

Blessed Memory
Elder Paisios of Mount Athos
Words

Volume V
Passions and Virtues

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Preface

The late Elder Paisios told us at the beginning of our communal life in 1968: *"There is one virtue—humility—but since you do not understand this, I will add love as well. But does anyone who possesses humility not also possess love?"* These "sister virtues," as the Elder called humility and love, are the foundation of the spiritual life, for they draw God's grace upon a person, and from them all other virtues are born. *"Simply cultivate humility and love," he told us, "and as soon as these virtues develop, pride and malice will be exhausted, and the agony of the passions will begin."*

This fifth volume, published with the blessing of His Eminence Nikodimos, Metropolitan of Kassandra, is a collection of the Elder's words concerning the passions and virtues. These words do not constitute a systematic teaching nor do they cover all passions and all virtues. They are compiled from the Elder's answers to our questions about discerning and healing the passions, as well as about cultivating virtues. These answers are of interest not only to monks but to anyone who has a sincere concern for cultivating virtues. Elder Paisios, known for his methods of pastoral guidance—his apt examples and sparkling humor—warms the soul with spiritual warmth, under the influence of which the flowers of repentance bloom in the soul, and it bears the fruit of virtue. He urges us to courageously look our old self in the face, to hate its "vile mask," and to cast it off. We are confident that the Elder's simple yet enlightened words, illuminated by the light of God's grace, will help us fight with even greater zeal against the slavery of the passions and feel ourselves to be free people in Christ.

Elder Paisios said: *"God does not give man vices, but powers. Depending on how a person uses the powers of his soul, he will become either better or worse."* That is, if we use these powers in accordance with God's will, we draw near to God and become like Him by grace. If we use them in

accordance with the “desires of the old man,” we become slaves to our passions and drift away from God. To become a “new man,” one must bring one’s will into harmony with God’s will, which is expressed in God’s commandments. *“By keeping God’s commandments,”* Elder Paisios said, *“we cultivate virtue and attain health of the soul.”*

Geronda particularly emphasized that Divine Grace ceases to work in a person who gives in to his passions. Therefore, when someone told the Elder that they were succumbing to some passion, he would usually reply, *“Be careful; by doing this, you are driving away the Grace of God.”* When we asked him how to obtain the Grace of God or how a person can draw near to God, he would answer us in different ways: sometimes he said that this could be achieved through humility; sometimes he explained how one could draw near to God through love and inner nobility; sometimes he taught how to attain this through self-sacrifice and charity; and sometimes he emphasized the renunciation of one’s “self.” For these are the qualities of the new man, the man freed from passions. *“When I say that one must cast aside oneself,”* the Elder would say, *“I mean to cast aside one’s passions, to shed one’s old self... If we renounce ourselves and the unscrupulous tenant—our old self—leaves its dwelling, then the new man, the man of the New Testament, will take up residence in the heart in the space that has been freed.”*

This volume consists of two sections, each with four parts. The first section is devoted to the passions; the second, to the virtues.

The first part of the first section is devoted to self-love, “the mother of passions,” since all passions—both bodily ones, such as gluttony, sensuality, and others, and spiritual ones, such as pride, envy, and others—“stem from this.”

The second part deals with pride—the “general headquarters of the passions,” as the Elder called it. One might say that *“just as there is one virtue—humility”*—so there is also one passion—pride, because it *“drove us out of paradise onto earth, and now seeks to send us from earth to hell.”*

The third part is devoted to judgment, which arises from pride and is *“filled with injustice.”* Man turns the gift of reason, given to him by God to distinguish good from evil, into the passion of judgment, which God particularly abhors.

The fourth part deals with the passions of envy, anger, and despondency. They, too, represent a perversion of the soul’s faculties and are the result of their misuse. We transform the desire, which God has given us so that we may strive for the good, into envy and malice, and we direct the irritable force inherent in us from birth—which we should use for a courageous struggle against evil—against our neighbor. And finally, the passion of sorrow and despondency deprives us of the ability to rejoice in God’s abundant gifts and weakens us spiritually. The Elder distinguishes this sorrow from the sorrow for God, which arises from repentance and fills the soul with sweet consolation.

The second section, devoted to the virtues, begins with a discussion of humility, which *“lifts one up to Heaven.”* Without humility, our virtues are “tainted.” Patience may contain grumbling and hypocrisy; simplicity may degenerate into insolence and cunning; and joy may be not spiritual exultation but worldly pleasure. *“Those who have found the path of humility,”* the Elder said, *“prosper in the spiritual life quickly, steadily, and effortlessly.”* And in one of his letters, he writes: *“The shortest, surest, and easiest path to the Heavenly Jerusalem is humility.”*

The second part is devoted to love, which must be properly distributed among God, one’s neighbor, and all of creation. Love for God is inextricably linked to love for one’s neighbor and leads the soul to divine eros, holy madness, and divine intoxication. True love for one’s neighbor is *“precious spiritual love,”* possessed by one who *“removes his ‘self’ from his love”*—that is, who does not pursue his own interests in love. And love for creation is the abundance of “general” love possessed by the spiritual person.

The third part is devoted to spiritual nobility and love, which are the two main pillars of Elder Paisios's teaching. *"In spiritual nobility,"* the Elder said, *"there is everything: love, humility and simplicity, selflessness, honesty... and the greatest joy and spiritual exultation."* Elder Paisios, without diminishing the importance of abstinence, places spiritual nobility and charity above any physical feat, for if there is no spiritual nobility, generosity, and charity, then all spiritual labors—abstinence, prostrations, and so on—are, as he put it, *"a scarecrow in the garden,"* which *"may scare away crows, but not demons."*

The fourth part discusses simplicity—*"the first fruit of humility"*—faith and hope in God, which are *"the most reliable guarantee for a person";* patience, which *"untangles the most tangled situations and bears divine fruits";* and spiritual joy, which comes *"after order has been established within. It gives the soul wings."* Finally, Elder Paisios speaks of discernment—the *"crown of virtues."* Discernment—*"is not merely a virtue,"* nor a step forward in spiritual progress, but the fruit and guardian of that progress; it is *"the rudder that safely guides the soul so that it does not stumble to the right or to the left,"* but may walk steadfastly along the royal path of virtues, avoiding the extremes that come from demons.

The conclusion includes the Elder's words about "good restlessness." *"Good restlessness for a good deed,"* as he called it. *"Good restlessness,"* Elder Paisios said, *"is a surge of enthusiasm and a striving. It gives the soul courage and vigor; it brings not fear or sorrow, but comfort. It is not tension or anxiety, but zeal for a good deed."*

May this spiritual zeal be kindled in all of us, inspiring us to the feat of casting off the old man and putting on humility, through which Love—Christ—will dwell in our hearts.

September 26, 2006, The Dormition of John the Theologian, Apostle and Evangelist

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

— *Geronda, please say something to us as a farewell.*

— *What can I say? I've said so much already!*

— *Say something so that we can work on it until your return.*

— *Well, if you insist, I'll say this... There is one virtue—humility—and since you don't understand that, I'll add love as well. But if someone has humility, don't they also have love?*

Section 1. Passions.

"The struggle against the passions is a constant, sweet martyrdom for the sake of keeping the commandments out of love for Christ."

Chapter 1. The Struggle Against Passions.

— Elder, what did the prophet David ask of God when he said, "Establish me with a spirit of dominion"¹ ?

¹ (Ps. 50:14)

— David asked God for the gift of leadership, since he ruled over people. But every person needs the “spirit of dominion” so that they may rule over themselves and not be ruled by their passions.

— Geronda, what are passions?

— I think that passions are the powers of the soul. God does not give man vices, but powers². But if we do not use these powers for good, then the “tangelashka”³ comes along, begins to direct them itself, and they become passions; and then we grumble and blame God. But if we use these powers correctly, directing them against evil, they will help us in our spiritual struggle. Take anger, for example. If a person has it, it means the soul possesses courage, and that is useful in the spiritual life. Those who lack anger also lack courage; it is not easy for them to control themselves. A quick-tempered person, when using the strength they possess for spiritual benefit, is like an expensive car driving on a good road—you step on the gas, and no one can catch up to you. But if they misuse that power and fail to control themselves, they are like a car speeding at tremendous speed down a broken road, constantly hitting potholes.

A person must be aware of the strengths they possess and direct them toward good. Thus, with God’s help, they will attain a good spiritual state. Let them, for example, direct their selfishness against the devil and not give in when he tempts them. Let him sanctify his tendency toward idle chatter by practicing prayer. Is it not better to commune with Christ and be sanctified than to engage in idle talk and sin? Depending on how a person uses the powers of his soul, he will either become better or worse.

Do not make excuses for your passions

— Geronda, some people believe they lack the necessary prerequisites for the spiritual life and say, “You can’t get anything from someone who has nothing”⁴.

— It’s even worse when people say they’ve inherited their passions and use that to justify themselves.

— But what if, Geronda, that’s really the case?

— Listen to what I’m going to tell you. Every person is born with certain predispositions, both good and bad. And a person must work hard to rid themselves of their shortcomings and develop the good that is within them, in order to become the image of God.

Bad predispositions are not an obstacle to spiritual perfection, because if a person strives—even a little, but with zeal and desire—it means that he is within the realm of spiritual laws, within the realm of miracles, and then all his inherited shortcomings are smoothed away by the Grace of God.

God especially loves and helps that soul who, having been born with less-than-ideal predispositions, strives zealously in the spiritual life and aspires to Heaven, trying to break away from the earth and soar upward on their feeble wings, weakened by poor heredity. I know many people who, by making some effort, received great help from God and were freed from what was weighing them down. To God, such people are true heroes. For what is it that draws God to us? The effort we put forth to overcome the old man.

— Elder, doesn’t Baptism erase a bad hereditary predisposition?

² Here, Elder Paisios expresses in simple words the truth of our faith: “God is neither the cause nor the creator of evil” (St. John Climacus, Word 26, 155). Consequently, as Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite says, He “did not create the passions in human nature, but through our negligence, contrary to nature, they entered into it” (Nea Klimax. Volos, 1956. p. 152). Passions, as the Holy Fathers teach, arise from the “unnatural” use of the body’s faculties or the soul’s powers. If this “unnatural” use drags on over time, it becomes a bad habit, and it takes a great deal of effort to eradicate it. — *Compiler’s note.*

³ This is how Elder Paisios refers to the devil. — *Translator’s note.*

⁴ *Lucian.* Conversations in the Kingdom of the Dead. Dialogue II

— In Baptism, a person is clothed in Christ, freed from original sin, and Divine Grace descends upon him, but the bad hereditary tendencies remain. Can God not erase even these through Holy Baptism? He can, but He leaves them to man so that he may strive, so that he may overcome, and in the end receive the victor's crown.

— Geronda, when I give in to some passion, I tell myself: "That's just the way I was born..."

— That's all we needed. Maybe you'll say that your parents endowed you with all your vices, that your ancestors' vices have manifested themselves in you, while all the talents and virtues went to others? Maybe we'll even blame God? If a person says, "This is just my nature; I was born with these bad tendencies; I grew up in these circumstances, so I can't change," it's as if they're saying, "It's not just my father and mother who are to blame for this, but God as well." Do you know how hard it is for me to hear such words? After all, a person is not only slandering their parents but also God. When he begins to think this way, God's grace ceases to work.

— Geronda, some people believe that when a flaw lies at the very core of a person's being, it is impossible to correct it.

— Look at what's happening: it's convenient for some people to speak this way because it allows them to justify themselves and not even attempt to rid themselves of the flaw within them. "God," such a person says, "didn't give me any talents! What fault is it of mine? Why are they demanding of me what is beyond my strength?" There's your loophole. A person justifies himself, soothes his conscience, and lives as he pleases. If we start saying, "This is hereditary; that's a character trait," how then will we improve ourselves? Such an attitude robs us of spiritual courage.

— Yes, Geronda, but...

— "But" again? What kind of person are you? You're as slippery as an eel. You're always coming up with some excuse or another.

— I don't do it on purpose.

— I'm not saying you do it on purpose. But if God has given you such a mind that you grasp everything on the fly, then why can't you understand that making excuses is very bad! There's so much intelligence in that little head of yours, and yet you don't understand!

I've noticed that some intelligent people defend what is wrong because it's more convenient for them; that's how they justify their passions. Others, on the contrary, don't justify themselves, but harbor an inescapable thought that there is something in their character they cannot correct, and so they fall into despair. And what does the devil do? He sets self-justification as an obstacle to spiritual perfection for some, while he ensnares others with their heightened sensitivity and leads them to despair.

To cut off a passion, a person must not justify himself but humble himself. If he says, for example, "I am not given the gift of love, but another is," and makes no effort to acquire love, how can he prosper spiritually? Without struggle, there is no progress. Have you not read in the writings of the Holy Fathers about the vices some ascetics initially had and the degree of spiritual perfection to which they later ascended? They surpassed many who were very virtuous. For example, Abba Moses the Moor—what a criminal he was, and what he became afterward! This is what the Grace of God accomplishes!

In my view, a person with a bad hereditary predisposition, when he struggles to acquire virtues, receives a greater reward than one who inherited virtues from his parents and did not have to work hard to acquire them. Because one was given everything ready-made, while the other had to work very hard to earn them. After all, consider this: people have greater respect for those who, having inherited debts from their parents and working tirelessly, were able not only to pay off those debts but also to amass their own wealth, than for those who inherited a fortune from their parents and simply preserved it.

The Vision of Passions

- Elder, I am tormented by passions.
- Do you feel that passions dwell within you?
- Sometimes I do.
- That's good. When a person realizes that passions are fighting within him, he becomes humble. And where there is humility, there comes the Grace of God.
- But it still upsets me that I keep making mistakes.
- Rejoice that you make mistakes—they humble you, for there is pride within you. “My God,” say, “this is who I am. Help me. If You don't help me, I won't be able to do anything.” Don't despair. When we make mistakes, our true inner self is revealed; we come to know ourselves and try to correct ourselves. This shows us the right path and frees us from illusions. I rejoice when one of my weaknesses is revealed, when my passions come to the surface. If my passions did not manifest, I would think I had attained holiness, while the seeds of those passions would secretly dwell in my heart. Likewise, when you become angry and fall into judgment, of course you'll be upset, but there's also a reason for joy—your weakness has been revealed, which means you'll fight to get rid of it.
- Elder, when a passion doesn't manifest itself for a while, does that mean it's gone?
- If a passion lives within you, it will manifest itself at some point. Therefore, if you know you have a passion, be vigilant. For example, knowing that a snake lives somewhere near your cell, every time you step outside, you'll look to make sure it doesn't slither out and bite you. It's not scary when you know there's a snake nearby and you're waiting for the moment to kill it when it slithers out; it's scary if you walk along carefree and unsuspecting, and it suddenly lunges at you and strikes. What I mean by this is that when a person doesn't watch over themselves and isn't aware of their passions, it's a dangerous state. But when they know what their passions are and struggle against them, then Christ helps them root them out.
- Elder, maybe I should just strive and not worry about whether correction has come or not? Perhaps my correction depends not on me, but on God?
- Yes, strive in your spiritual struggle and leave everything to God, but also examine yourself to understand where you stand and what is happening to you. A doctor first tries to find the cause of a patient's fever, and only then determines what medicine to give to bring down the temperature. From the moment a person begins to see their shortcomings, a healthy sense of concern should arise within them, urging them to strive for correction. I look at myself and see that I have such-and-such shortcomings. I make an effort and analyze my condition: “Until yesterday, I had such-and-such shortcomings. Have I gotten rid of any of them? At what stage of the struggle am I?” Then I turn to God: “My God, I'm doing what I can; help me to improve, because I cannot do it on my own.”
- Elder, is it possible for a person not to see their passions?
- If a person is sensitive, God does not allow him to recognize his passions right away, because the devil tempts a sensitive person and tries to drive him to despair. “Do you have such-and-such a passion?” the devil says to him. “Why did you do this and that? You won't be saved.” That's how a person can end up in a psychiatric hospital.

Pride—the foundation of passions

- When a person has been striving for many years and feels no progress, what does that mean?
- If we do not see progress in our spiritual struggle, it means we lack self-control, or God is not allowing us to go further, lest we become proud and harm ourselves.
- Elder, it seems to me that I'm getting worse and worse every day; what will become of me?

— There are three stages in the spiritual life. In the first stage, God gives a person candy and chocolate because He sees the weakness of the soul and its need for comfort. In the second stage, He gradually withdraws His grace for educational purposes, so that a person realizes that without God's help, he cannot do even the smallest thing. Thus, humility is born in a person, and he feels the need to turn to God in everything. The third stage is a constant, steady, and good spiritual state. You are between the second and third stages: you move forward a little, then forget your weakness; Christ withdraws His grace, you are left with nothing, you begin to feel your weakness again, and you come to your senses. If you had told me that the further you advance, the better you become, that would have frightened me—it would mean there is pride within you. But now, when you say that you yourself seem to be getting worse and worse, then I rejoice, because I see that all is well with you. Do not be afraid: the further a person advances, the more clearly they see their shortcomings and imperfections, and this is progress.

— Geronda, could it be that God doesn't hear me when I ask Him to deliver me from my passion?

— Is our God Baal?⁵ God hears us and helps us. Perhaps you don't feel His help? But then it's not God who is to blame, but you yourself, because your pride drives His help away.

If there is no danger that His help will become a cause for pride, then it is impossible for God not to help. The good God wants us to be freed from our passions, but if we have pride or a tendency toward pride, He will not help us, lest we think we have overcome them by our own strength.

Therefore, when we ask God with all our hearts to help us rid ourselves of a particular passion and do not receive help, we must immediately understand that behind our passion lies another, greater passion—pride. Since we cannot see pride, God allows the passion we do see—such as gluttony, idle talk, anger, and so on—to remain, for the sake of our humility. When, because of our frequent failures, we come to hate our passions, recognize our weakness, and humble ourselves, then we will receive help from God and begin to climb the spiritual ladder step by step.

Passions are easily rooted out while they are still “young”

— Elder, I see that I have many passions.

— Yes, you have many passions, but you are also young, and you have the courage to work hard to clear your garden of thorns and plant lilies, hyacinths, and roses—and then to look at it all and rejoice. While you are young, your passions are like young shoots and can be easily uprooted. Both weeds and thorns, before they've grown, are easily pulled from the ground, but once they gain strength and become coarse, they're hard to pull out. And nettles, when they sprout their first leaves, are soft to the touch, just like basil. You can pick it up without worry, because its shoots are still young. Therefore, try to root out your passions while you are young; if you let them continue to grow, various lusts will enslave your soul, and it will be difficult to rid yourself of them.

People who do not root out their passions in their youth suffer greatly in old age, because their passions age along with them and turn into a hard-to-cure habit. With age, a person begins to grow attached to their passions, becomes more lenient with themselves, their will weakens, and it becomes harder to fight against their passions. In youth, a person is full of energy, and if they channel that energy into eradicating their passions, they will succeed.

How to Get Rid of Passions

— Geronda, why do I constantly suffer from overeating?

⁵ See 3 Kings 18:26

— Because that's your weak spot. The devil attacks the outpost that's weakest; he leaves the others—which are well-defended—untouched. "If I manage to capture this outpost," he says, "then I'll capture the others one by one." That's why you need to fortify your weak spot well.

— When I see my passions, I'm completely at a loss.

— Don't lose your bearings or lose heart. Boldly conquer your passions one by one, starting with the most important one. It's helpful at first not to overthink it, but simply to tackle and eradicate the coarsest, most obvious ones. And when the thick roots of the main passions begin to wither, the finer roots will wither along with them. Consequently, by uprooting a major passion, you also uproot the other, lesser ones along with it.

— Why is it, Geronda, that even though I constantly resolve to wage a serious battle against my passions, I never actually do anything about it?

