person is already close to God in the next life, he does not take offense at us. On the contrary: our prayer moves him to compassion. “Look,” he says, “I'm in Paradise, close to God, and they're worried.” So our prayer stirs this person's love for us, and by praying to God on our behalf, he helps us even more. But besides that, how do you know what state a particular departed soul is in? Of course, first and foremost, you should pray for those whom you know grieved God during their earthly lives. Then you should pray for other departed souls like them, and after that—pray for all the departed in general.

¹³⁸ Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. Letters. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. p. 44.

¹³⁹ From the funeral kontakion “*With the saints, grant rest...*”

The Coming Last Judgment

— Geronda, how is the soul purified?

— If a person strives to observe and fulfill God’s commandments, if he works on himself, if he purifies himself of passions, then his mind is enlightened. He rises to the heights of contemplation, and his soul becomes like the soul of man before the fall of the first humans. A person will be in this state after the resurrection of the dead. However, having been completely purified of passions, a person may experience the resurrection of his soul even before the general resurrection. If this happens, his body will be angelic and incorporeal, and he will no longer be concerned with material food.

— Geronda, how will the Last Judgment take place?

— At the Last Judgment, the true state of every person will be revealed in an instant. Each person will go to the place they deserve. Just like on TV, everyone will see both their own wickedness and the spiritual state of others. A person will look at their neighbor as if in a mirror and, bowing their head, will go to their place. For example, a daughter-in-law in her earthly life sat with her legs crossed in front of her mother-in-law, while the mother-in-law, with a broken leg, cared for her—the daughter-in-law’s son—her own grandson. If, at the Last Judgment, this daughter-in-law sees that Christ is placing her mother-in-law in Paradise, while she herself is not admitted there, she will be unable to object or ask Christ why He is doing this. After all, that earthly scene will be vividly before her eyes. She will remember how her mother-in-law, with a broken leg, cared for her grandson, and she will not dare to enter Paradise. And besides, she herself would not have a place in Paradise. Monks, on the other hand, will see the hardships and trials that laypeople endured, and they will see how those laypeople overcame them. If the monks lived improperly, they will, with their heads bowed, go of their own accord to the place they deserve. Nuns who have not pleased God will see at the Last Judgment heroic mothers who did not take monastic vows, did not have the blessings and favorable opportunities that nuns have, and yet, despite this, performed feats of virtue and attained a high spiritual state. How, then, upon seeing all this, will the nuns be ashamed of the pettiness and baseness they engaged in—and from which they themselves suffered! “That is how,” a thought tells me, “the Last Judgment will take place.” That is to say, at the Last Judgment, Christ will not say: “Come here—what have you been up to?” or “You’ll go to hell, and you to Paradise.” No: each person, comparing themselves to others, will go to the place they deserve.

The Afterlife

— Geronda, I brought some sweets for you to share with the sisters.

— Just look how happy they are! In the next life, we’ll say, “How we used to rejoice over such trifles! How those trifles used to move us back then!” But right now, oh my, our hearts are simply leaping with joy.

— Geronda, how can we understand [the transience of these joys] right now?

— If you understand this now, you won’t say that in the life to come. Whatever anyone says, those who live there in Heaven live well. Do you know what kind of “handicrafts” they do in Heaven? They constantly glorify God.

— Geronda, why is the body of a deceased person called “remains”?

— Because the body is what remains on earth after a person dies. The true self—the soul—ascends to Heaven. At the coming Judgment, God will raise the body as well, so that it may be judged along with the soul, because the person lived and sinned with it. In the afterlife, everyone will have the same body—a spiritual body—and everyone will be the same height: both short and tall; everyone will be the same age: young people, the elderly, and infants—since all people have the same soul. In other words, in the afterlife, all people will have the same angelic age.

— Geronda, in the next life, will those who are in Hell be able to see those who are in Heaven?