— Why do you try to tackle everything at once? Passions, like virtues, form a single chain. One passion follows another, and one virtue is linked to another, like cars in a train. If you spend some time fighting one passion and cultivating within your soul the virtue that is its opposite, you will eventually succeed. And along with the conquered passion, you will rid yourself of other passions as well, and the virtues that are their opposites will develop within you. Let's say you are envious. If you fight against envy and cultivate love and kindness within yourself, then by overcoming envy, you will simultaneously free yourself from anger, judgment, malice, and sorrow.

— Elder, is it better to cut off passions or bad habits right away, or to get rid of them gradually?

— It's better, if you can, to cut them off right away—otherwise they'll grow. There's no need to wait here. When a person crosses a stream, especially in winter, they try to run to the other side as quickly as possible so as not to freeze. If they run quickly, they won't have time to freeze. Horses, when they are tied up, snap their bridles with a single sharp movement; so too with temptation—you must snap the bridle sharply.

— Geronda, Abba Isaac the Syrian says: "Impassivity does not consist in not feeling passions, but in not accepting them into oneself"⁶. Can an impassive person be troubled by passions?

— Perhaps, but no matter what the devil throws at him, it all burns up in the divine fire that has been kindled within the ascetic. The devil never ceases to tempt a person, but if a person does not accept the enemy's suggestions, then his heart is purified and Christ takes up residence in it. His heart is transformed into a furnace, into a "bush that is not consumed"⁷, and whatever enters the heart afterward—it all burns up.

It is better to die heroically than to be overcome by passions

— Geronda, can gratitude to God alone inspire us to fight against our passions?

— Gratitude to God alone is not enough; a good will, the acknowledgment of one's own sinfulness, and zealous effort are also necessary.

— Does the remembrance of death help our inner struggle?

— Yes, it helps greatly. If we keep the remembrance of death in mind with hope in God, we will come to realize the vanity of this world and receive spiritual help. Therefore, we must bring to mind the Judgment of God and not forget that we will have to give an account for our unrepented sins. "What am I doing? Why am I living so carelessly? If I were to die right now, what would become of me? Have I made a pact with death? After all, both the great and the small die." If I think about the fact that God may soon call me to Himself, I will not sin.

⁶ Quoted from: The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian. Moscow, 1993. p. 210.

⁷ See Exodus 3:2–3

In order for our passions to die, we must think about death, about the future Judgment, and show zeal for Christ, Who suffered greatly to redeem us. The struggle against passions is a constant, sweet martyrdom for keeping the commandments out of love for Christ. It is better to die heroically than to be overcome by passions and offend Christ.

— Elder, it's hard for me to struggle.

— It hurts to pull a splinter out of your finger, but pulling a passion out of yourself is much more painful! Know also that when a person tries to cut off a passion, temptation places obstacles in his path, and the person suffers just as a demon-possessed person suffers when he is rebuked, because at that moment there is a struggle with the devil. But then the demon-possessed person is set free.

Self-purification doesn't happen automatically, effortlessly, or at the push of a button. Passions aren't cut away all at once, just as a tree trunk isn't sawed through in a single stroke. You have to work with the saw for a long time until you've cut all the way through the trunk. But the work doesn't end there. Think of how much effort it takes to turn a log into furniture! First, the log must be cut into planks; then a craftsman will spend a long time working on them, turning them into the desired furniture.

— But what if I don't understand that this work is necessary?

— Then you'll remain a stump, and you'll be thrown into the fire.

You have to plant so that God may make it grow

— Elder, every day I say, "Starting tomorrow, I'll begin to pray and improve myself," but everything stays the same.

— Put God first; say this: "By God's strength, I will try to improve myself," and then God will help you. The fact that you want to improve yourself means that you are accepting help. You ask God for help—and He looks upon you with favor. You do the little you can do, and that is how you move forward. Who among people, seeing a small child trying with his little hands to move a large rock, would not run up to him to help? So too, God, seeing your small effort, will help you overcome.

Some people, even though they make no effort themselves to improve, say: "My Christ, I have such-and-such passions. You can deliver me from them. Deliver me from them!" How can God help in such a case? For God to help, a person must make an effort themselves. There are certain things a person must do on their own so that God may then send His help. It never happens that a person receives help if they themselves do not wish to help themselves.

Sometimes we try to acquire God's grace and gifts through some kind of magic. We think that without struggle we will acquire some virtue and even become saints. But for God to give us anything, we must make an effort. How can God give us anything without our own effort? As the troparion says: "You have cultivated the barren wilderness"⁸. God sends rain and softens the earth, but we must till our own field. The ground is ready, but we must plow the field and sow it. And then we will reap what we sow. If we do not plow, how can we sow? And if we do not sow, what will we reap?

Therefore, we shouldn't ask what God can do, but we should ask ourselves what we can do. The interest rates at Christ's bank are very high. But if we don't have an account at that bank, how can we get money from there?

⁸ From the troparion to the venerable one, troparion, tone 8

Part 1.

Self-love—the mother of all passions

“Whoever is self-centered has no peace; such a person has no inner peace, because they are not free within.”

Chapter 1.

Self-Love and Its Consequences

All passions stem from self-love

— Geronda, what is self-love?

— Self-love is the indulgence of the whims of one’s old self—that is, love for one’s old self. Overeating, selfishness, stubbornness, and envy all stem from self-love. You see, one person, out of self-love, seeks convenience and comfort for himself and has no regard for anyone else. Another, with scholastic precision, takes care of his meals and sleep, just so that nothing happens to his precious health. A third demands to be respected and valued. If he is slightly restricted in something, or if things aren’t done exactly as he wants, he immediately flies into a rage: “Why aren’t they respecting me? I’ll show them.” Yes, self-love is a terrible thing!

— Geronda, how can a person say, “We mortify ourselves all day for your sake”⁹ ?

— One can say that if they sacrifice their own desires for the sake of another. Every desire bears the imprint of the human “I,” of self-love. If a person doesn’t consider whether what they like is also pleasing to the other person, and instead begins to demand, “I want this, I want that,” or “Why didn’t you do this for me? Why didn’t you give me that?”—such a person ultimately falls under the devil’s power.

— Some people cannot calm down when things do not go their way.

— But how can they find peace when their “self” is at the heart of their desire? If a person’s “self” is at the heart of their desire, how can Christ be there? But when there is no “self,” and there is only the One, the Most Important—that is, Christ—then there is everything. And when Christ is absent—then there is nothing. When a person casts aside his “self,” then God gives him everything in a miraculous way.

— Geronda, when you tell us that we need to cast aside our “self,” I feel afraid—what if I can’t handle it?

— Oh, what a tragedy! It’s like saying, “If I cast aside my passions, what will I have left?” After all, when I say we must cast aside our selves, I mean casting aside our passions, shedding our old selves. For a grown-up who understands what’s what, it’s somehow not serious to say: “I can’t give up my ‘self.’” If someone told you, “Take a sledgehammer and break down this wall,” and you’d never held anything in your hands but a paintbrush, then you might say, “I can’t.” But to cast off the old self, you don’t need physical strength—you need humility.

Eat what’s unappetizing and delight in Christ

Self-love is also the desire to eat and rest more than is necessary. Ideally, the body should be given only what it needs. Desire is one thing, and need is another. One is the desire for physical pleasures, and the other is the need for what is essential. Let’s say there are two dishes in front of me; each contains the same amount of vitamins, but one tastes better than the other. If I choose the

⁹ Ps. 43:23

tastier meal, that would be self-indulgence. But if I choose the tastier meal to stimulate my appetite—because I’m suffering from a lack of appetite due to illness—then that would be a matter of sound judgment.

The body, this “wicked tax collector”¹⁰, as Abba Macarius says, may demand more than it needs, depending on what the body is accustomed to. If a person has a small stomach, it is easier for them to fast; but if not, they become a slave to their stomach, because the stomach must be filled with something. Take, for example, an overweight person: he has a whole warehouse in his stomach; he needs to eat at least half a calf to feel full, and then drink two buckets of water on top of that!

— And in the past, Geronda, were people physically stronger, or did they push themselves harder?

— Of course, they were a little stronger physically, but they also disciplined themselves more. Elder Haji-Georgy gave his monks a little honey and nuts every day¹¹. And yet they were all young—about fifteen years old, in a period of active growth—yet spiritually they were adults! Today, people follow worldly logic: “Children shouldn’t fast, lest they get sick; they should have everything in abundance; we must shield them from hardship.” And so these poor souls live, constantly demanding cutlets, but it does them no good at all.

When a person rejoices in not eating for the sake of Christ’s love, then he is truly nourished. If, for the sake of Christ’s love, he prefers the unpalatable to the tasty, then through the unpalatable he delights in Christ.

Self-love destroys love for one’s neighbor

— Geronda, today an elderly man was struggling to climb the steps to the church, and no one helped him, even though many people passed by.

— And “the priest... seeing him, passed by... and the Levite... seeing him, passed by.”¹² They are right... They do not know... they have never heard the Gospel of the Good Samaritan! What can one say? We love ourselves, but not others. Self-love destroys love for one’s neighbor, which is why we act this way. But those who love themselves do not live according to the spirit of the Gospel. If Christ had thought only of Himself, He would have remained in Heaven; He would not have come to earth, suffered, or been crucified for our salvation.

Today, almost everyone is self-centered, but the spirit of self-sacrifice is missing. Today, the prevailing mindset is: “As long as I’m not suffering.” You know how hard it is to look at those around us! Recently, at the hospital¹³, I witnessed this situation: a bedridden patient needed to be lifted and moved to another ward; the male nurse didn’t budge, even though it was his job. “I can’t—my lower back hurts,” he said indifferently! Yes, you see, what an inhumane person! But a pregnant nurse, together with another nurse, picked him up and carried him. They didn’t think of themselves. And she completely forgot that she was pregnant and rushed to help! Do you know how happy I am when I see a person who, even while in a difficult situation themselves, sacrifices themselves for others! I’m very happy! My heart rejoices. I feel a kinship with such a person because they are close to God.

¹⁰ Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis. *Lausaic History. Philokalia of the Neptic and Ascetic Fathers. Volume VI.* Thessaloniki, 1996. p. 124

¹¹ Fasting was strictly observed in the community of Elder Hadji-Georgios (see Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Elder Hadji-Georgios.* Thessaloniki, 2005). — *Compiler’s note.*

¹² Luke 10:31–32

¹³ In 1987, Elder Paisios underwent surgery to remove a hernia. — *Compiler’s note.*

Let the others go to hell!

— Geronda, many people were waiting for you today, but one young man didn't wait and cut in line.

— Yes, he walked in and said, "I need to see you. I was on Mount Athos, didn't find you there, and came here." "All right," I told him. "Don't you see that other people are waiting? Should I just leave everyone else now and deal with you?" "Yes, Father," he said. Can you imagine? People are standing on the stairs, packed like sardines—the sick, women with small children... and this guy insists on his way. And if it had been some serious matter, fine, but he was just spouting nonsense. He's the most important one; let everyone else go to hell!

Sometimes people come and say, "Father, today pray only for me and no one else." What a demand! It's like saying, "I'm the only one riding this train; I don't want anyone else in the cars." But the train is going anyway—why shouldn't others ride it too?

— Geronda, how should we understand Christ's words: "For whoever wishes to save his soul will lose it"?¹⁴

— What is meant is that a person should "lose" his soul in a good sense. That he should not regard his own life as important, but sacrifice it for the sake of others. "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor,"¹⁵ says the Apostle Paul. This is the very foundation of the spiritual life: to forget oneself—in a good sense—and to turn toward others, sharing in their pain and difficulties. One should not look for ways to avoid difficulties, but rather find opportunities to help others and bring them joy.

— Geronda, how can one understand what another person needs in order to do this for them?

— Put yourself in the other person's shoes, and then you'll understand what they need. If you stay shut in your own shell, you won't be able to understand what another person needs.

These days, most people think about how to take someone else's seat, rather than how to put themselves in their shoes. I sometimes observe how some people approach Communion, cutting in line ahead of others. Each of them thinks, "I'm busy; I'm in a hurry"—and doesn't think, "Am I worthy to receive Communion?" or "Maybe someone else is in more of a hurry than I am?" Nothing of the sort! They receive Communion and calmly walk away. But even if you don't get enough Communion, you should rejoice that it went to someone else and not to you. And if the priest has only one particle, one pearl, and there is a sick person on the verge of death who needs Communion, then you should rejoice that it is he who receives it, not you. This is what Christ wants from us. This is how Christ enters the heart, filling a person with joy.

The Agony of Self-Satisfaction

— Elder, I'm having trouble with one sister.

— Do you know what the problem is? Many people see how others put them on the spot, but they don't see how they put others on the spot. They have demands only for others, not for themselves. But the logic of the spiritual life is to pay attention to how you put others in a bind, rather than how they put you in a bind; to strive for what the other person needs, rather than what you need. Did we come into this life to rest, or for convenience and comfort? We did not come into this world to have a good time, but to purify ourselves and prepare for the next life.

If we think only of ourselves and do only what we want, then we begin to want others to think of us, serve us, and help us—that is, to ensure that we are always comfortable. "I really want this," says one; "But I want something else," says another. Everyone strives for what they like, but finds no peace, because true peace comes when a person thinks not of themselves, but of others.

¹⁴ Matt. 16:25

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 10:24

During the occupation in 1941, fleeing from the Germans who were ravaging villages, burning, and killing, we left Konitsa and went into the mountains. On the day the Germans entered Konitsa, my two brothers had gone down from the mountain to the plain early that morning to loosen the soil around the corn in the garden. When I heard that the Germans had arrived, I rushed to my mother: “Mom, I’m running down to warn my brothers.” She wouldn’t let me go, because everyone was telling her, “They’re already as good as gone; at least don’t let this one go, or you’ll lose him too.” “As if that’s true,” I thought. I slipped on my army boots and ran down to the garden. In my haste, I didn’t tie my boots properly, and as I ran across the field—which had recently been watered—they fell off my feet and got stuck in the mud. I left them behind and ran barefoot along the river, which was full of thistles. For about an hour in the summer heat, I ran through the prickly grass and felt no pain at all. I ran up to my brothers in the vegetable garden and shouted, “The Germans are here; we have to hide.” And then we saw armed German soldiers approaching. “Keep loosening the soil,” I told my brothers, “and I’ll pretend I’m tending the field and thinning out the corn.” The Germans walked right past us without even saying a word. It wasn’t until later that I noticed my legs were covered in wounds from the thorns—but up until that moment, I hadn’t felt a thing. There was such joy in that run! The joy of self-sacrifice. How could I have abandoned my brothers? What if something had happened to them? My conscience would have tormented me afterward. Even if I had no conscience, I would still have suffered the torment of self-reassurance.

Self-love robs us of peace and joy

— Geronda, why don’t I have a peaceful spirit all the time?

— You haven’t freed yourself from your “self”; you’re still a prisoner of your old self. Try to put your “self” to death, or else it will destroy you. Whoever harbors self-love cannot have rest or inner peace, because they are not free within. Such a person does everything like a turtle and moves like a turtle. Can a turtle freely stick its head out? Most of the time, it stays inside its shell.

— In theory, it seems to me that I’m working on myself, but in practice...

— In reality, it’s hard. This is precisely where our old self is subdued. But if we do not subdue our old self with diligence and discernment, it will blow up the entire edifice of our spiritual life.

— Geronda, what does hell look like?

— Let me tell you a story I heard once. One day, a simple man asked God to show him heaven and hell. Then one night, in a dream, this man heard a voice saying, “Come, I’ll show you hell.” He found himself in a room. In the middle of the room stood a table, and many people were seated around it. On the table was a pot full of food. But the people were hungry: they scooped from the pot with long spoons, but couldn’t bring the spoons to their mouths. So some of them grumbled, others screamed, and still others cried... Then he heard the same voice: “Come on, now I’ll show you heaven.” Then he found himself in another room, where there was a similar table with a pot, and people with long spoons were also sitting around it. However, everyone was well-fed and cheerful, because each of them, as they scooped food from the pot, fed another person with their spoon. Now do you understand how you can experience paradise even in this life?

Those who do good rejoice because they are comforted by divine consolation. But those who do evil suffer, and they turn earthly paradise into an earthly hell. If you have love and kindness within you, you are an angel, and wherever you go and wherever you are, you carry paradise with you. But if passions and malice dwell within you—then the devil is within you, and wherever you go and wherever you are, you carry hell with you. Already in this life, we begin to experience heaven or hell.

Chapter 2. Freedom from the Bondage of Selfishness

The Goal of the Struggle: Casting Off the Old Self

— Geronda, how can I overcome self-love? My physical strength is limited, and it's hard for me to practice self-denial in everything and act with self-sacrifice.

— “A broken spirit is a sacrifice to God; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”¹⁶ You cannot overcome self-love simply by lifting another person's heavy burden—God does not require this of you, because you do not have sufficient physical strength. But self-love can be overcome through humility, by enduring insults and injustice. And if you add a little physical labor to this, for the sake of love and mercy, do you know what help comes from God?

— Elder, what is the connection between physical labor, asceticism, and the subduing of passions?

— Physical labor subjugates the body to the spirit. Fasting, vigil, and any other ascetic practice performed for the sake of love for Christ—when accompanied by the struggle against the passions of the soul—is beneficial. For if a person does not root out the passions of the soul—pride, envy, anger—but only mindlessly torments the body, then he merely nourishes his passions with pride. The passions of the soul cause us more harm than physical obesity: physical obesity is a benign tumor, while the passions of the soul are a malignant tumor. I am not saying that physical asceticism is unnecessary; I simply want people to understand the essence of asceticism, which consists in putting off the old self.

— Elder, how should one strive in abstinence?

— One should practice asceticism as follows: one must give one's body what it needs—sleep, food, and so on. Next, a person's task is to cut off their emotional passions: lust, selfishness, envy, and so on. And only then should one move on to abstinence in food and sleep. In that case, physical asceticism will be justified.

— Geronda, how can a person understand where the limit of their capabilities lies and where self-love begins?

— A person must observe themselves and experiment. Through trial and error, they will be able to assess and understand their capabilities. An inexperienced salesperson weighs out sometimes too little, sometimes too much, but over time learns exactly what and how much to put in. In any case, while a person is young, they can engage in more rigorous ascetic practices. The older they get, the less strength they have, and they can no longer overburden themselves. If they overdo it, they may even harm their health. Therefore, from time to time, one needs to reassess one's physical capabilities and adapt to one's new condition.

— Sometimes, when I feel my strength is depleted, I'm overcome with fear, and I can't do anything. Could this be due to self-love?

— When you feel drained, examine the cause: is it due to illness? If not, then perhaps it's a lack of sleep—and you need to eat more or rest. If it's neither of those, then it's a temptation. Get up, get to work, and you will overcome the temptation.

— Elder, should I push myself too hard at work? Could it be that by being too easy on myself, I'm driving away God's grace?

— No, silly girl! You need to watch yourself and stop before you reach the point where you no longer have the strength.

¹⁶ Ps. 50:19

— But it seems to me that I have never once in my life fulfilled what the Holy Fathers said: “Give your blood and receive the Spirit.”¹⁷

— What blood can you give? You yourself need blood... Focus all your attention on the passions of the soul.

Don't worry too much about comfort

— Geronda, when I say that I can work only so much and that this is the limit of my abilities, am I saying this out of self-love?

— The longer a person sits idle, the more he relaxes; the more he works, the stronger he becomes. Not only does work drive away sadness—¹⁸—but it also helps him spiritually.

The goal is for a person to take more joy in discomfort and hardship than in comfort. If only you knew how some elders live on Mount Athos and what joy they experience in doing so! Do you know what self-sacrifice one elder had, who lived a kilometer from my cell, high up on the mountain, on a steep slope? The poor man would crawl down the path on all fours whenever he needed to visit an elder who lived further down. They wanted to bring him to the monastery so it would be easier to care for him, but he refused. Then everyone began to say, “He’s in a state of ecstasy,” since this elder lived alone in his cell. Once he came to me and told me why he didn’t want to go to the monastery. At one time, there was no church in their cell; he had long been urging his elder to build one, and finally his elder said, “All right, let’s build it, but you won’t be able to leave this place anymore, because the church will have its own Guardian Angel, and you can’t leave him alone.” He promised he would never leave the cell, and they built the chapel. Eventually, the cell where the elder lived fell into ruin, and he began living in the chapel. He even slept there, sitting in the stasidia. What self-sacrifice! I brought him some clothes because he had absolutely nothing. He was also ill—he was constantly tormented by stomach cramps. Once I sent a doctor I knew to see him. The doctor went with a friend, but they found the elder already dead: he was sitting in the stasidia, wrapped in a blanket. That is how this man departed to the Lord!

Living in harsh conditions for the sake of Christ’s love brings Christ’s tenderness into the heart. Divine joy is born of physical suffering. The holy fathers shed their blood and received the Spirit. Through fasting and labor, they attained grace. They renounced their “self” and found it in God’s hands.

I am deeply moved when I read the synaxarion of the holy ascetics of Mount Sinai. Five thousand ascetics lived on Sinai—and how many more on Mount Athos! Over the course of a thousand years, how many fathers have been sanctified! And how much suffering the confessors and martyrs have endured! Yet we complain at the slightest difficulty. We want to attain holiness without effort. Self-sacrifice is a rarity. Even we monks do not understand that blessings are acquired through labor¹⁹, and we feel sorry for ourselves, make excuses, and find extenuating circumstances. This is where evil comes from. The devil helps every person find an excuse, and the years go by.

That is why we must not forget about death. And if we are going to die anyway, then we should not worry too much about the body—not in the sense of pushing it to the point of illness, but in the sense of not being overly concerned with comfort.

¹⁷ Abba Longinus. Quoted from: *Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers: Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra*, 1993. p. 100.

¹⁸ Lit.: mold. — *Translator’s note*

¹⁹ The sequence for the Great Angelic Icon states: “Good deeds are earned through labor.” — *Compiler’s note*: Quoted from: *The Liturgical Book of Metropolitan Peter Mohyla*. Kyiv, 1996. Folio 932.

For whom are you preserving your “self”—for yourself?

— Geronda, I have a thought that my physical weakness isn’t the only reason I get tired so quickly.

— Yes, if you had the Divine fire within you, everything would be different.

— And how can I acquire this divine fire?

— You need to forget yourself and think of others.

— It seems to me that it’s hard to do that all the time.

— At the very least, try to think about and care for others as much as you think about and care for yourself. That way, you’ll gradually reach a point where you become indifferent to yourself—in a good way—and will constantly think about others. Then God will think of you, and so will people. Just don’t do it just so that others will think of you!

— So it turns out that my own “self” is tormenting me?

— Well, of course! Cast aside your “self.” If you cast it aside, you will soar. Why do you need it? For whom are you keeping it? For yourself? The portion of love you reserve for yourself, you take away from the wholehearted and boundless love you must have for others.

— Geronda, how can I let go of my “self”?

— As much as possible, set aside your “self” in everything you do; make room in your heart for others. Whatever you desire for yourself, give to others. Give, give, without thinking of yourself. The more you give, the more you will receive, because God will bestow His grace and love upon you in abundance. He will come to love you deeply, and you will love Him, because you will cease to love yourself—that “self” which demands to be nourished by pride and selfishness, rather than by God’s grace, which provides the soul with all the necessary nourishment, transforms the flesh through a divine transformation, and causes a person to shine with an immaterial light. I will pray that you may soon experience what I am talking about and be freed from the torment of self-love.

— Elder, could it be that even as I struggle against self-love, my “self” will still shine through in my actions?

— It all depends on how you strive. A person discards what is filthy and repulsive, but first one must realize that it is truly filthy and repulsive. Without feeling revulsion, you won’t discard it. To cast off the old self, you must feel revulsion toward it. You cannot move forward on paralyzed legs.

When there is self-denial, God grants His grace

— Geronda, when I think about how the saints disciplined themselves, my conscience torments me; it seems to me that I feel sorry for myself.

— When a person, striving humbly, diligently, and with discernment, goes beyond the limits of his own abilities, then a supernatural divine power descends upon him.

— Elder, what does Abba Barsanuphius mean when he says, “Do not seek bodily rest unless the Lord sends it to you”?²⁰

— By this he means that one should not seek rest or comfort for oneself. First and foremost, self-denial is necessary, and abundant divine gifts follow it, because when there is self-denial, then God bestows His grace upon a person.

When a person has a spirit of self-sacrifice, he receives divine help; God cares for him. A person receives help from God in proportion to his self-sacrifice and his prayers for his neighbors.

²⁰ The Ascetic Instructions of the Venerable Varsonofius and John. Cited from: *Dobrotolyubie*. Vol. II. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1992. p. 569.

One late evening, I was walking from the Stavronikita Monastery to Father Tikhon's cell, which I was tidying up in preparation for moving in.²¹ On the way, a man stopped me. I had a heavy bag on my back, and it was drizzling, yet I stood there and listened. It was already dark, and he just kept talking and talking without stopping. We were soaked to the bone. At one point, a thought crossed my mind: "How am I ever going to find my cell? It's nighttime, the ground is muddy, the path is rough, and I don't have a lantern." But how could I interrupt him? I asked him where he planned to spend the night. He said in the neighboring cell. So we stood there until midnight. Finally, we said goodbye. I set off on my way, but as soon as I stepped onto the path leading to my cell, I slipped and fell into the bushes. My shoes flew off, my bag got caught on the branches, and my cassock rode up to my neck. I couldn't see a thing. Then I said to myself, "I'd better stay here. I'll say the Evening Prayer, Midnight Office, and Matins, and then, who knows, dawn will break and I'll make it to my cell. But will that poor fellow find his way?" As soon as I got to "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your great mercy," suddenly, as if by a spotlight, a bright light illuminated the entire ravine! I found my boots and was able to walk. The path was illuminated. I made it to the cell, found the key to the lock—and it was so small and hidden so far away that even in broad daylight I would have had a hard time finding it. I entered the chapel and lit all the oil lamps there. And then the light disappeared—it was no longer needed!

Part 2.

Pride—the Root of Evil

"The proud are separated from God, because pride is a poor conductor—an insulator that blocks God's grace and separates us from God."

Chapter 1.

Pride—The General Headquarters of the Passions

— Geronda, I am envious, resentful, judgmental, and angry...

— Envy, judgment, anger, resentment, and so on all stem from pride. Pride is, so to speak, the headquarters of all passions. By striking at pride, you strike at all passions, and humility and love enter the heart. That is why, I think, it is enough to focus on pride, to direct our efforts against it. To concentrate all our fire on the citadel of pride that separates us from God. When the enemy wants to capture a country, he strikes the capital first. If he manages to capture the capital—consider the whole country captured.

— Geronda, who is akin to the proud?

— To the one outside these walls, the devil... Although it is easier to defeat the devil than a proud person—all it takes is humility—but a proud person, even if you humble yourself before him and ask for forgiveness, you still won't be able to soften him. He will say to you, "You're just pretending!"

The more humility one has, the richer one's spiritual substance. The proud have no inner substance. They stand upright like an immature ear of grain, while the mature one bows his head downward. A person clouded by pride is not only restless inwardly, but also agitated and boisterous

²¹ This was in 1968. – *Compiler's note.*

outwardly. All his deeds are like a balloon: the devil first inflates it, then pierces it, and the balloon bursts with a loud pop.

Pride is a shameful and terrible thing, for it turned angels into demons! It cast us out of paradise onto earth, and now it seeks to send us from earth to hell.

When We Do Not Feel Pride

— Geronda, I don't feel pride when I'm proud of something specific.

— That means there is pride in you in general. The Devil often presents things in a disguised way, and a person does not realize when he is acting out of pride. But if a person is attentive to himself, he will realize when he is acting out of pride. He may not sense all the pride within him, but he feels at least part of it; he can recognize it if he experiences a sense of selfish satisfaction and superiority over others.

— And if a person doesn't realize at all that there is pride within them, what happens then?

— Then spiritual laws come into play. A person becomes proud, falls, and is humbled. They become proud again, fall again, and are humbled again. And so it continues throughout their entire life: pride—humility, pride—humility. Such humility is not a virtue, but the result of spiritual laws at work. A person becomes humble without wanting to and without drawing any conclusions for themselves. This is a state of stagnation; the person is simply given the opportunity to realize that something is wrong within them. For example, you say to your sister, "That icon of yours turned out well." If she becomes proud, then the next time she needs to paint another icon, she'll think: "I'll paint this icon even better so that the Elder will praise me again." And lo and behold, instead of an icon, she ends up with a caricature. I correct it, and she tells herself again, "This time I'll do exactly as the Elder told me, and he'll praise me," and once again it turns out to be a caricature.

— Geronda, what if she herself thinks her icon is very beautiful?

— Of course, it's possible. To her, her daub might seem like a masterpiece; she'll come and happily say to me, "How is it now, Geronda? Did the icon turn out well?" I'll explain to her that her work is a daub, and then she'll understand.

— And if she doesn't understand?

— If she doesn't understand, it means her pride has become entrenched, and she'll keep making the same mistakes. No matter what you say, she'll stick to her guns.

— Geronda, what if I sense pride with my mind, but my heart remains deaf to it?

— That's where we'll start, and healing will come gradually. A doctor first makes a diagnosis and only then begins treatment.

Pride creeps in everywhere

— Geronda, it's good when I encounter small difficulties while fulfilling my monastic duties—I find it beneficial. Could there be pride in that as well?

— If a person isn't careful, he can become proud even while lying in bed doing nothing. A train can derail to the right or to the left. The devil catches us from both sides. Some people ask me, "What should I pay attention to so as not to fall into pride?" That's like asking, "Where might I fall—here or there?" You can fall here or there, to the right or to the left; you can fall down the stairs, off a chair, or off a bench. At any moment and under any circumstances, you need to be vigilant, because pride creeps in everywhere.

— Geronda, can a person be proud even if they have nothing?

— Sometimes such a person can be even more proud than others. When I lived at the Stomion Monastery²² in Epirus, I heard about an old shepherd there. He had no family and wandered from place to place. Eventually, another shepherd took him in, settling him in a hut where he stored branches for his goats. He wouldn't let the old man light a fire, for fear the branches might catch fire. And so the old man lived in that cold hut, sleeping in a corner on two planks, with an old mattress laid on top. When I heard about him, I went to visit him. He was in very poor health. I asked a poor woman how much she wanted to wash him. "Nothing—just give me some soap," she replied. Another time I visited him while he was having lunch. When he finished eating, he looked at me, turned his plate upside down, and proudly declared, "What a head I have, Father! Otherwise, there'd be dogs and cats here." He considered turning the plate upside down so that dogs and cats wouldn't lick it an achievement. As if he'd flown into space. What pride! He lived who knows how, yet he was proud!

Proud Thoughts

- Geronda, what should we do when proud thoughts come to us?
- Just as other people laugh when they see pride in us, so too should we laugh at thoughts of pride.
- Do proud thoughts ever come to a humble person's mind?
- They do, but he laughs at them because he knows who he really is.
- Elder, I read somewhere that thoughts of pride should be driven away immediately, just like impure thoughts.
- An impure thought is recognized immediately, but recognizing a thought of pride requires self-control. For example, if an impure thought arises in your mind during prayer, you'll recognize it and immediately drive it away: "Come on, get out of here." But if, while in church, a thought comes to you that you've read the Psalter well, you need clarity of mind to recognize it and drive it away.
- But in most cases, a thought of pride appears in the blink of an eye. How can you manage to bring a humble thought to mind in time?
- You need to prepare in advance. "I have prepared myself and will not be shaken,"²³ — says the prophet David. Thoughts of pride come like lightning—it's an old trick of the devil. But use another trick—constantly cultivate humble thoughts to outpace him.

Only humble thoughts bring humility, and only with humility does pride depart. A preacher once told me that he had prepared a very good sermon. He stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak; he spoke very eloquently. At one point, a proud thought flashed through his mind, and he lost his train of thought. He burst into tears and stepped down from the pulpit in disgrace. After that, he was unable to preach for a long time—he had become unfit for the task. I told him, "This happened to you because of pride. You became proud, and that is why God's grace departed from you. Now, with humility, start all over again. When the time comes to ascend the pulpit, tell yourself: 'If I lose my train of thought, it means that for my spiritual benefit I must once again become a laughingstock.' And if you suddenly start crying again, people will think you're crying out of emotion, and they won't be led astray but will benefit instead. So don't be afraid." And, indeed, he returned to his work and began to deliver sermons with humility, always ready to be humiliated.

²² Elder Paisius lived as a monk at the Stomion Monastery in Konitsa from 1958 to 1962. — *Compiler's note.*

²³ Ps. 118:60

Chapter 2.

Pride Takes Many Forms

Hidden Pride

- Elder, you said that I have hidden pride. What is hidden pride?
- It is inner pride. And inner pride is much worse than outward pride.
- How does outward pride differ from inward pride?
- Outward pride is noticeable and therefore easy to remedy. You can recognize a person with outward pride by their clothes, their gait, and their speech. But sometimes, you say a few words to them, and before you know it, they start to correct themselves. Hidden pride, on the other hand, is very insidious and therefore difficult to cure. It lies deep within; those around them do not see it, and only an experienced person is able to recognize it. It is mainly people of spiritual life who suffer from hidden pride. Outwardly, they may seem humble and pious, but in their hearts they harbor such pride—you wouldn't believe it! So, a tangalashka might even be dressed in rags...
- And if a person has hidden pride, do they feel it?
- If they observe themselves, then they do.
- It seems to me that someone with hidden pride doesn't feel peace in their soul.
- They don't feel the peace that comes from God—they don't even know what it is—but they calm their own thoughts.
- Elder, what can help me recognize hidden pride, and how can I fight to get rid of it?
- Let's imagine that you're striving zealously, and a thought tells you that you're doing something great, that you're a virtuous person. If that's the case, then there's pride within you, but you're hiding it. If you look closely, you'll see that the satisfaction you feel is false. For hidden pride to disappear, you need to hate this lie and drive it away from yourself. People are repulsed by those who display outward pride, and this helps them correct themselves. But those with inner, hidden pride must themselves be disgusted with themselves in order to rid themselves of it. Also, if you allow others to correct you, you're helping yourself in this way too, because hidden pride comes to the surface, becomes apparent, and then gradually disappears.

Selfishness—the disobedient son of pride

- Are pride and selfishness different passions?
- Pride, selfishness, and vanity are one and the same passion, only in different shades and manifestations. The satanic degree of pride is called haughtiness.
- Selfishness is the disobedient son of pride. A selfish person always stands his ground. But just as trees that refuse to bend under the force of the wind eventually break, so too does the selfish person bruise his own forehead because he refuses to yield. Selfishness is a great evil! Although the egoist finds no peace, he still stands his ground! Take Arius, for example. His mother said to him, "So many people claim that you are wrong—don't you understand?" "I know," he replied, "but I cannot submit to their opinion." Arius's egoism would not allow him to admit his mistake.
- Did he really not care that he had led so many people astray with his heresy?
- He wasn't interested in that. "If I admit I'm wrong," he said, "I'll lose the respect of my followers." And the more he realized he was mistaken, the more vigorously he tried to convince others that he was right. Selfishness is a terrible thing!
- Geronda, how does a selfish person differ from a proud one?
- A selfish person is stubborn and obstinate, while a proud person may be neither. For example, in church you approach the icons one by one; everyone knows who is going after whom.

If a certain sister is selfish and another sister passes her, she'll get so upset that she won't go to venerate the icons. "If she cut in front of me," she'll say, "I won't go to venerate the icon at all." But if she's proud, she'll also take offense, yet she won't show it; she might even give way to others, ostensibly out of politeness: "Go ahead! You go too, and you!"

— Elder, what should I do when my dignity is violated?

— When your selfishness is wounded, don't rush to its aid. Leave it alone; let it die on its own. If selfishness dies, the soul will be resurrected.

— And how does selfishness die?

— You must bury your "self"; let it rot and turn into fertilizer so that humility and love may grow from it.

A high opinion of oneself

— Geronda, why do I fall into pride so easily?

— If you fall into pride so easily, it means you have a high opinion of yourself. You think you're something special. A person wouldn't become proud if they didn't think they were something special. And since you consider yourself an exceptional person, you take pride in the slightest thing, just like someone with high blood pressure whose blood pressure spikes instantly the moment they get a little worked up.

— Geronda, my heart has grown cold again. Why does this keep happening to me?

— Because your head isn't properly screwed on, and the wind of arrogance is blowing through it. I put a cap on it, screw it tight, but you keep taking it off. Now we need to put on a bigger cap and screw it on tighter. Do you know what gifts you could receive from Christ if you didn't have this flaw? When we lose our focus, the devil comes unnoticed, pierces our head with the sharp point of pride, inflates us like a balloon, and sends us soaring upward.

— It's not easy for someone who thinks highly of themselves to see the good in others.

— That's true. A person who thinks highly of himself is shrouded in the mist of pride and lacks both spiritual health and discernment; that is why he cannot see the gifts that other people possess. How can lofty thoughts come from God if he is preoccupied with lofty thoughts about himself? If Christ were to turn even a single cog in our minds just a little, we would immediately start spouting nonsense. What high opinion of oneself is there in that?

Someone who has a high opinion of himself is out of touch with reality; such a person is a madman. You need to come down to earth gently to find yourself; otherwise, you'll just keep floating in the clouds and wasting gas for nothing!

Self-Confidence

— Geronda, what does it mean: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (²⁴)?

— This refers to human self-confidence. When, during the great tonsure, the person being tonsured is asked, "Do you promise to endure all this...?"—he replies, "Yes, with God's help."²⁵ He does not say, "Yes, I will endure it all on my own." If a person does not put God first in everything, but says, "I will do this myself; I will do such-and-such on my own," then even if he breaks his own forehead, he will still accomplish nothing.

— Elder, I'm really upsetting the sisters: they tell me one thing, but I do something completely different.

²⁴ Ps. 126:1

²⁵ The Service of the Great Angelic Icon. Quoted from: The Liturgical Book of Metropolitan Peter Mohyla. Kyiv, 1996. Folio 937.

— This happens to you because of your overconfidence. You think you're catching flies on the fly, but in reality, you're not catching flies—you're catching air! You raise your hand and think you've caught a fly. "I caught it!" you shout, but your fist is empty. You raise your other hand. "I caught a fly," you shout, but your fist is empty again. First, check to see if there's anything in your fist, and only then say, "I caught it."

— My sisters say it's hard for them to be around me because I insist on my own opinion, but I don't notice that.

— You know what the problem is here? When you have a certain opinion, you don't think, "I had a thought, and I don't know if it's right or not," but you believe that your opinion is always correct, and that's why you stick to your guns. You're like that housewife whose husband asked her to cook an octopus, but the octopus was missing one tentacle. "Well, is it ready? Is the octopus cooked?" the husband asks. "What octopus? It's a seven-tentacled one!" the wife replies. "Not a seven-tentacled one—an octopus!" — "Not an octopus, but a seven-legged one!" Finally, the husband couldn't take it anymore and, getting angry at his stubborn wife, threw her into a well. But even from there, she kept holding up seven, seven, seven on her fingers! So, say what you think, but don't insist on your own opinion.

— But I often notice that my opinion is more correct than that of the sisters I work with.

— It's because of your self-confidence that things appear that way to you. Be careful: someone who takes an overly logical approach to everything, with their selfishness and self-confidence, may end up refusing to listen to anyone at all.

— How can I get rid of my self-confidence?

— Take a good look at yourself, and you'll see that you have nothing of your own, that you can't do anything without God's help. If you realize that the good things you do come from God, while your foolishness is your own doing, then, of course, you'll stop trusting yourself and get rid of your self-confidence.

Boasting

— Elder, does someone who is filled with pride always boast about the good deeds they do?