— Imagine there's a fire burning in a room at night. Those standing outside can see those inside that brightly lit room. Likewise, those in Hell will be able to see those in Paradise. And this will be an even greater torment for them. And imagine this again: those who are in the light at night cannot see those standing outside in the darkness. Likewise, those in Paradise will not see those in Hell. For if those in Paradise could see the sinners suffering, it would cause them pain; they would grieve over their bitter fate and would be unable to enjoy Paradise. But in Paradise, "*there is no sickness....*" Those in Paradise will not only fail to see those in Hell—they will not even remember whether they had a brother, a father, or a mother, if those people are not in Paradise with them. "*On that day all his thoughts will perish,*"¹⁴⁰ — says the psalmist. For if those in Paradise were to remember their relatives suffering in Hell, what kind of Paradise would that be for them? And not only that: those in Paradise will think that no other people [besides those in Paradise] exist. Likewise, they will not remember the sins they committed during their earthly lives. If they were to remember their sins, their love for God would make it unbearable for them to think that they had grieved Him.

It should also be noted that the amount of joy each person will experience in Paradise will not be the same. One will have a thimbleful of joy, another a cupful, and a third a whole lake of joy. However, everyone will feel fulfilled, and no one will know how much joy or divine delight another is experiencing. The Good God arranged it this way because, if one person knew that another was experiencing greater joy than he was, then Paradise would not be Paradise, for then [envy similar to that on earth] would begin even in Paradise: "Why does he experience greater joy, and I less?" That is to say, everyone in Paradise will see the glory of God in accordance with the purity of their inner eyes. However, the acuity of this spiritual vision [of God's glory] will not be determined by God. It will depend on the purity of each individual person.

— But there are some, Geronda, who don't believe that Hell and Heaven exist.

— Do they not believe that there is a hell and a heaven? But if there is no heaven and no hell, how can the dead exist in nothingness? After all, they are souls! God is immortal [by nature], and man is immortal by Grace. Consequently, he will remain immortal even in hell. Furthermore, even in this earthly life, our soul experiences Heaven or hell to some extent—depending on the state it is in. If a person is tormented by remorse, if he experiences fear, confusion, mental anguish, despair, or is consumed by hatred, envy, and the like, then he [even in this earthly life] lives in hellish torment. But if a person possesses love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, and the like, then they live in Paradise. The entire foundation is the soul. After all, it is the soul that feels both joy and pain. Try approaching a deceased person and saying the most pleasant things to them, for example: "Your brother has arrived from America," or something similar. He won't understand a thing. If, on the other hand, you pounce on him and break his arms and legs, he still won't understand a thing. It follows from this that it is nothing other than the soul that feels within a person. Doesn't all this give pause to those who doubt the existence of Hell and Heaven? Or suppose you're having a beautiful, pleasant dream. You're happy, your heart beats sweetly, and you don't want the dream to end. You wake up, and you're sorry that you've woken up. Or perhaps you have a bad dream. For example, you dream that you fell and broke your legs; in the dream, you suffer and cry. Out of fear, you wake up with tears in your eyes, see that nothing has actually happened to you, and joyfully exclaim, "Thank God it was just a dream!" In other words, the soul is involved in this. When a person has a bad dream, they suffer more than they would in reality, just as a sick person suffers more at night than during the day. Likewise, when a person dies and goes to hellish torment, it will be more painful for them [than the state of hellish torment they may have experienced on earth]. Imagine a person endlessly reliving a nightmare and suffering eternally. You can't even endure a bad dream for a few

¹⁴⁰ Ps. 145:4.

minutes. But imagine—God forbid!—being in such anguish [forever]. That’s why it’s better not to end up in hell. What do you say to that?

— Geronda, we’ve been struggling for so long to avoid going to hell. So, in your opinion, are we going to end up there after all?

— If we don’t use our heads, we’re in for it. Here’s what I wish for us: if we’re going to Heaven, then let it be for all of us; and if we’re going to Hell, then let it be for none of us... Am I right or not? It would be very ungrateful if, after all that God has done for us humans, we were to end up in the torments of Hell and cause Him grief. God forbid—not only that a person should end up in Hell, but even a little bird.

May the Good God grant us sincere repentance, so that death may find us in a good spiritual state and we may return once more to His Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.