— Whether he admits it or not, that hidden smugness is still there! The other day, a man came to see me. He talked nothing but about himself, and every so often he'd interject, "I say this for the glory of God." He just kept on and on.... "I'm saying this for the glory of God." I gently pointed out, "Maybe there's a little bit of your own glory in there, too?" "No, not at all," he replied, "it's all for the glory of God..." It turns out the man didn't come to talk about what was on his mind, but to recount his achievements "for the glory of God," even though in reality he was telling me all this for his own glory.

In any case, a person always loses out if he tells others about the good he has done and takes pride in it. Not only does he labor in vain, but he is also condemned. One man, who was preparing to become a priest, withdrew to a remote monastery forty days before his ordination. After thirty-eight days, he was supposed to leave the monastery and return to the world. But he went to great lengths to return to the monastery and stay there for two more days, so that he could later say he had spent forty days in the monastery before his ordination. After all, even Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai before receiving the Ten Commandments!²⁶ Then he told everyone, "I spent forty days in seclusion before my ordination." But is that how grace comes? He would have been better off staying twenty, or fifteen, or not a single day at all, so as not to have a reason to boast that he had stayed forty days—he would have received more grace that way.

²⁶ See Exodus 34:28.

— Geronda, the Apostle Paul says, “Boast, but let your boasting be in the Lord.”²⁷ Can there be pride in such boasting?

— No. How could there be pride in that? It is not pride, but praise and gratitude to God. If we consider it a great honor and a blessing that the Good God has arranged things so that we have become Christians, then there is no pride in that. If, for example, someone considers it a special blessing and rejoices that God has given him good and pious parents, this does not mean that the person is boasting with worldly praise. It means that he feels gratitude toward God.

People-pleasing

— Elder, I often feel dissatisfied and resentful.

— What kind of resentment?

— Well, I think: “Why don’t people understand how much effort it takes me to do such-and-such a task, and why don’t they show me respect?”

— When a person does something with humility and love and doesn’t find understanding, it’s natural to feel resentful, even though that’s wrong (at least in this case, there are some extenuating circumstances). But when a person demands recognition from others, that’s even worse. It’s a manifestation of selfishness, a sense of being right, and a desire to please others. As much as possible, act with humility. Do what you do out of love for Christ, not to please others or out of vanity, in order to hear praise from people. When a person does not seek praise from others but labors solely for God’s sake, God rewards him in this life by bestowing His grace in abundance, and in the life to come grants the blessings of paradise.

— Elder, could it happen that the desire to please God becomes mixed with the desire to please people?

— The devil, who wants to defile everything, can use the desire to please others to steal away part of a person’s love of virtue. A person has a healthy ambition—the love of virtue—but if he is not careful, he will become infected with the desire to please others, and then, whatever such a person does, it will bear no fruit. It’s like drawing water with a bucket full of holes. But if a person realizes that any deed done to please others is empty, then any desire to do anything for show will immediately fall away. His eyes will not want to see honors, nor will his ears want to hear what others say about him.

— But I can’t tell the difference between self-love and seeking the approval of others in my actions.

— What is pure is immediately apparent. When a person is guided by love for God, they have an inner sense of peace—that is, they feel peace and stillness within—while seeking to please others brings restlessness and confusion to the soul.

— Elder, a thought tells me that I fall into temptation because my heart does not belong entirely to God.

— Yes, part of it is possessed by the desire to please people. Try to ensure that the desire to please people does not creep into any of your good deeds, so that you may receive the full reward for your labor, without any deductions for the sake of worldly vanity, and enjoy inner peace to the fullest. Analyze the motives behind your actions, and as soon as you notice that you are acting out of a desire to please others, cut it off immediately. If you strive at this “good deed,”²⁸ you will free yourself from worldly impulses, the center of which is the human “self.” Then everything will go as it should, and you will have no temptations—neither external nor internal—but will enjoy inner peace.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 1:31. See also: Rom. 5:11; Phil. 3:3.

²⁸ 1 Tim. 6:12

— Elder, I'm distressed by my stagnation in the spiritual life. I'd like to make progress every day.

— You know how it is sometimes? People want to get rid of their passions and become better not to please God, but to please others. You, for example, want to become better and grow in your spiritual life. But have you thought about why you want this? Is it to draw closer to God, or to appear better than the other sisters? Let's say you try to arrive at church before the others. But why? Is it so you won't be late for the service, because that's the right thing to do, or so you can be the first to arrive and receive praise from the sisters? A spiritual person thinks about pleasing God, not people. "If I were still trying to please people," said the Apostle Paul, "I would not be a servant of Christ."²⁹

— Geronda, I'm always afraid of losing face in the eyes of others, but I don't think about walking rightly before God. How can I ensure that I always have the fear of God?

— You need sobriety. In every action, even the smallest one, God must be at the center. Turn your whole being toward God. If you love God, your mind will be constantly occupied with thoughts of how to please Him, how to be pleasing to God, rather than how to be pleasing to people. This will help you free yourself from the heavy chains of seeking human approval, which stand in your way of a higher life. And when you come to rejoice in falling in the eyes of people, you will inwardly delight in the Sweetest Jesus.

The Candy of Praise

— Geronda, I heard some praise and...

— So what? What should we care about? How others treat us, or how Christ treats us? Will others be our driving force, or will Christ? You're a serious person, so don't act so frivolously. I'm often praised—even by important people—but their praise makes me sick. I laugh to myself and cast their praise far away. And you, too—as soon as you hear something like that, cast it far away from yourself. These are rotten things! What do we gain from others praising us? Only that tomorrow or the day after, the fools will laugh at us? A person who rejoices when others praise him is being deceived by demons.

If a person is corrupted—that is, infected with pride or predisposed to it—then any praise, whether "worldly" or "spiritual" (relating to the body or the soul), is harmful. Therefore, it is better simply not to praise others. After all, if a person is spiritually weak, our praise will only harm them; they may perish.

Praise is like a drug. For example, a person who begins to deliver sermons in church may, after the first time, ask others whether the sermon went well and what he should pay attention to so as not to cause harm to the listeners. Another person, in order to encourage him, might say, "You spoke well, but I think you should pay attention to such-and-such." But then a preacher prone to pride may reach the point where he asks for others' opinions only to hear praise from them. And if they tell him, "Yes, it was a good sermon," he'll be delighted. "Look how they're praising me," he'll think, and become arrogant. But if they tell him, "That was a bad sermon," he'll start to worry. Do you see how the tangalashka deceives a person with nothing more than a sweet of praise? At first, a person asks with good intentions, to understand what he needs to correct. But then he starts asking others' opinions just to hear praise that brings him joy!

If you feel joy and satisfaction when you're praised, and get upset and hang your head when you're corrected or told that you didn't do something very well, then know that this is a worldly state. And your agitation is worldly, and your joy is worldly. A spiritually healthy person rejoices if you tell him, "You didn't do that very well," because by doing so you help him see his mistake. He acknowledges that he didn't do the task very well, so God enlightens him, and next time he'll do it

²⁹ Cf. Gal. 1:10

well. But again, he will consider that it was not he who did it, but God. “What could I have done on my own?” such a person says. “If God hadn’t helped me, I would have done nothing but nonsense.” Such a person has the right mindset.

- Elder, how can we ensure that we feel the same way whether we are praised or criticized?
- If you come to hate worldly glory, you will accept both praise and reproach with the same attitude.

Vanity

- Geronda, why do I feel a void inside?
- It comes from vanity. When we strive to elevate ourselves in the eyes of others, we feel a void inside—the fruit of vanity. After all, Christ does not come into a void, but into the heart of a renewed person. Unfortunately, people who lead a spiritual life often strive to acquire virtue, yet they also want something that would feed their pride—public recognition, privileges, and so on. Thus, a void appears in their souls, the void of vanity. There is no fullness, no joy of the heart. And the more vanity grows within them, the greater the emptiness in their soul becomes, and the more they suffer.

- Elder, why do I feel such a burden in my work?
- You are not striving with humility. One who strives with humility encounters no difficulties in his work. But when a person has spiritual aspirations accompanied by vanity, then a heaviness arises in the soul. The other passions do not hinder us as much in our spiritual ascent if we humbly call upon God’s mercy. But when the tangalashka ensnares us with pride, it blinds us and forces us to follow it along a narrow and dangerous path; it is then that we feel a heaviness in our souls, because we find ourselves within the sphere of the tangalashka’s power.

Spiritual life is not like worldly life. In worldly life, for example, for a business venture to succeed, you need to advertise well, distribute those—what do you call them?—brochures, and try to make sure people know about you. But in spiritual life, a “venture” will be successful only if a person comes to hate worldly glory.

- Geronda, how can one drive away vain thoughts?
- Rejoice in things that are the opposite of what worldly people strive for. Only by having aspirations opposite to those of the world can one act in the realm of the spirit. If you want to be loved—rejoice when no one pays attention to you. If you want a place of honor—sit on a bench. If you seek praise, love humiliation so that you may experience the love of the humiliated Jesus. If you seek glory, strive for dishonor—³⁰—so that you may experience the glory of God. And when you experience the glory of God, then you will feel happy and have within yourself a joy greater than all the joys of the world.

Chapter 3. The Consequences of Pride

Pride Separates Us from God

- Elder, I feel like something isn’t right with me.
- Have you found the reason? When you came last time, I saw that you were thinking correctly and acting with discernment, which is why Christ was helping you. Perhaps because of this you became proud, and that is why Christ withdrew His grace from you?

³⁰ Disgrace: dishonor, lack of honor and glory. — *Compiler’s note.*

— Yes, Geronda, that's probably it.

— When we stop realizing that we succeed through God's help and start thinking that we achieve everything on our own, then God withdraws His grace so that we may understand that ours are only our desires and efforts, while the strength and the result depend on God. As soon as we realize that we succeed with God's help, our eyes are immediately opened; we humble ourselves, weep over our fall, God has mercy on us, grants us His grace once more, and we move forward.

— When a person becomes proud, does Divine Grace depart immediately?

— Of course! Do you think it took a long time for Lucifer to turn from an angel into a devil? It all happened in the blink of an eye. The moment a person has the thought that he is something special, God's grace immediately departs. What does God's grace have in common with pride? God is humility. And when God's grace departs, the devil comes and clouds a person's mind. Then a person may experience external attacks from demons, and spiritual darkness forms within them.

The proud person lacks God's grace, and therefore there is a danger that he—God forbid—may suffer a great fall. Such a person is separated from God, because pride is a poor conductor, an insulator that blocks Divine Grace from reaching a person and separates us from God.

When we entertain a proud thought, we ruin everything we do

— Elder, I'm very inattentive; I'm nothing but a nuisance.

— It seems there is hidden pride within you, and since God loves you, spiritual laws begin to take effect:³¹ you ruin something and become humble. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled."³²

— Geronda, I'm afraid to iron because I recently burned someone else's cassock.

— Cross yourself and keep ironing.

— Maybe it was a temptation?

— The harm we cause rarely stems from the devil's envy. As a rule, the cause is a proud thought. When we entertain a proud thought, we fail at whatever we're doing. It seems that you, too, entertained a proud thought.

— Then why did the cassock burn instead of something happening to me?

— Because the cassock belonged to someone else; people found out what you had done—you were disgraced, and through that you humbled yourself. But if something had happened to you, you wouldn't have been disgraced. Why does a person go to confession? So that sin becomes evident, is exposed to ridicule: that is how the devil is defeated.

— Geronda, when a person does something, and instead of bringing benefit, it causes harm, what does that mean: that the person acted incorrectly or lacked a good disposition?

— There can be many reasons. One must examine the motives behind the action.

— Geronda, could a person cause harm simply because of their absent-mindedness?

— If you look more closely, you'll see that in most cases, harm stems from pride. If, for example, a housewife thinks to herself that no one washes dishes better than she does, she might end up knocking over a shelf full of dishes and breaking everything. Once, a woman who worked in a glassware store had this thought: "How deftly I'm taking the box of wine glasses off the shelf!" As soon as she thought that, the box she was reaching for slipped out of her hands and fell to the floor, and all the glasses shattered. Or, let's say a driver sees a poor old man on the road, picks him up, and drives him where he needs to go. If at that moment a thought crosses his mind: "Wouldn't someone

³¹ Elder Paisios often spoke about spiritual laws. He wrote about them in detail in the book **The Athonite Elder Haji-George**. — *Compiler's note*. See also: *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Words**. Vol. IV. **Family Life**. Moscow, 2006. p. 273. — *Translator's note*

³² Luke 14:11

else have done the same? Now this old man will tell everyone what a good person I am!”—then God’s grace will leave him, and he might crash into a pole, drive onto the sidewalk, or, for all we know, run someone over!

A proud person experiences downfalls instead of spiritual highs

— Geronda, my fever is gone now.

— Good, I’m very glad it’s gone, thank God, because it was very hard on you. I hope that the “fever” in your spiritual life will also pass, but you need to deal with the pride that causes it. In fact, pride is such a thing that it can cause not only a rise in spiritual “temperature,” but also intense fever. The stronger the pride, the higher the spiritual fever, which also affects the body, causing fever there as well, since the body and the soul are interconnected.

Pride is the most terrible spiritual disease. It is like a leech: once a leech attaches itself, it begins to drink blood. In the same way, pride sucks all the blood out of a person. It causes spiritual suffocation, because pride consumes all the spiritual oxygen intended for the soul.

— Geronda, I’ve noticed that as soon as I get into a certain rut in my work...

— It seems a thought begins to tell you, “I am succeeding,” and that is why a fall follows. For a proud person, instead of spiritual highs, there are falls.

— Geronda, pride always trips me up, no matter what I do or say.

— Then do everything with a humble mindset; otherwise, even your good deeds will be tainted by the devil. Suppose someone proudly declares to others, “I’m going to do a good deed”; then they let the devil into their intention and may encounter many obstacles along the way, and in the end, they won’t accomplish anything. But if a person goes and does good without fanfare, then the devil doesn’t interfere.

— Geronda, what is the proper way to engage in spiritual work on oneself?

— In mystery and silence. Spiritual work is a delicate matter, and each of our actions requires special attention. The spiritual life is the “science of sciences,”³³ as the Holy Fathers say. What soberness is needed! Ascending in the spiritual life is like climbing a spiral staircase without a railing. If a person climbs without watching their step, but says to themselves, “Look how high I’ve climbed! And just how much higher will I go!”—then they stumble and fall.

— And why doesn’t this staircase have a railing?

— Because a person is a free being and must use the mind that God has given him. If he does not use his mind correctly, how can God help him?

— Geronda, could pride be the cause of spiritual drought in a person?

— Yes. If a person is proud, God allows him to remain in a state of lethargy, indifference, coldness, and apathy. For if a proud person were to taste the blessings of heaven, he would become proud and think that he deserved them because of his own deeds. Then he would start telling others: “Strive hard! See what I have been granted for my deeds!”—and in this way he will cause harm to others. That is why God allows such a person to be afflicted as much as necessary, until his conceit dies within him, until he despairs of himself in a good sense and feels what it means that “without Me you can do nothing.”³⁴

³³ *The Venerable Isichius, Presbyter of Jerusalem. A Soul-Benefiting Word to Theodulus on Sobriety and Prayer. Quoted from the book *Dobrotolyubie*. Vol. II. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1992. p. 183.*

³⁴ John 15:5

Pride makes a person a laughingstock

— Geronda, why do we always want others to know about our good deeds, even though it is so sweet and easy to live and work in obscurity?

— A person of inner substance strives to keep his good deeds unnoticed, and people respect and love such a person, even though he himself does not realize it.

How attractive a humble person is, and how repulsive a proud one! No one loves a proud person. Even God is repulsed by him. When small children see one of their peers acting haughtily, they start laughing at him. But a quiet and level-headed person is respected. If children see a man on the street walking with his nose in the air, they immediately sense what kind of person he is, run after him, and tease him. I remember one man in Konitsa: every day he would put on a suit, tie, and hat and stride proudly across the square, even though he lived in abject poverty. As soon as the little kids saw him, they'd run up and follow behind him, mimicking his gait. Even the very youngest children! And adults—how much better they can sense a proud person! Don't be fooled by the fact that they say nothing so as not to offend; deep down, they feel disgust.

A person who wants to exalt himself ultimately becomes a laughingstock. I remember when I lived on Mount Sinai,³⁵ a priest named Savva came there. He was a somewhat vain and self-centered man. Once, some Bedouins were carrying something heavy into the monastery. As they pulled it, to keep in step, they shouted “sawa-sawa,” which means “together.” Father Savva, hearing their shout, ran out into the courtyard. “I haven't even arrived yet, and they're already shouting ‘Savva’! And now everyone here knows me!” He thought the Bedouins were shouting, “Savva, Savva!” When he said that, I burst out laughing. Well, how could you not laugh here? The way a person's mind works is how they understand everything... If a person has even a slight touch of conceit, then they see everything as exaggerated.

— Does a person act that way because of pride?

— He's a prisoner of vanity, and his imagination runs wild, so that later... A monk once told me that when he was still living in the world, he once gave an expensive cloak to an acquaintance. One day they happened to be in the same group of people. His acquaintance was wearing that very cloak. During the conversation, he suddenly said, “Do you know where I got this cloak? From Paris! And do you know how much it costs?” He said this in the presence of the very person who had given him the cloak as a gift!

— Is he stupid?

— Who could be more foolish than a proud person? Pride makes a person a laughingstock.

Chapter 4. Let's Strike at Pride

We Must Fight, But We Must Fight Right

— Geronda, a thought tells me that if I change my assignment, leave the choir, and stop painting icons, I'll stop being constantly proud and falling into temptation.

— Even if you stop singing and painting icons but do not come to hate vanity, you will make even more mistakes. And there will be pride in your withdrawal as well—even more pride—because in reality you want to give up your duties so that your selfishness is not compromised.

— Geronda, isn't it better to do nothing at all than to do something and be proud of it?

³⁵ Elder Paisios lived as a monk on Mount Sinai from 1962 to 1964. — *Compiler's note.*

— If you're told to do something, then go and do it, but be careful not to stumble and fall. And if you do stumble and fall, get back up. Realize that you stumbled because you weren't paying attention, and if you're told to do it again, do it, but be careful not to stumble again. Just because you fell once doesn't mean you shouldn't do it next time! Now, if someone tells you, "Don't go, because you fell last time," then don't go. Do you understand? When you're told to do something, do it—but do it correctly and with humility. Doing nothing just to avoid becoming proud is even worse. It's like watching a battle from the sidelines, refusing to fight so you won't get hurt. You have to fight, but you have to fight the right way. Otherwise, what good are you?

Your brother helps you overcome your pride

— Geronda, I get upset when the sisters correct me.

— You're proud, and that's why you get upset. Your brother can help you overcome your pride if you give him the right to correct you and allow him to offer a few words of guidance. That is how the soul is purified.

It's hard for a person to see their own arrogance, so they must treat others as doctors and accept from them all the medicine needed to heal their illness. Every person has medicine in store for their neighbor. A good doctor treats the patient with compassion and love; a bad one—with malice and hatred. And often it is the latter who is better for a person, because it is precisely with such a surgeon that the scalpel cuts deeper.

— Geronda, I'm foolish, so I often don't understand why people correct me.

— You'd better say, "I'm smart, but I lack humility." When your mistakes are pointed out to you, you start making excuses. How can you admit your mistakes if you don't make any, and others are just condemning you for no reason? A person who makes excuses when others correct them kills humility. But a person who admits their mistakes humbles themselves, and God's grace descends upon them.

— Geronda, it seems to me that I'm not trying to prove I'm right, but simply want to explain that I've been misunderstood.

— I've noticed that you have a hidden pride that manifests itself in self-justification. Try not to justify yourself, no matter what anyone says. Sincerely ask for forgiveness—that's enough. The word "forgive me" and sincere repentance put an end to pride.

— Today, a child was misbehaving in the archondar.³⁶ His mother told him to apologize, but he replied, "I don't want to." Why is it so hard for some people to say "I'm sorry"?

— Pride won't let them.

Spiritual Split in the Personality

— Geronda, how can I get rid of my conceit?

— If you look inside yourself and come to know yourself, you will see such ugliness there that you will become disgusted with yourself.

If a person does not humble himself naturally through self-knowledge, then the Grace of God will not be able to dwell in him. The devil will play cat-and-mouse with him his whole life (even if God grants a person the longevity of Methuselah): sometimes the devil will instill a proud thought, and sometimes the person will respond with a humble one. Sometimes one will prevail, sometimes the other. And so they will continue to play the same tune.

— Geronda, I see that all the sisters, even the young ones, have surpassed me in virtue.

³⁶ Archondarion—a room in Greek monasteries for receiving guests. — *Translator's note*

— Since you haven't humbled yourself, others have humbled you. Do you know what they do when they want to launch a rocket into space? They count down: "Ten, nine, eight, seven... one, zero!" When they reach zero, the rocket takes off. You've reached zero; now you'll soar upward. Did you study physics?

— Yes, Geronda.

— It's time to study spiritual physics, to learn how spiritual fragmentation of the personality occurs.

— How so, Geronda?

— When you turn your attention inward, come to know yourself, and humble yourself—then the spiritual splitting of your personality will occur, spiritual energy will be released, and you'll fly into space. This is the only way to enter a spiritual orbit; otherwise, you'll remain in the worldly one.

It does a person no good to know the whole world but not his own inner world. If he first comes to know his inner world—that is, his own personality—then he will easily be able to explore not only the earth but also the cosmos. When a person comes to know themselves, their personality naturally splits, and they begin to revolve in a spiritual orbit, beyond the Earth's gravity, beyond the world's pull. Although they live on Earth as a human being, they do not feel the pull of sin or worldly desires in general.

— If pride remains in a person, does that mean they lack a proper understanding of themselves?

— Yes, the spiritual splitting of their personality has not yet taken place.

— So we're coming back to humility again?

— Of course! A person who harbors pride has not come to know himself. If he comes to know himself, the pride will disappear. Self-knowledge is the most important thing. Without self-knowledge, there can be no humility. And when a person, in humility, comes to know himself, he then gains recognition from others.

— But what if there is self-knowledge but no humility?

— Then there is no goodwill or kindness.

High Status and a Humble Disposition

— Geronda, is there pride within me?

— A little bit. At the very least, pride needs to stay within acceptable limits, within the bounds set by law...

— Is there such a thing as an acceptable amount of pride?

— If someone with abilities, knowledge, and so on feels a little proud, there are extenuating circumstances. This, of course, doesn't mean that such pride is good, but at least the person has an excuse. But someone who has neither abilities nor knowledge has no right to be proud; they simply must be humble. If they are proud, it means they are completely lost. For example, a nurse takes pride when she gives a patient a penicillin injection and the patient's fever goes down. But Fleming, who discovered penicillin, was a humble man! After his discovery, he came to America. People greeted him with applause. He clapped back, and then asked, "Who are they clapping for?" And when he found out it was for him, he was embarrassed! What I'm trying to say is this: the discoverer of penicillin wasn't proud, but the nurse who gives the injection acts all high and mighty. That's why Basil the Great says, "The greatest achievement is when a person holds a high position yet maintains a humble disposition." This is a very valuable quality, and it is rewarded by God.

What humility one sometimes finds among high-ranking military officers, and what pride among ordinary gendarmes! Once, a gendarmier sergeant—a rather brash fellow—came to my cell and struck up a conversation. "I'm a police officer, I'm this, I'm that!" Even if he were the chief of the entire gendarmierie, he wouldn't speak that way. It's appalling! Yet there are people who are

wealthy, high-ranking, and talented, and yet possess such humility, such simplicity. Military officers with high ranks do not wear their uniforms in order to avoid being honored. I remember one general, who had many war decorations, saying as he was getting ready for a parade, “Here I go again, having to lug these decorations around...” And another, who had only a single stripe as a decoration, wore his uniform all the time just to show off his decorations. He even sewed on extra-wide epaulets, so much so that he was nearly disciplined, because according to regulations, epaulets must be of a specific width. Poor people!

— So, if someone takes pride in holding a low-ranking position, does that show their foolishness?

— Not just once, but many times over!

Don't take credit for what God has given you

— Geronda, I'm proud of the physical abilities and spiritual gifts that I believe I possess.

— Why on earth should you be proud? Did you create heaven and earth?³⁷ Do not take credit for what God has given you, and do not try to show that you have what you do not have. Tell yourself: “God, in my weakness, has given me certain gifts so that I would not be discouraged or feel miserable. Now I must develop these gifts to grow spiritually. Glory to You, my God! I thank You that You had mercy on me and helped me.” You consider all the gifts you have to be your own, but are they really yours? “What do you have that you did not receive?”³⁸ This is where discernment is needed; this is where you need to use your head to understand that all gifts come from God. If God's grace were to leave us, we would be unable to do anything. It's that simple. Let's say someone has certain abilities and takes pride in them. First of all, let them consider where these abilities came from. God gave them to him. What did they do themselves? Nothing. For example, God may have given someone a greater measure of intelligence, and they may have their own business and live in prosperity. Why, then, should they now take pride in their successes? Should God's grace forsake them, they could fall into debt and end up in prison.

In any case, someone who has talents but lacks humility—and who, through his defiant behavior, offends his neighbor—forces Christ to loosen the screws in his head a little to bring about forced humility. Suppose someone wants to move a large rock but cannot because he lacks the intelligence. Then another person, wiser than he, comes up to him and says, “Well, don't you get it?” He takes a crowbar and, using it as a lever, easily moves the rock. If he behaves this way, shouldn't God loosen the screws in his head just a little? Some well-known preachers experience such a loss of speech that they can't say a word afterward! That's how they have to humble themselves. And what would happen if God allowed such a preacher to speak unhindered? God restrains each person in His own way so that they do not harm themselves.

We must be careful not to take credit for the gifts God has given us. We must thank God and be mindful not to prove unworthy of such gifts. At the same time, we must sympathize with those who have not been granted such gifts from God and pray for them. And when we see someone who is inferior to us in some way, let us say to ourselves: “If he had the gifts that God has given me, he would be a saint by now. Not only have I failed to develop the gifts given to me, but I am also deceiving God by claiming as my own the gifts He has given me.” Of course, God is not upset when a person appropriates for himself the gifts He gives him. It is just that He cannot give him greater gifts, lest He cause him harm. But if a person acts with simplicity and humility and acknowledges that his gifts come from God, then God gives him others as well.

³⁷ Cf. 2 Kings 19:15; Neh. 9:6; Esth. 4:17; Isa. 37:16; Jer. 39:17.

³⁸ 1 Cor. 4:7

Through pride, we make ourselves miserable because we reject the gifts God gives us, and we also grieve God, Who finds it painful to see us unhappy. Although He has abundant riches that He could give us, He withholds them so as not to harm us. So, what happens? If He gives us a gift, we begin to look down on others as if they were flies and insult them with our arrogant behavior. If He does not give it—we fall into despair. Then God says: “If I give them a gift, they become proud, harm themselves, and behave arrogantly toward others. If I don’t give it, they agonize and suffer. So I just don’t know what to do.”

Let us thank God not only for the gifts He has given us, but also for the fact that He created us as human beings. After all, He is the master of His own house, and therefore He could have created us as snakes, scorpions, turtles, mules, or donkeys. Let us say this: “God could have created me as a mule; I might have ended up with a cruel master who would have loaded me with 150 kilograms and beaten me, but He did not do that. He could have created me as a snake or a scorpion, but He didn’t. He could have made me a turtle, a pig, a frog, a mosquito, a fly, and so on, but He didn’t. What did He create me as? A human being. And do I live up to the gifts given to me? No.” If a person does not reason in this way, then even though he may seem righteous to others, he is the most deceitful person on earth, because he is deceiving not people, but God, who has endowed him with so many gifts. But if he reasons correctly, then even when he reaches spiritual heights and performs thousands of miracles daily, his mind will not tell him that he is doing anything special, because he attributes everything to God, while he himself considers whether he is worthy of what God has given him. Such a person receives grace upon grace in this life and becomes a person of grace, because humility has become his natural state. And if he gives all glory to God and becomes a grateful servant of God, he will hear in the life to come: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things.”³⁹

Part 3.

Condemnation—The Greatest Injustice

“Only God judges righteously, because only He knows the hearts of men. We, lacking God’s righteous judgment, judge ‘by appearances,’ outwardly, and therefore condemn and unjustly accuse others.”

Chapter 1.

“Do Not Judge, Lest You Be Judged”⁴⁰

Condemnation Is Full of Injustice

— Geronda, I judge and condemn others with ease.

— Your capacity for judgment is a gift given to you by God, but it is being misused by the devil, who compels you to condemn and sin. Therefore, until your capacity for judgment is purified and sanctified, until divine enlightenment comes, do not trust your own opinion. If a person’s capacity for judgment has not been purified, yet he meddles in others’ affairs and judges them, he constantly falls into condemnation.

— And how can one’s capacity for judgment be sanctified?

³⁹ Matt. 25:21

⁴⁰ Matt. 7:1

— It must be purified. You may have good intentions and desires, but are you certain that you always judge correctly? However, your judgment is human, worldly. Try to free yourself from the human, to attain selflessness, so that Divine enlightenment may come and your judgment may become spiritual, Divine. Then your judgment will correspond to divine justice, not human justice; it will be in harmony with God’s love and mercy, not with human logic. Only God judges righteously, because only He knows the hearts of people. We, being unaware of God’s righteous judgment, judge “by appearances,” outwardly, and therefore condemn and unjustly accuse others. Our human judgment is the greatest injustice. Remember what Christ said: “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with righteous judgment.”⁴¹

Great caution is needed; we can never know the true state of affairs. Many years ago, a pious deacon lived in a monastery on Mount Athos, who one fine day left the monastery and returned to the world, to his homeland. At the time, the fathers had mixed opinions about him. But what had happened? Someone wrote to him that his sisters still hadn’t settled into life, and he, fearing they might stray from the right path, went to help them. He found work at a factory and lived even more ascetically than he had in the monastery. As soon as he had settled his sisters, he quit his job and returned to the monastery. The abbot, seeing that he knew everything—the monastic rule, the duties of obedience, and so on—asked where he had learned all this. Then he opened his heart and told him everything. The abbot informed the bishop, and the bishop immediately ordained him as a priest. Then he went to a remote monastery, where he lived a life of strict asceticism, attained holiness, and helped many people spiritually. And those who do not know how the story ended may still be condemning him to this day.⁴²

We must be very careful with condemnation! What injustice we inflict on our neighbor when we condemn him! Although in reality we inflict injustice on ourselves, not on others, because God turns away from us. Nothing is more hateful to God than condemnation, because God is righteous, and condemnation is full of injustice.

How We Come to Condemn

— Geronda, why do I often fall into the trap of judgment?

— Because you look at others. You’re curious and want to know what one sister is doing, what another is doing. You gather material so that the devil has something to work with and can lead you into judgment.

— I used to not notice other people’s faults, but now I notice them and judge them...

— Now you see others’ faults because you don’t see your own.

— Geronda, where do these judgmental thoughts come from?

— From conceit—that is, from pride and a tendency toward self-justification.

— Geronda, does judgment stem from a lack of love?

— It can happen because of a lack of love, and it can happen because of contempt. When you lack love, you lack forbearance toward others’ mistakes; you mentally belittle and insult them. Then temptation strikes, leading them to make another mistake; you see it, condemn them again, and then begin to treat them with contempt.

— Geronda, sometimes a sister I work with upsets me, and I judge her.

— How do you know how many “tangelashkas” that sister is struggling with right now? Maybe fifty demons were attacking her, trying to defeat her so that you would then say, “Ah, so that’s what

⁴¹ John 7:24

⁴² In this case, this person’s actions run counter to the canons of the Church and ecclesiastical discipline and cannot be considered correct. Elder Paisios cited this example to show that judging “by outward appearances,” no matter how correct it may seem, can be unjust toward a person. — *Compiler’s note.*

you're like." And when they see that you've judged her, five hundred demons will come to humiliate her again in front of you, so that you'll judge her even more. For example, you might say, "Sister, don't put that thing there—it belongs here." The next day, the tangalashka might make it so she forgets what you told her and puts the thing back in its old place. She'll do something else wrong, and you'll start thinking to yourself, "Didn't I tell her yesterday? And today she's doing the same thing! She's caused trouble in other ways, too!" At that point, you judge her and can't help but say, "Sister, didn't I tell you not to put that there? It's a mess. You're tempting me with your behavior!" And that's it: the devil has done his work! He made it so that you condemned her and ruined your relationship with her. And she, not knowing that you were the cause of her carelessness, will feel remorse for having upset you and will fall into sadness. See how cunningly the tangalashka works, and yet we listen to him.

Therefore, try not to judge anyone; judge only the tangalashkas, who have turned from angels into demons, and instead of repenting, are becoming increasingly cunning and evil, striving with all their might to lead God's creatures to ruin. The Evil One incites people to commit strange acts and create chaos, and he himself instills thoughts of condemnation in others, thereby defeating both groups. But those who create chaos later feel guilty and repent, while the others who condemn justify themselves, become arrogant, and fall just as the Evil One fell—through pride.

God's grace departs from condemnation

- Elder, when a thought against someone comes to me, is it always condemnation?
- Don't you realize that at the moment?
- Sometimes I realize it too late.

— Try to realize your fall as quickly as possible and ask for forgiveness from the sister you judged and from God, because judgment becomes an obstacle to prayer. God's grace naturally withdraws from judgment, and coldness sets in in your relationship with God. How will you pray afterward? Your heart turns to ice, to stone.

Judgment and slander are the most terrible sins; they are stronger than any other sin and drive away God's grace. "Just as water extinguishes fire," says St. John Climacus, "so judgment extinguishes God's grace."⁴³

- Geronda, I fall asleep during the morning service.

— Perhaps you've judged some sister? You look at things superficially and judge others, which is why you fall asleep during the service. When a person judges and does not look at things spiritually, they lose their spiritual strength. And when they lose their strength, they either feel drowsy or, on the contrary, suffer from insomnia.

- Geronda, I often sin through gluttony.

— Right now, you should focus all your attention on your judgmental attitude. If you don't stop judging others, you won't be able to free yourself from gluttony either. A person who judges drives God's grace away from himself, becomes defenseless, and therefore cannot amend his ways. And if he does not realize his mistake and humble himself, he will constantly fall. But if he understands and turns to God for help, God's grace will return.

Those who judge others fall into the same sins

— Elder, why does this happen: when I judge a sister for some shortcoming, I then end up doing the very same thing myself?

⁴³ John of Sinai. *The Ladder*. Athens, 1969. p. 145.

— If someone judges another for something but does not realize their own fall and does not repent, they usually fall into the same sin themselves. This happens so that the person may realize their own fall. Out of His love, God allows a person to replicate the condition of the one they have judged. If, for example, you say that someone is greedy and fail to understand what you have judged, then God will withdraw His grace and allow you to fall into greed as well—and you will begin to hoard. Until you realize your fall and ask God for forgiveness, spiritual laws will continue to operate.

To help you understand this better, I'll tell you a story from my own life. When I was living at the Stomion Monastery, I learned that one of my classmates had strayed from the right path. I prayed that God would inspire her to come to me at the monastery. I even copied down some passages about repentance from the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers. And then one day she came. We talked, and it seemed to me that she understood everything. She began to visit the monastery often with her child, bringing candles, oil, and incense for the church. Once, some acquaintances of mine—pilgrims from Konitsa—told me, “Geronda, this woman is pretending. She brings candles and incense here, but back in town she keeps going out with officers.” When she came to the monastery the next time, I started yelling at her in the church: “Get out of here—you’ve stunk up the whole place!..” The poor woman left in tears. Some time later, I felt a strong carnal struggle. “What is this? I’ve never had temptations like this before. What’s going on?” I couldn’t find the cause. I prayed—it didn’t go away. I went up to Gamila.⁴⁴ “I’d rather be eaten by bears,” I thought. I climbed high, but the temptation wouldn’t go away. A small hatchet hung from my belt. I took it out and struck my leg three times, hoping the pain would make the temptation go away. Blood poured into my boot, but the temptation wouldn’t go away. Suddenly, a thought about that woman flashed through my mind. I remembered the words I had said to her. “My God,” I thought, “I’ve only experienced a little of this hellish torment, but she lives with it constantly!... God, forgive me for judging her.” And immediately I felt a heavenly coolness; the struggle was over. Do you see what judgment does?⁴⁵

If we are forgiving of others’ mistakes, then God will be forgiving of our mistakes as well

— Geronda, today while picking olives, I judged some of the sisters because they weren’t paying attention to their work.

— You know, stop judging and condemning others, or else God will condemn you too. Don’t you ever put a slightly spoiled olive in with the good ones?

— No, I try not to.

— If Christ were to sort us out just as carefully at the Last Judgment, we’d be doomed! But if we are forgiving of other people’s mistakes and do not condemn them, then later we’ll be able to say to Christ: “God, put me in paradise too, in some little corner!” Do you remember what’s written in The Father’s Book about the negligent monk who was saved because he didn’t judge others? When his time to die came, he was cheerful and at peace. Then the elder, for the spiritual benefit of the fathers who had gathered from other cells, asked him, “Brother, why aren’t you afraid of death, since you lived so carelessly?” The brother replied: “It is true that I lived carelessly, but ever since I became a monk, I have tried not to judge anyone; therefore, now I will say to Christ: ‘Christ, I am a wretched man, but at least I have kept Your commandment, “Do not judge, lest you be judged”’⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gamila is the name of a peak on Mount Pindus. — *Compiler’s note.*

⁴⁵ Through his account, Elder Paisios shows that, for the sake of Christ’s love, he was even ready to face martyrdom. The love of Christ burned in his heart and drove him to extreme ascetic feats and the endurance of suffering. The motivating factor behind such an act was not hatred of the body, but love for Christ. Similar examples are found in the lives of the saints (see the life of the Venerable Martinian, February 13). Elder Paisios recounted this story to show how God’s grace departs from a person because of condemnation, and in no way did he present this as a method for combating carnal temptations. — *Compiler’s note.*

⁴⁶ Matt. 7:1

.” “Blessed are you, brother,” the elder said to him, “because you have attained salvation without effort.”⁴⁷

— Geronda, some believers, when they see a person living in sin, say, “He’s on a straight path to hell!”

— Yes, if worldly people go to hell because of debauchery, then spiritual people go because of judgment... We cannot say of anyone that he will go to hell. We do not know how God works. God’s judgments are an abyss. We must not condemn anyone, because by doing so we take judgment out of God’s hands and make ourselves into gods. If Christ asks us on the Day of Judgment, then we will give our opinion...

Chapter 2. **The Struggle Against Condemnation**

If we focus on ourselves, we will not judge

— Geronda, when I see disorder in my service, I judge it in my thoughts.

— Keep your own house in order, and don’t look at others’ disorder. Be strict with yourself, not with others. What did you do today?

— I was dusting.

— Did you dust other people’s things or your own?

— Unfortunately, off others.

— Look, you’ll start working on yourself when you stop caring about what others are doing. If you focus on yourself and stop looking at others, you’ll see only your own flaws, and you won’t notice them in others. Then you’ll lose hope in yourself—in a good way—and you’ll judge only yourself. You’ll feel your own sinfulness and strive to rid yourself of your weaknesses. Then, when you see some weakness in others, you’ll say to yourself: “Have I truly overcome my own weaknesses? How can I make such demands of others?” Therefore, constantly work on yourself and keep watch over yourself to avoid hidden pride, and practice self-reproach with discernment to avoid inner condemnation. In this way, you will be set aright.

— Geronda, Abba Isaac writes: “If you love purity... having entered the vineyard of your heart, work within it; root out the passions from your soul; strive not to know human evil.”⁴⁸ What does he mean by this?

— He means to turn inward and work on oneself. How did the saints attain holiness? They turned inward and saw only their own passions. Through self-condemnation and self-reproach, the veil fell from the eyes of their souls, and they began to see clearly and deeply. They saw themselves as lower than all people and considered everyone else better than themselves. They saw their own faults as great and the faults of others as small, because they looked with the eyes of the soul, not with earthly eyes. That is why they said of themselves, “I am worse than all people.” Their spiritual eyes were purified and gained keen insight, so they saw their own faults—small knots—as logs. We, even though our flaws are like logs, see them as splinters⁴⁹ or do not see them at all. We scrutinize others under a microscope. The sins of others seem great to us, while we do not see our own, because the eyes of our souls have not been purified.

⁴⁷ See *The Great Gerontikon*. Volume I. Thessaloniki, 1994. p. 344

⁴⁸ Quoted from: The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian. Moscow, 1993. p. 262

⁴⁹ See Matt. 7:3

The main thing is for the eyes of the soul to be purified. When Christ asked the blind man, “How do you see people now?”—the man replied, “Like trees,”⁵⁰ because his sight had not been fully restored. When his full sight returned, he began to see clearly. Having attained a good spiritual state, a person sees everything clearly and excuses all the shortcomings of others—in a positive sense—because he sees them with spiritual vision, not human vision.

If we excuse others, we do not condemn them

— When thoughts of pride and judgment come to me, I try to excuse others. Is this a fall or a struggle, Geronda?

— A struggle. When a person stares with his mouth open, a fly might fly into his mouth. Of course, he’ll spit it out, but it’s better to try to keep the fly from flying in.

— Geronda, often, when I look at others, I judge them.

— To tell the truth, it’s impossible not to see what’s going on around you. However, you need to cultivate discernment so that you can see extenuating circumstances and excuse people. Then you will see them in a favorable light.

— Geronda, during the service, thoughts come to me about why one sister doesn’t come to the choir loft, why another sings softly, and so I’m constantly judging.

— Why don’t you consider that perhaps the sister is tired, or maybe she’s been sick and didn’t sleep, and that’s why she isn’t singing? I know sisters who, even when they’re sick and running a fever, can barely drag their feet, yet they go to their duties and try to make sure no one notices anything, so they won’t be excused from their duties and another sister won’t be put in their place—and she’d have to work for two. Doesn’t that move you?

— It does, but I don’t always manage to make excuses for a sister when she behaves rudely.

— Have you ever thought that a sister might act rudely to hide her virtue? I know people who deliberately cause trouble so that those who aren’t paying attention will speak ill of them. Or perhaps the sister is acting rudely because she’s tired, but then she repents right away. She has already repented for her behavior, yet you keep condemning her. In the eyes of people, she appears humiliated, but in the eyes of God, she is exalted.

— Geronda, I have a certain narrow-mindedness: I don’t put myself in another person’s shoes to justify them.

— Look with compassion upon those who err, and glorify God for what He has given you; otherwise, He might later say to you: ‘I gave you so much, so why did you treat Me so cruelly?’ Think about what that person had in the past, what opportunities for self-development they had, and what opportunities you had but failed to take advantage of. That way, you will rejoice in the blessings God has bestowed upon you, glorify Him, and humble yourself. At the same time, you will feel love and compassion for your brother, who did not have the same opportunities as you, and you will pray for him from the bottom of your heart.

There are people who commit serious crimes, but they have many extenuating circumstances. Who knows what these people are like in God’s eyes? If God hadn’t helped us, perhaps we, too, would have become delinquents. Let’s say a criminal has committed twenty crimes; I condemn him, but I don’t know what his past was like. Who knows how many crimes his father committed!... Maybe he was sent out to steal from childhood onward? And then, in his youth, he spent many years in prison, where he was taught by experienced thieves. He could have committed not twenty, but forty crimes, but he restrained himself. And I, with my hereditary predispositions and upbringing, should by now be performing miracles. Am I working miracles? No, I’m not. So there’s no excuse

⁵⁰ See Mark 8:24

for me. But even if I had performed twenty miracles—and I could have performed forty—there’s still no excuse for me. With such thoughts, we ward off condemnation and slightly soften our hardened hearts.

Don’t rush to conclusions

— Geronda, what can help me avoid judging others?

— Is it really always the way you think it is? No. Well then, say, “I don’t always think correctly; I often make mistakes.” For example, in such-and-such a situation, I thought this, but it turned out I was wrong. In another instance, I judged someone, but it turned out I had acted unjustly and unfairly toward that person. Therefore, I shouldn’t listen to my own thoughts.” Each of us has made mistakes in our assumptions. If we remind ourselves of times when we were wrong in our judgments, we’ll avoid passing judgment. Even if we were right in our opinion just once—don’t rush to draw conclusions. Do we really know what extenuating circumstances the other person might have?

In my youth, condemnation was always on the tip of my tongue. Since I lived quite conscientiously and possessed a certain semblance of piety, I condemned whatever seemed wrong to me. When a person lives a spiritual life in the world, they may see vices in others and fail to see their virtues. They may not see those who cultivate virtue, since they live inconspicuously, but they do see others committing misdeeds and condemn them. This one does the wrong thing, that one walks the wrong way, a third looks the wrong way...

Do you know what happened to me once? An acquaintance and I went to a service at the monastery in Monodendri, about a nine-hour walk from Konitsa. In the church, my friend went up to the choir loft, while I stood in the congregation behind the psalmists and quietly sang along with them. After a while, a fairly young woman dressed in black entered the church, stood next to me, and began to examine me closely. She’d look at me and cross herself, look at me and cross herself... I got angry. “What kind of person is she?” I thought. “Why is she staring at me like that?” I never stared at my sisters when they walked past me on the street. They would come home later and complain to my mother: “Arseny⁵¹ saw me and just walked right by!” “How can you do that?” Mom would say to me later. “You run into your sisters on the street and don’t even say hello!” “Am I supposed to stare at every woman who walks past me, whether she’s my sister or not?” I’d reply. “We have a ton of relatives.⁵² I’ve got nothing better to do.” That’s the kind of extremes I would go to: a sister walks past, and I don’t say hello to her! Well, anyway... As soon as the liturgy ended, that woman in black invited me to her house. It turns out I looked a lot like her son, who had been killed in the war! So that’s why she was staring at me in church and crossing herself: I reminded her of her child. And I had been judging her: “ , she’s so shameless—the way she stares in church!” I felt terrible after that incident. “You,” I told myself, “have no idea what you’re thinking, but she lost her son—she’s in grief!”

Another time, I judged my brother, who was in the army. The company quartermaster told me, “I gave your brother two cans of oil. Where are they?” I remembered that my brother used to bring his army buddies over to our house to spend the night... “How could he have done such a thing—taken the oil?” I thought. I sat down and wrote a harsh letter to my brother... But he replied, “Ask the caretaker at the lower church about the cans!” It turned out he’d sent the oil to the church in Lower Konitsa. “Congratulations,” I said to myself, “last time you judged that poor woman, and now your own brother. That’s enough! Next time, don’t judge at all. You’re an abnormal person, which is why you see everything as abnormal. Strive to become a normal person.” Another time, when something seemed wrong to me, I said, “It’s probably something good; I just don’t understand it. No

⁵¹ Elder Paissios’s secular name. — *Compiler’s note*

⁵² Elder Paisios had seven brothers and sisters. By that time, his three oldest sisters were already married. — *Compiler’s note*

matter how many times I've acted on a thought from the left, I've always been wrong." When I—in a good way—began to hate myself, I started making excuses for everyone. I always found excuses for others and blamed only myself. If a person doesn't watch over themselves, they'll have nothing to say in their own defense at the Judgment.

It takes courage to cut off condemnation.⁵³

So: I wish to make a good start. STOP. STOP judgmental thoughts. Amen.

I wish for the purification and sanctification of my mind and heart. Amen.

Part 4.

The Children of Selfishness and Pride

envy—anger—sorrow

"When a person learns to rejoice in the successes of others, Christ will give him all the successes of others, and he will rejoice as much as everyone else combined, and then his successes and joy will be immense."

Chapter 1.

The Poison of Envy

Envy is one of the principal passions

— Geronda, I'm envious of one of the sisters.

— I know which sister you're envious of... And I've also learned that she's envious of you too! May you both be envious of the zealous Elijah, so that he may drive envy from you and grant you his divine zeal. Amen.

— Geronda, when I start to feel envious, I try to look at things logically.

— Wouldn't it be better to try not to feel envy from the very beginning? Envy is ridiculous. You just need to use your head a little to overcome it. It doesn't take any great feats, because envy is an emotional passion. Look, never let envy get the better of you, because it's one of the main passions. Do you know what envy can lead a person to ? To ill will and slander. And slander is a much greater evil than ill will.

— What does envy consist of?

— There's just about everything in it!... There's pride, there's selfishness, there's self-love... There's no love, and naturally, no humility.

— So, Geronda, can there be no love in someone who is envious?

— Of course not! It's impossible for envy and love to coexist in the same person. Even if there is a little love in him, his love is impure, because his "self" is mixed in with that love. Envy spoils and renders love and kindness useless, just as a dead mouse spoils the oil when it falls into a clay pot.

— Geronda, I think I'm envious because I don't feel fulfilled.

— How can you feel complete when you want everything to belong to you?

— What if I desire something that my sister has?

⁵³ Elder Paisios wrote the following lines to a novice in the form of a telegram. — *Compiler's note*

— If God said, “You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your neighbor,”⁵⁴ then how can we desire something that belongs to another? What, are we not even going to keep the basic commandments? Then our life will turn into hell. “Each person is tempted when they are drawn away by their own desire...”⁵⁵ — says Saint James, the brother of the Lord. These desires will torment souls in hell. And if God takes us to paradise, but we are not free from envy, then we will not find peace there either, because we will still have those same reckless desires.

Jealousy poisons a woman's deep love

— Geronda, why is the passion of jealousy more inherent in women than in men?

— A woman, by nature, possesses much kindness and love, and the devil attacks her fiercely: he instills in her a poisonous jealousy and poisons her love. And when her love is poisoned and turns into malice, then a woman transforms from a bee into a wasp and surpasses a man in cruelty. And while it is enough for a man for an unwanted face to disappear from his sight, for a woman—whom God created to be more emotional—this is not enough; she would like that person to die. That is... just to be sure!

A woman's malice, when mixed with jealousy and stubbornness, can reach demonic proportions. A woman must fear jealousy. She must remove her “self” from her love so that her strong love may be pure.

— How can this be achieved?

— By overcoming pettiness and cultivating spiritual courage, spiritual nobility, and self-sacrifice. Nobility is the antidote to jealousy. But, unfortunately, few possess nobility.

Envy weakens us

— Geronda, I have absolutely no boldness.

— You're envious, and that's why you lack boldness. When a person is envious, he agonizes, can't eat, wastes away, and loses his boldness—while others think he's a great ascetic!

— I feel very poor and weak spiritually.

— You have a lot of strength, but you're squandering it on foolish envy, and even though you possess innate nobility, you're suffering like the lowliest beggar. You would thrive in the spiritual life if you weren't bogged down by envy. Be careful, because envy drains you of all the spiritual and physical strength you could offer to God. If you cast out envy, your prayer would have power.

Because of envy, a person loses spiritual strength. Why do you think the apostles could not cast out the demon from the possessed boy,⁵⁶ even though they had received from Christ the authority to cast out demons and had already cast out demons from people? Because they envied Peter, James, and John—for Christ had taken only them up the mountain and was transfigured before them.⁵⁷ Christ could have taken all the disciples with Him, but not all were capable of comprehending such a mystery, so He took only those who could. Perhaps you might say that He did not love the other disciples? Or that He loved John more than the others? No, but John loved Christ more than the other disciples and therefore felt Christ's love more deeply. He had a greater capacity; his “battery” was larger. Do you see how envy drove God's grace away from the apostles, and they were unable to heal the demon-possessed boy? That is why Christ said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?! How long shall I put up with you?!”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ex. 20:17

⁵⁵ James 1:14

⁵⁶ See Matt. 17:16; Mark 9:18; Luke 9:40

⁵⁷ See Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28

⁵⁸ Matt. 17:17. See Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41

Whoever buries his own gifts envies the gifts of others

— Geronda, how can a person who feels envy help themselves overcome this passion?

— If they recognize the gifts God has bestowed upon them and begin to develop them, they will not be envious and will live as if in paradise. Many people fail to see their own gifts; they see only the gifts of others, and envy takes hold of them. They consider themselves deprived and shortchanged. They torment themselves and turn their lives into a nightmare. “Why does he have these gifts, and I don’t?” they say. You have certain gifts; others have different ones. Do you remember Cain and Abel? Cain did not seek to recognize his own gifts, but looked instead at the gifts that Abel possessed. Thus, he nurtured ill will toward his brother, then rebelled against God, and ultimately committed murder.⁵⁹ Yet perhaps he had greater gifts than Abel.

— How can a person, upon seeing the talents of others, not be envious but instead rejoice?

— If he cultivates his own talents rather than burying them, then he will rejoice in the talents of others. For many years now, I’ve been observing one sister; she has both a beautiful voice and a devout spirit, yet she doesn’t sing in the choir. And since she buries her own talent and doesn’t sing, it bothers her when she hears another sister sing—even though that sister doesn’t have such a good voice. She doesn’t consider that God gave her a better voice, but she isn’t developing it.

Therefore, let everyone take a look: perhaps the gift they envy in another is also within them, but they are not developing it—or perhaps God has given them a different talent. God has not shortchanged anyone; He has given each person a specific gift that can help them in their spiritual development.

Just as one person is unlike another, so one person’s gift is unlike another’s. Have you not noticed the wild peas growing by your fence? They share a single root, yet each shoot has its own color, one more beautiful than the next. Yet they do not envy one another... Each is content with its own color. And the birds! Each has its own beauty, its own song.

Let everyone discover the gifts God has given them, and let them glorify the Good God—not proudly, like the Pharisees, but humbly, acknowledging that they have neglected them, and let them develop these gifts in the future.

— But I envy some of the sisters because they have certain gifts that I don’t have.

“God has given you so many gifts, and yet you envy the gifts of others? You remind me of the daughter of a pastry chef in Konica. Her father gave her a small piece of cake every day—a larger piece might have made her sick—yet she would look at the children at school eating large corn tortillas and envy them.” “They eat big pieces, but my father gives me a small one,” she would say. She envied the corn tortillas that others were eating, even though she herself had an entire pastry shop full of cakes! In the same way, you do not appreciate the great gifts that God has given you, but you look at the gifts of others and envy them.

Let us not be ungrateful. After all, God, our Good Father, has endowed each of His creatures with various gifts, because He knows what each of us needs so that we do not harm ourselves. We often act like little children, complaining that the Father didn’t give us a drachma or two, as He did to our brothers and sisters, even though He gave us a whole hundred drachmas.⁶⁰ We think He has given us nothing because we consider a hundred drachmas to be mere paper; we covet the one or two drachmas He gave to others, so we weep and take offense at our Good Father.⁶¹

⁵⁹ See Gen. 4:3–8

⁶⁰ One hundred drachmas—a paper bill. — *Compiler’s note*

⁶¹ From a letter by Elder Paissios to a sister; 1968. — *Compiler’s note*

Good Envy

— Geronda, I envy one sister because I see that she has humility, simplicity, and reverence.

— I'll pray that she dies. Do you want her to die?

— No, Geronda! I may envy another's virtue, but I wouldn't even think of wishing anything bad upon her. I don't want her to lose her virtue; I want there to be something good in me as well.

— Well then, let's split it so that each of us gets half! Don't worry. Your envy is a good kind of envy. You're envious of "great gifts..."⁶²

— So there's such a thing as good envy?

— Yes, when someone envies another's virtue and at the same time is happy for them, then that envy is good. But if a person feels bad, if they get upset when they see another's success, or secretly rejoice when that person faces difficulties, then that envy is bad. Let's say you envy your sister because she has a beautiful voice and sings well. If you find out that she's lost her voice and can't sing, and you're happy about it, that means there's malice in your envy—there's poison. If you're upset—that means there's no malice in your envy; you simply wish you could sing well too.

— How can I cultivate good envy?

— We'll call you "the one with good envy"!... Try to purify and sanctify your envy so that it becomes good envy. Rejoice for your sister who is succeeding, and strive to imitate her. In this way, you will be transformed spiritually, and the Grace of God will dwell within you—a grace that grants a person heavenly joy even in this life.

— Geronda, can good envy turn into bad envy in a person?

— If a person doesn't work on themselves, then, of course, it can. It requires attention.

— Geronda, I can't always understand what I'm feeling when I see my sister's successes. What kind of envy is this: good or bad?

— Ask yourself: "If my sister performed a miracle, how would I feel?" Or: "If she gave in to temptation and brought disgrace upon herself in the eyes of others, would I be happy or worried?" By answering this question, you'll understand whether your envy is good or bad. Now tell me, if you heard that the sister you envy had become lazy and completely stopped fulfilling her monastic duties—that she doesn't pray herself but instead puts a cassette in the tape player and listens to "Lord Jesus Christ..."—would you be upset?

— Yes, I'd be upset, but even if I heard that she's making greater and greater progress, I don't think I'd be happy about that either.

— You know, if you walk with difficulty, rejoice for the one who runs fast, and don't be upset. If you want to prosper spiritually, rejoice in the sisters' successes and ask God that they continue to prosper, and that you may reach your own measure. When I was a novice at the monastery,⁶³ there was another novice there, about the same age as me. He had attained a high level of spiritual maturity; his face radiated light. He was an example in everything—a great ascetic and a zealous defender of the faith. He was also very devout. The senior monks would stand up out of respect when he passed by. I benefited more from this novice than from all the books I had read before, because he was a living example. Once, I had a headache. By chance, that brother came into my cell at that moment, and I asked him to pray. He hadn't even left yet, and the pain was already gone. On another occasion, a man possessed by a demon came to the monastery and asked the fathers to heal him. Then the abbot said to this novice, "Go ahead and pray; let the demon come out of this unfortunate man." "Through your prayers," he said, "may Christ drive out the demon." No sooner had he stepped away than the demon came out of the man. Such was his boldness before God! To what spiritual stature

⁶² 1 Cor. 12:31

⁶³ At the Esfigmen Monastery, in 1953. — *Compiler's note*

he had attained! So I asked God that this brother might attain the stature of the saint whose name he bore, and that I might attain his stature. Do the same, and you will clearly see the power of God.

When a person learns to rejoice in the successes of others, Christ will give him all the successes of others, and he will rejoice as much as all the others combined, and then his successes and joy will be immense.

Chapter 2. **Anger—the Enemy of God’s Peace**

Let Us Turn Anger Against the Passions

— Geronda, I want to be free from anger. I see how inappropriate anger is for a monk.

— Anger, pure anger, is a power of the soul. If, for a person who is meek by nature, this trait of his character aids in spiritual perfection, then a hot-tempered person benefits twice as much from the power inherent in his character—provided he uses this power of anger against the passions and against the evil one. If he does not use this power correctly, the devil will take advantage of it. If a person who is gentle by nature does not strive to acquire courage, he will not be capable of great deeds. But a hot-tempered person, if he sets his mind on something great and turns his anger against evil, can consider the matter settled. That is why people who possess a spark of recklessness reach the heights of the spiritual life.

— So, Geronda, I should be angry at the devil, not at the sisters.

— You see, at first a person gets angry at others; then, if he strives, he will come to be angry at the devil; and in the end, he reaches the point where he is angry only at his own old self, at his own passions. So try to be angry only at the devil and at your own passions, and not at the sisters.

— Geronda, are my anger and stubbornness childish passions?

— No, my dear! It’s understandable when a small child gets angry, stamps their feet, and shouts, “I don’t want to, I won’t!” But as they grow older, they must outgrow this, retaining only a child’s simplicity and spontaneity, not their childish foolishness. You see, some people end up going to such extremes! They bang their heads against the wall in anger—it’s a good thing God made people with strong heads, so nothing happens to them! Others tear their clothes! There was a man who tore his shirt every day in anger. He tore it to pieces so he wouldn’t take it out on others.

— So does that mean anger is a way of venting malice?

— Yes, but isn’t it better to vent your malice on your own flawed self than on others?

Why Do We Get Angry?

— I don’t think I get angry; I just get very irritated.

— How so? If you lose your temper, you need to see if there’s a passion for anger within you. It’s one thing if a person says something harsh out of irritation because they’re tired, in pain, or dealing with problems, etc. Someone else might even respond to a greeting with, “Leave me alone!”—even though no one said anything bad to them, just “hello.” But the person is tired or in pain, so that’s how they react. After all, even the most patient donkey will kick out if it’s overloaded.

— When I’m not at peace with myself, even the smallest things annoy me.

— If you are not at peace with yourself, it means you are spiritually unwell, and it’s no wonder you react this way. When a person is sick, they sometimes grow weary even of the sound of speech. It’s the same when they are in poor spiritual condition—they lack clarity, patience, and forbearance.

— Geronda, why do I get angry over the slightest thing?

— You get angry because you think others are always to blame. Your anger stems from the fact that you accept thoughts about others that come from the left. If you accept thoughts that come from the right, you won't pay attention to what was said to you or how it was said. You'll take responsibility for yourself and won't get angry.

— But, Geronda, I can't believe that I'm always the one at fault.

— It seems you have some hidden pride. Be careful, because anger carries with it self-justification, pride, impatience, and arrogance.

— Geronda, why do people get so easily annoyed at every turn these days?

— These days even flies get annoyed! They're stubborn and persistent! Before, if you shooed a fly away, it would fly off. Now it just sits there stubbornly... But it's also true that today, certain activities not only fail to help one find peace of mind, but can even make a naturally calm person nervous.

— Why is it that now, living in a monastery, I don't get angry, whereas in the secular world I used to get very angry?

— Often, due to external circumstances, a person feels dissatisfied and loses their temper because they don't find fulfillment in what they're doing and want something else. But such irritation is like dust on the surface—it disappears when a person finds what they're striving for.

“Be angry, yet do not sin”⁶⁴

— Geronda, does indignation stem from selfishness?

— Not always. There is also righteous, holy anger. The prophet Moses held the tablets of the commandments in his hands, but when he saw that the Israelites were offering a sacrifice to the golden calf, in holy anger he threw them to the ground and shattered them.⁶⁵ Before ascending Mount Horeb,⁶⁶ where he was to receive the commandments, Moses told the Israelites what they were to do until his return. Moreover, they themselves had seen lightning and heard thunder at the summit of Horeb, but since Moses was taking so long to return, they began to seek a god for themselves. They went to Aaron and said to him, “We don't know what has happened to Moses. Who will lead us now? Make us gods so that they may lead us.” At first, Aaron refused, but then he gave in. The people set to work. They built a furnace, threw into it all the gold that the Egyptians had given them before they left Egypt—⁶⁷—and fashioned a golden calf. They set it on a large rock and began to drink and celebrate. “It will lead us,” the people said. Then God said to Moses, “Hurry down, for the people have turned away from Me.” As Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai, he heard shouting. Joshua, who was waiting for him below, said, “What's happened? Foreigners have arrived!” “Those aren't battle cries—they're cries of joy,” Moses replied. They drew closer and saw the people rejoicing because the golden calf would lead them to the Promised Land! You see, the calf was made of gold!... Moses was indignant; he threw the tablets of the commandments to the ground and shattered them.

A spiritual person may get angry, be indignant, or cry out, but only for a serious spiritual reason. There is no evil within him, and he causes no harm to others. “Be angry, yet do not sin”—is that not what the prophet David says?

⁶⁴ Ps. 4:5

⁶⁵ See Ex. 32:1–24

⁶⁶ Another name for Mount Sinai found in the Old Testament. — *Compiler's note.*

⁶⁷ See Exodus 11:1–3; 12:36–37. Shortly before leaving Egypt, the Israelites, at God's command, borrowed silver and gold vessels and clothing from the Egyptians. They were unable to return these items, since the firstborn of the Egyptians were soon struck down; Pharaoh was terrified and quickly drove the Jews out of Egypt. — *Compiler's note.*

“I prepared myself and was not dismayed”⁶⁸

— Geronda, how can I overcome anger?

— The challenge is not to let it get to the point of anger. Milk, if you don’t take it off the heat in time, boils over and spills right away.

— And how do I avoid getting angry in the first place?

— You need to be vigilant. Watch yourself and keep your anger in check so that this passion doesn’t take root in you. Otherwise, even if you later try to cut it down with an axe, it will constantly sprout new shoots. Remember what the prophet David said: “I prepared myself and was not dismayed.” Do you know how one monk used to act? As he left his cell, he would cross himself and say, “My God, preserve me from temptations.” He was ready to face temptation. It was as if he were standing guard. He watched to see from which direction temptation would come so that he could defend himself against it. If any brother did something wrong to him, he was ready and responded with meekness and humility. Do the same.

— Geronda, sometimes when I’m tempted, I tell myself, “I’ll keep quiet,” but in the end I can’t hold back—I lose control.

— What do you mean, “I lose my temper”? And where does that outburst go afterward? Does it burn up? It seems you lack humility, which is why you reach a certain limit and then lose your temper. You need just a little more humility. Before you speak, recite the Jesus Prayer two or three times for enlightenment. One woman, when she got angry, would first recite the “Apostles’ Creed” and then open her mouth. They’re worldly people, yet look how they strive!

— What should I do if I don’t like the way one of the sisters behaves?

— Treat your sister kindly. Try to excuse her with love. This will help you naturally develop a consistently good spiritual disposition. And when the passion of anger comes upon you, it will find your heart occupied with love and, having no place to stay, will depart.

We overcome anger through humility and silence

— Geronda, how can a person overcome anger?

— We overcome anger through humility and silence. Why do we call the snake wise? Although it has a powerful weapon—venom—and can harm us, as soon as it hears the slightest noise, it immediately slithers away: it doesn’t charge head-on; it yields to our anger. So too, if someone offends you with a word, do not respond. Through silence, you disarm the person. Once, a cat named Dikas was about to strangle a little frog in my cell. The little frog sat motionless, and Dikas left it alone and walked away. With its silence and humility, the little frog... defeated the cat. But if it had moved even a little, Dikas would have grabbed it and started tossing it around and beating it like a drum.

“When my sister and I have disagreements and each of us stands our ground, we reach an impasse, and in the end I get annoyed.”

“You see, one of the two must submit and give in; there’s no other way. If two people want to carry a long plank through a small door, one of them must go in first, the other following behind: otherwise, they won’t be able to get it through. When everyone sticks to their own way, it’s like striking stone against stone—only sparks fly!... The people of Faras,⁶⁹ when someone stood their ground, would say, “Let your goat be a female goat, and mine a male goat,”⁷⁰ and in this way they

⁶⁸ Ps. 118:60

⁶⁹ Faras—a small town in Cappadocia, the birthplace of Elder Paisios. — *Compiler’s note.*

⁷⁰ A female goat is of greater value because she bears offspring. — *Compiler’s note.*

avoided quarrels. In any case, the one who yields comes out ahead, because by making a sacrifice, they find joy and peace.

— But what if a person outwardly behaves correctly and yields, yet is indignant in his heart?

— That means the old man is still alive within him, and he is struggling against him.

— But why, Geronda, even though he behaves correctly, does he lack inner peace?

— How can he have peace? For a person to have peace, he must also be properly oriented inwardly. Then anger and anxiety depart, and the peace of God enters the person. And when inner peace comes, it destroys the fumes of anger, the eyes of the soul are cleansed, and the person begins to see clearly. That is why Christ speaks specifically of “peacemakers,” saying that they “will be called sons of God.”⁷¹

Chapter 3. **Soul-Destroying Sorrow**

Joy comes from Christ, but sorrow comes from the devil

— Geronda, I’ve been feeling very melancholy lately.

— Why are you feeling so down? Did your ships sink? Where did you send them? Into the Atlantic Ocean? Do people really send ships out to sea in weather like this? How many sank?

— All of them, Geronda, have sunk.

— Wonderful! Then you have no possessions, and you can become a good nun! Why don’t you glorify God all the time? What are you lacking? If someone who is far from Christ is sorrowful, I understand that, but if someone who is close to Christ is sorrowful, that’s hard to understand. After all, even if you’re in pain, Christ soothes your pain.

A person cannot have bitter sorrow, because if they bring their sorrow to Christ, it will become sweet nectar. If someone has sorrow, it means that they are not going to Christ with their sorrows.

Joy comes from Christ, and sorrow from the devil. If only you knew how distressed I am when I see a monk with the expression of a grocery store owner who has been deprived of his profits. It is another matter entirely to grieve for God—tears that bring joy. Here, a person rejoices. His silence and his composure pour honey into his heart. When I see such a person, I want to kiss his feet.

— How can a person know that his sorrow is truly for God?

— Let’s say a person has committed a sin and is distressed. If he is grieved because he has saddened Christ, then he feels a sweet pain in his heart, because God pours sweetness—divine consolation—into his soul. This is sorrow for God. But if a person is constantly in sorrow, feeling fear and despair, then he must understand that this sorrow is not from God. Sorrow for God is spiritual joy; it brings comfort to the heart. But sorrow that is not from God inevitably brings fear and hopelessness.

— But Geronda, what if a spiritual person is distressed because some heretic is using his name and harming people?⁷²

— This sadness is justified; a person should feel it, because many are being harmed. But even in this case, one must respond spiritually. If a person accepts everything with humility and says, “My God, I do not want people to suffer; enlighten them so that they may understand the truth,” then he will find peace. But if they start fretting and saying, “What should I do? People are using my name

⁷¹ Matt. 5:9

⁷² The sister who asked the question was referring to instances when people used Elder Paisios’s name for their own gain or to persuade others to accept their erroneous views. — *Compiler’s note.*

to harm others,” then they will find no peace. In any case, if a person is not at fault and their conscience is clear, then even if others upset them, they will find great comfort.

Selfishness always brings sorrow and fear

— Geronda, I keep thinking about that mistake of mine that upset you, and I’m overcome with sadness.

— Stop it; it’s all in the past now. It will bring you nothing but distress, and it won’t help you in any way. But it wouldn’t hurt for you to be more careful in the future. Keep on striving diligently. Everyone makes mistakes, but the Good Lord, like a Father, protects us. For this purpose, He has the saints; for this purpose, He has given every person a Guardian Angel to protect them; and for this purpose, He sets apart spiritual people to help others.

— I’m weighed down by sadness over my failures, Geronda, and I’m getting tired of striving.

— That comes from selfishness. You are not yielding, which is why you are exhausting yourself. There is no humility, no repentance, no contrition—only selfishness—and selfishness always brings sorrow and fear. When a person lacks repentance, he grieves over his selfishness, his desire to please others, and the fact that he has fallen in the eyes of others; then anxiety, bitterness, and pain dwell within him.

— So, if a person is deeply distressed after a fall, is selfishness always the cause?

— Not always. It can also stem from zeal. When a person is deeply troubled by jealousy and zeal, they receive great comfort, which uplifts not only the soul but also the body.

— But how can I tell if I’m suffering out of zeal?

— Someone who is distressed out of zeal blames themselves for everything, while someone who is distressed out of selfishness blames others for everything and says they’re being treated unfairly. When their selfishness is hurt, they start sulking and stop talking... Just today I reprimanded two sisters for their mistakes. Both were upset and hung their heads.

But one was upset because of her diligence—since her mistake had saddened me—while the other was upset because of her selfishness. The first was too ashamed to even look me in the eye. The other, however, in order not to ruin her reputation, immediately began to make excuses, without considering how serious her mistake was. She thought to herself: “I’ve discredited myself in the eyes of others; they’ll stop trusting me. How can I now justify my mistake so as not to ruin my reputation?” If she had admitted her mistake and blamed herself for everything, she would have found comfort. But she tried to justify herself, so she found no peace in her soul. When we justify ourselves, we give the devil a foothold; he comes, influences us subtly, and causes sorrow. But when we take all the blame upon ourselves, then God takes all our burden upon Himself. So, let’s decide which to choose: humility, which brings peace, or selfishness, which brings sorrow, fear, and distress?

An ungrateful person is always sad

— Why do many people, even though they have everything, feel fear and sorrow?

— If you see a person who experiences intense fear, distress, and sorrow even though they have everything, know that they do not have God.

The one who has everything—both material possessions and good health—yet, instead of thanking God, makes new, unreasonable demands, grumbles, and complains, is undoubtedly preparing a place for himself in hell. A person who knows what gratitude is is content with everything. They think about what God gives them every day and rejoice in it all. But if a person is ungrateful, they are dissatisfied with everything, grumble about every little thing, and suffer. Let’s

say he doesn't like the sun, and then the Vardaris—⁷³ —the north wind—begins to blow, bringing the cold... He didn't like the sun, so now he's shivering from the cold.

— Geronda, what are you trying to say?

“I mean that if we do not appreciate the blessings God gives us and instead grumble, trials will come that force us to curl up into a ball.” I'm telling you in all seriousness: anyone with such a disposition—who constantly grumbles and complains—should know that God will slap them in the face so they can pay off at least part of their debt in this life. And if that slap doesn't come, it's even worse—then they'll have to pay for everything all at once in the next life.

— So, can grumbling become a habit?

— It does become a habit, because grumbling is followed by more grumbling, and complaints by more complaints. He who sows complaints reaps complaints and accumulates fear. But he who sows praise tastes divine joy and blessings forever. A complainer, no matter how many blessings God gives him, does not feel them. Therefore, God's grace departs from him, and temptation comes. Temptation follows him closely, and everything in his life goes awry. But God Himself pursues the grateful with His gifts.

Ingratitude is a great sin, one that Christ Himself condemned. “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?”⁷⁴ — He asked the leper who had come to thank Him. Christ expected gratitude from the ten lepers not for His own sake, but for their own sake, because gratitude would benefit them.

Tangalashka wants to see us sad

— Geronda, why does my joy suddenly turn to sorrow?

— A sudden shift from joy to sorrow most often stems from temptation. The malicious Tangalashka battles against people, especially those who are receptive and naturally cheerful, who strive to lead a spiritual life. This is his work: he wants to see us sad and take pleasure in it. But why on earth should we allow Tangalashka to do this? Isn't joy better than sadness? And isn't love better than malice?

— But sometimes I fall into sadness, and I don't know why.

— Tangalashka doesn't want people to be happy. He finds a way to upset both those who have a reason to be upset and those who don't. As for you, it seems to me that he's trying to lead you to disappointment, entangling you more and more with his subtle threads. All right, if he were tying you up with twine, back and forth like that, you could at least say there's a reason to be upset. But, to you those thin threads seem like thick ropes, and you get worked up. Don't torment yourself for no reason, because by doing so you're pleasing Tangalashka and upsetting Christ. Do you want Christ to be grieved?

— No, Geronda, but...

— No “buts”! “Go to hell!”⁷⁵ say, “Be grieved!”

— “Be grieved!”

Sorrow drains our mental and physical strength

— Geronda, I often have stomachaches, and it's hard for me to fulfill my monastic duties.

— You just sit there and dwell on your thoughts, seeing everything in a negative light and tormenting yourself needlessly; that is why you suffer in both body and soul. After yet another such

⁷³ Vardaris is a very strong and cold wind that blows northwest from Thessaloniki along the Axios River. — *Compiler's note.*

⁷⁴ Luke 17:17

⁷⁵ St. John Chrysostom. Homily for Holy Easter.

episode, your stomach starts to ache—how can you possibly find the strength for spiritual matters then? You can take medicine to relieve the pain, but if you don't get rid of your sadness, your stomach will start hurting again. Do not entertain thoughts that cause you disappointment, lest you render useless the gifts God has given you. The more correctly you view things, the more peace and tranquility you will have within you; the healthier you will be, and you will stop taking medicine.

Sorrow disarms a person. It drains all the vitality from both mind and body and prevents one from doing anything. It poisons the soul and brings disorder to the body. It strikes at the body's most sensitive spots, instills fear, and wears a person down. The poison of despondency can bring down not only someone with a weak constitution, but even someone very strong. There is one sister here. Do you know how much strength she has? She's a star in spiritual matters, and when it comes to obedience, she excels at everything! She could run the entire monastery, but because of despondency, she does nothing—her potential goes to waste. Such a powerful engine, yet it idles uselessly.

Drive away weakness with spiritual courage

— Geronda, when difficulties come one after another in my spiritual struggle, I start to grumble, and I'm overcome by despair.

— It is precisely in such difficult moments that human strength is revealed. Do not be afraid or panic when you encounter difficulties. Ask God for spiritual courage so that you may boldly face the difficulties on your spiritual path and fight bravely.

— The sadness I've been feeling lately because of my poor spiritual state is completely draining my spiritual strength.

— Thank God, you've come a long way from where you used to be, even though you haven't yet reached where you're supposed to be. I am confident that you will soon show what you are capable of, breaking the last bonds of spiritual weakness with the help of God's grace, just as a lion tears through a spider's web. Drive away weakness with spiritual courage. I will wait and pray. I hope to see the day when I can rejoice in your successes.

— Geronda, when I neglect my spiritual duties, I am overcome with melancholy.

— Sadness over having neglected something and joy over what has been accomplished are natural things. But selfishness can also creep in, so be careful. Make a good start, establish an order for your spiritual struggle, and move forward slowly but surely. In this way, you will achieve greater steadfastness, and these ups and downs caused by the disguised enemy will cease. If you use your strength with spiritual courage to succeed in your monastic endeavor, you will achieve great success. But if you get stuck in weakness, you yourself will lament endlessly, while the tangalashka claps its hands in the meantime.

— Geronda, am I lacking strength?

— You need drive, a burst of energy!

— How do I achieve that?

— You need courage, bravery! Why do I need pitiful nuns? I need spiritual warriors⁷⁶ — who, with spiritual courage, would fight against the tangalashka, glorifying God.

Praising God is the antidote to despondency

— Geronda, I get upset when I see remnants of some passion within myself.

⁷⁶ Suliotka: a woman from Suli, a confederation of villages in Epirus. The Suliots and Suliorkas displayed exceptional heroism in the struggle against Ali Pasha (1792–1803). — *Translator's note.*

— Say, “Thank God that the worst is over!” If I were in your place, looking at God’s great gifts, “from the morning watch until night”⁷⁷ I would repeat: “Glory to You, O God.” If you want to begin living a heavenly life right here, look at the mercies and abundant gifts that God gives you, and give thanks: “Glory to You, O God.” Glorify God for helping you succeed—even if only a little—whether through your own labor or the help of others. When a person says, “Glory to You, O God,” God helps, because gratitude, combined with a humble disposition, diligence, and zeal in one’s endeavors, attracts innumerable heavenly powers and divine gifts.

— Geronda, what if I know I’ll fall again?

— You don’t know. You’re thinking that out of fear. You shouldn’t be afraid of repeating your previous mistake, because that’s how your faith in God wavers. There’s no need for excessive worry here. If a thought tells you that you won’t improve, and you fall into despondency, then you need to comfort and encourage yourself. “Thank God,” you must say, “today I am better than I was yesterday. A thousand times, thank God...” Although this encouragement may seem insincere, it holds within it a great power—hope in God. Hope in God is the lever that overturns despair, frees the soul from despondency and fear, and, step by step, strengthens a person’s spiritual powers, awakening holy optimism within them.

— Geronda, I’m worried about my health problems.

— Accept everything as a great gift from God. God does not wrong anyone. In Heaven, you will find comfort. You will receive a generous pension—unless you diminish it yourself with your grumbling.

— But how, Geronda, when right now I don’t feel Heaven within me?

— You don’t feel Heaven because you don’t glorify God. When a person lives in praise, they rejoice in everything. There are people in the world who will judge us monks. Look at the Bedouins—what a hard life they lead, yet they thank God and are always cheerful.⁷⁸ They don’t remove the stones from the wheat; they grind it just as it is, so their bread is full of stones! The food they eat seems to lack essential micronutrients, calcium, and so on, which is why their teeth are completely ruined. You see a Bedouin with just a single tooth, yet he rejoices as if that tooth were made of mother-of-pearl. For another person, lacking even a single tooth is enough to make him feel inferior. All of this means that we must ceaselessly give thanks and glorify God day and night for His blessings upon us.

One bishop told me that in church, while the deacon was reading the Gospel account of the healing of the Gerasenes,⁷⁹ an ordinary parishioner standing behind the bishop’s seat kept repeating, “Glory to You, O God.” The deacon begins: “At that time, Jesus came to the region of Gerasa.” “Glory to You, O God,” says the parishioner. “Two demoniacs met Him”—“Glory to You, O God.” “They were very fierce”—“Glory to You, O God.” “And behold, the whole flock rushed... into the sea”—“Glory to You, O God.” “I realized,” the bishop told me later, “that this simple man was right to keep saying, ‘Glory to You, O God,’ because ‘Glory to You, O God’ casts the demons into the sea.” And you must constantly repeat: “Glory to You, O God, glory to You, O God,” until the flock rushes into the sea...

Praise sanctifies everything around it. In giving praise, a person forgets himself in gratitude, loses his mind in a good way, and rejoices in everything. And when a person thanks God even for the smallest things, God’s blessing then comes upon him so generously that he cannot bear it. At that point, the devil can no longer stand it and departs.

⁷⁷ Ps. 129:5

⁷⁸ Elder Paisios speaks of the time when he lived on Mount Sinai (1962–1964). — *Compiler’s note.*

⁷⁹ See Matt. 8:28–34

Section 2.

Virtues

“Whoever possesses spiritual beauty, born of virtue, shines with Divine Grace. For as a person acquires virtues, they attain deification, and therefore radiate light; Divine Grace reveals them.”

Cultivating Virtues

— Geronda, when does a person attain deification?

— When Divine Grace enters him.

— Does joy then dwell within him?

— Not only joy dwells within them, but also great love, humility, consolation, and confidence. They possess the qualities that God possesses, and that is why God’s Grace enters them.

— And what does “God of gods” mean?⁸⁰

— Does David not say, “Are you not all gods, and sons of the Most High?”⁸¹ Man is created “in the image” of God; therefore, God is the God of gods—that is, of people. Man must attain deification. All people are created in the image of God, but which of us is on the path to “likeness”? The further we stray from God, the less we become like Him—that is, the further we stray from the essence of “likeness.”

For a person to become like God, they must live in accordance with God’s commandments and work on themselves. In this way, they are purified of passions and acquire virtues, and then they are no longer merely a person created “in the image” of God, but enter into a state of “likeness,” since Divine Grace is at work within them.

“Practicing virtue means keeping the Lord’s commandments.”⁸²

— Geronda, I would very much like to see my saint.

— And I would like you to try to become a friend of God.

— How can I achieve that?

— “How can a young person keep their way pure? By living according to Your word.”⁸³ If you live in accordance with God’s commandments, you will become a friend of God.

If we are children of God, then we must keep His commandments. When the Jews said, “We have Abraham as our father,” Christ replied to them, “Your father is not Abraham, but Satan, because if you were children of Abraham, you would do the works of Abraham.”⁸⁴

— Geronda, what does Abba Isaac mean when he says that Christ does not require the fulfillment of the commandments, but rather the correction of the soul?⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ps. 49:1

⁸¹ Ps. 81:6

⁸² Quoted from: The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian. Moscow, 1993. p. 148

⁸³ Ps. 118:9

⁸⁴ Cf. John 8:39; John 8:44

⁸⁵ See The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian. Moscow, 1993. p. 148

— Why did God give the commandments? Was it not for our correction? By keeping God’s commandments, we cultivate virtue and attain health of the soul. “The practice of virtue,” says Abba Isaac, “is the keeping of the Lord’s commandments.”⁸⁶

— Geronda, Abba Isaiah says: “A person needs a courageous and great heart to care about keeping God’s commandments.”⁸⁷

— That is true. To fulfill God’s commandments precisely, one needs courage, bravery, and sobriety. Therefore, examine what you lack and what God requires of you: consider what you have done and what you should have done but did not. Say to yourself: “Yes, I like what I am doing, but is it pleasing to the Lord?”—and strive to fulfill God’s will. “For the words of Your lips I have kept the ways of the righteous,”⁸⁸ —as it is written in Holy Scripture.

Virtue has value only when it is acquired freely, without external coercion. A person must feel virtue as a personal need and then strive to acquire it. It is not God who needs us to do His will—it is we who need it. We need to do God’s will in order to free ourselves from our old self. All the believer’s strength must be directed toward strictly observing God’s commandments. When a person strives to fulfill God’s will, he draws closer to God and, even if he does not ask, still receives Divine Grace. In other words, he draws water directly from the source.

All virtues must be cultivated

— Can a person be virtuous by nature?

— A person may be, by nature, for example, simple, calm, or meek. All these are natural gifts that God gives him, and in order to increase them, a person must cultivate them. Through spiritual struggle, he will receive spiritual gifts, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

— Geronda, is reasoning a gift from God or a virtue that a person gradually acquires through spiritual practice?

— Let me put it this way: discernment is a gift. But suppose you don’t have this gift—you have some other one instead. As you develop your gift, you will simultaneously develop discernment and other virtues, and through this, make up for the virtues you lack. When a person strives, for example, in self-restraint, he simultaneously cultivates silence, attentiveness, prayer, discernment, and so on.

After all, virtues and passions develop depending on the direction in which a person chooses to work. If they cultivate virtues, the virtues will grow and drown out the passions. If they cultivate passions, the passions will grow and drown out the virtues. If they cultivate both, both will grow, and confusion will ensue. To understand this, imagine a garden with both flowers and weeds. If the gardener tends to the weeds, the weeds will grow and choke out the flowers. If he tends to the flowers, the flowers will flourish and choke out the weeds. If he tends to both, over time he will be unable to distinguish the flowers from the weeds.

For a person to succeed, they must recognize the passions within them and strive to cut them off. They must also recognize the gifts God has given them and develop them. If they cultivate these gifts with humility, they will soon be spiritually enriched. If they work on their spiritual growth, they will become good; if they neglect it, they will become bad.

I have met people who, although the soil of their souls was fertile, left it uncultivated, and it became overgrown with thorns and thistles. Others, however, even though thorns and thistles grew on their *land*, pulled them all up, plowed the field, and the land began to bear fruit. What good is it if God has given us good soil, but we have abandoned it, and it has become overgrown with weeds? If our land is suitable for growing sugarcane but is overgrown with reeds, and if we do not take care

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Quoted from: **The Love of Goodness**, Vol. I. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1992. p. 427.

⁸⁸ Ps. 16:4

to pull up the reeds, plant sugarcane, and cultivate it, how can God help us? You can only weave baskets from reeds; you won't get any sugar from them...

God will hold each of us accountable for whether we have doubled the gift He gave us. If He gave someone five gifts, that person must turn them into ten. Nine is no longer the best result for that person. Therefore, let everyone work with humility and discernment to achieve the best result. After all, God will demand an answer as to whether a person has turned one talent into two, two into four, and five into ten. Consequently, if a person has doubled the talents given to him, then in God's eyes he deserves the highest reward. And if anyone, out of zeal rather than pride, turns one talent into ten, he will move not only God but even a person with a heart of stone.

The virtue of others fills us with a sweet fragrance

— Geronda, what helps us acquire virtue?

— Associating with someone who possesses that virtue. If you associate with someone who has reverence, you will gradually acquire reverence yourself. This is true of all virtues, because the virtues of others fill us with their fragrance.

When we look at the virtues of others and try to imitate them, we are edified. But even by looking at their shortcomings, we also benefit, because the shortcomings of others help us see our own. Another person's virtue inspires me to strive to imitate it, while a flaw makes me wonder whether I have the same flaw—and if so, to what extent—so that I can try to rid myself of it. For example, when I see diligence in someone, I rejoice and try to emulate that person. When I see curiosity in another, I do not condemn my brother, but look closely to see if I, too, possess curiosity. And if I find that I do, I will try to rid myself of it. But if I see only virtues in myself and only flaws in others, while at the same time ignoring my own flaws or justifying them by saying, "I'm better than this person, and that one, and the other!"—then I'm doomed.

Other people are a mirror for us. When we look at others, we see ourselves, and others see our flaws, and their observations wash away the stains from us.

The Example of the Saints in Practicing Virtue

— Tell me, Geronda, what are the distinctive qualities of the saints?

— Love combined with humility, simplicity, and discernment—these are the distinguishing characteristics of the saints. If a person, with discernment, compels himself to imitate the lives of the saints, he too will attain holiness.

The example of the saints will greatly help us in our efforts to acquire virtues. By comparing ourselves to the saints, we see our own passions, condemn ourselves, humble ourselves, and strive with zeal and divine fervor to imitate them. We have no excuse for standing still, because we have the example of the saints—their lives—right before our eyes. All the saints are children of God, and they help us, God's wretched children, by showing us how to avoid the wiles of the evil one.

A careful reading of the lives of the saints warms the soul, inspires us to follow their example, and encourages us to courageously continue the struggle to acquire virtues. In the life of every saint, the same holy madness is evident, though it manifests itself differently in each one. One can see the ardent love (ἔρωτας) they had for God. And so the fire of divine zeal and a fervent desire to imitate them is kindled within a person.

— Geronda, how many years of a saint's life should one read in the Synaxarion⁸⁹ ?

— Your whole life. Although very little is written in the Synaxarion, a saint's life story does not cover their entire life, but only drops from a full cup that have spilled over the brim. The saints

⁸⁹ Synaxarion: a brief hagiography of the saint of the day, included in the liturgical Menaion. — *Translator's note*

would be fools if they revealed everything they experienced in secret. But these few words are enough for us, as long as they can touch our hearts, as long as we can embody them in our own lives.

— It seems difficult to me to do anything like what the saints did. Take, for example, Saint Synklitikia,⁹⁰—what a difficult feat she carried out until the end of her life, even though she suffered from a serious illness! Or the Venerable Barsanuphius,⁹¹—how many years did he maintain complete silence!

— All right, if you want to emulate the Venerable Barsanuphius, at least try not to respond when someone corrects you. As for the feat of Saint Syncletica, it seems to me that you wouldn't have the physical strength to repeat it—you wouldn't be able to endure it—but inwardly, in my opinion, you can emulate her, and you have a great deal of work ahead of you in this regard. I hope that the saint will grant you at least a little of what she herself possessed.

Let's purify virtue of its impurities

— Geronda, you sometimes speak of “toxic virtue.” When is virtue “toxic”?

— “Toxic” virtue is, for example, kindness when it's motivated by a desire to please others, or love when it's motivated by self-interest. When our actions lack selflessness and simplicity, and selfishness is mixed with virtue, then it is a perverted virtue. Then it is like an unripe fruit, which, of course, also contains some vitamins, but when you take a bite, you taste bitterness in your mouth.

— Could it be that I lack virtue, yet someone considers me pious?

— It's bad if you consider yourself pious.

— Could I fail to see my true spiritual state and think that I possess virtue?

— You can, but if you look closely, you'll feel that there is no sweetness inside, and from this you'll understand what your true spiritual state is. Sometimes a person may think they have acquired virtue simply because they have adopted certain outward signs of that virtue and follow them in order to appear pious to others. But in reality, this is not virtue—not true virtue. They will not last long this way. A trial will come, and the truth will be revealed. It is one thing, for example, if a person practices silence so as not to offend others with words, and thus gradually acquires the virtue of silence. It is quite another if he remains silent so that others will consider him a man of few words.

He may be silent with his tongue, but at the same time be constantly conversing with his thoughts, and passions may take hold of him. Outwardly, he may seem like a true saint, but when his inner self is revealed, it will turn out that this is...

— Geronda, I am despairing over my condition. The good I saw in myself has, in reality, turned out to be worthless.

— What exactly?

— What I thought was enthusiasm turned out, in the end, to be selfishness.

— No, dear, that's not true! There are many different metals in ore. There may be a lot of sand, but there's also copper, iron, and a little gold... If the ore goes into the crucible, that's when the gold will be smelted out. Don't they say, “Like gold in the crucible?”⁹²

Pride—the thief of virtues

— Geronda, I am a prisoner of my passions. Sometimes I am robbed by self-love, sometimes by the pursuit of outward things.

⁹⁰ Her feast day is celebrated on January 5. — *Compiler's note*

⁹¹ His memory is celebrated on February 6. — *Compiler's note*

⁹² Wis. 3:6

— If a person allows thieves to plunder his possessions, can he ever become rich? And you, if you allow your passions to rob you, can you ever succeed? You'll remain in poverty forever, because no matter what you accumulate, you'll lose it. I'm baffled as to how this little thief can rob you—you yourself can snatch paradise!

— I'd really like to work on cultivating virtue, but I'm stuck in place. Why is that?

— It may well be that a person isn't yet ready for virtue. But you, I see, are beginning to approach spiritual maturity. So listen: now that summer is coming and the grapes are slowly filling with sweetness, protect them properly from the crows—the tangalashkas—and live humbly and unobtrusively.

— But everything good I do, I lose, because I instantly fall into pride.

— Do you know what you're doing? You make honey, and then you throw it away, and the evil tangalashka steals it from you, leaving you empty-handed. Just as a beekeeper clouds the bees' vision with smoke and then takes their honey, so the tangalashka clouds your mind with the smoke of pride, steals all your spiritual honey, and then rubs its hands together with glee. It steals God's precious gifts from you and rejoices in doing so. You're smart—don't you understand this? Why don't you grab the hand of the thief, the deceiver, who is robbing you?

— But if a person feels that the gift they possess comes from God, how can temptation steal that gift?

— Through inattention. God endows every person with many gifts, and though a person ought to thank God for them, they often pay no attention, claim the gifts given to them by God as their own, and become proud in their hearts. Then the crafty devil comes and steals these gifts from the person—for he is a thief—poisons them with his venom, and renders them useless.

Spiritual Beauty

— Geronda, how can I attain spiritual beauty?

— If you strive with divine zeal to acquire virtues, you will also acquire spiritual beauty. The Mother of God possessed both outer and inner beauty. Anyone who saw her became a different person. The spiritual gentleness she radiated healed souls.

Through her inner beauty and the power of grace, she accomplished a missionary feat! And anyone who works spiritually and refines their character will become blessed and beautiful in soul.

— Does a person who possesses Divine Grace feel it themselves?

— They sense certain manifestations of grace.

— And can another person, looking at them, recognize grace in them?

— Yes, they can, because grace reveals it. You know, virtue cannot be hidden, no matter how hard a person tries. You cannot hide the sun behind a sieve, because its rays will still pass through the holes.

The one in whom there is spiritual beauty, born of virtue, shines with grace. For by acquiring virtues, a person attains deification, and thus radiates light from within, and Divine Grace reveals him. Thus, without desiring or even realizing it, a person reveals himself to others, and God is glorified.

Freedom from passions and the purification of the soul also affect the body, which is likewise purified, for purification begins in the heart. Through the blood, the heart transmits its spirituality to the body, and thus the whole person is sanctified.

Part 1.

There is one virtue—humility

“Humility opens the gates of Heaven, and God’s grace descends upon a person”

Chapter 1.

“God gives grace to the humble”⁹³

The humble person possesses all virtues

- Geronda, please say something to us as we part.⁹⁴
 - What can I say? I’ve already said so much!
 - Tell us something so we can work on it until you return.
 - Well, if you insist, I’ll tell you... There is one virtue—humility—and since you don’t understand that, I’ll add love as well. But if someone has humility, don’t they also have love?
 - Abba Isaac says: “Just as salt is to all food, so humility is to every virtue.”⁹⁵
 - So, without humility, virtues... are inedible! Saint Isaac wants to show just how necessary humility is in the practice of virtues.
 - Geronda, elsewhere Abba Isaac says that humility comes when a person has acquired all the virtues.⁹⁶
 - Maybe you misunderstood something? If a person lacks humility, no virtue can come near him.⁹⁷
 - So, does a person who possesses humility also possess all the virtues?
 - Of course. The humble person exudes all the fragrances of spiritual sweetness: simplicity, meekness, boundless love, kindness, lack of malice, self-sacrifice, obedience, and so on. He possesses poverty of spirit—⁹⁸—and that is why he possesses all spiritual riches. He is also pious and silent, and therefore he is of the same nature as the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, who possessed great humility. Carrying the incarnate God within herself, she replied: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”⁹⁹ She did not say, “I will become the mother of the Son of God.” She remained silent, silent, until Christ spoke at the age of thirty.
- St. Andrew of Crete says that She is God after God and occupies the second place after the Trinity.¹⁰⁰ Servant and at the same time Bride of God! Virgin and Mother! Creation of God and Mother of the Creator! All these are great mysteries that cannot be explained—they can only be experienced!

⁹³ See James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 3:34.

⁹⁴ This conversation took place in the Hesychastery in February 1968 between Elder Paisios and the first female monastics. The next day, the Elder departed for the Holy Mountain after a two-month stay at the monastery, where he had been to lay the foundation for spiritual life in the newly established communal monastery. — *Compiler’s note.*

⁹⁵ Quoted from the book **The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian**. Moscow, 1993. p. 199.

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 235.

⁹⁷ The passage the sister is referring to reads as follows: “Humility is a certain mysterious power which, upon the completion of the entire divine life, is received by the perfect saints” (cited from: *The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Moscow, 1993. p. 235). Here, Abba Isaac speaks of humility as a state of perfection, whereas Elder Paisios refers to the humility necessary for the struggle to acquire virtues. — *Compiler’s note.*

⁹⁸ Cf. Matt. 5:3

⁹⁹ Luke 1:38

¹⁰⁰ “Rejoice with God, O God, who possesses the second place in the Trinity.” St. Andrew of Crete, 5th tone. Theotokarion. Volos, 1991. p. 107.

— Which icon of the Mother of God do you like best?

— I like all the icons of the Mother of God. Even if I simply see Her name written somewhere, I reverently kiss it many times, and my heart trembles with joy.

It's amazing when you think about it! A little girl says: "My soul magnifies the Lord... for He has looked upon the humility of His servant."¹⁰¹ So much meaning in just a few words! You can gain great benefit by delving into the meaning of these words. They are brief but powerful. If you ponder them, you will come to love humility, and if you humble yourself, you will see God come into you, transforming your heart into the manger at Bethlehem.

The Spirit of God rests upon the humble

— Tell us, what virtues must a person possess in order for God's grace to descend upon him?

— Humility alone is enough. I am often asked, "How long does it take to attain Divine Grace?" Some may supposedly live a spiritual life their whole lives, striving in their spiritual practices, and so on, yet still think they are something special—such people do not attain God's Grace. Others, however, attain grace in a short time because they humble themselves.

If a person humbles himself, grace can illuminate him in an instant, turn him into an angel, and he will enter paradise. But if he becomes proud, in an instant he will become a goat and end up in hell. A person, if he wants, becomes a sheep; if he wants, he becomes a goat. Poor goats—they would like to become sheep, but they cannot; yet God has given man the ability to transform from a goat into a sheep, provided he desires it.

God's grace descends only upon the humble and meek. The Spirit of God rests upon such a person. Do you remember what the prophet Isaiah says: "Whom shall I look upon, if not the meek and quiet one?"¹⁰²

God requires only a little humility from us so that we may enter into a relationship with Him, and then all His rich gifts are poured out upon us abundantly, one after another. For God, as it were, owes great grace to the humble person; He gives it to them as a gift, even if the person themselves does not ask for it. Such is the spiritual law. Does not the Gospel say: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble?"¹⁰³ That is how God has ordained it. "Humble" means "possessing grace"! The very humble, therefore, receive great grace from God, because a humble person, like a sponge, absorbs Divine Grace into themselves. The one who humbly bows down and accepts blows from others purifies himself of impurities, becomes like an angel in spiritual beauty, and freely passes through the narrow gate of paradise. No one ascends to Heaven through worldly ascent, but through spiritual descent.

Humility opens the gates of Heaven, and God's grace comes upon a person, while pride closes them. Elder Tikhon said: "A single humble person has more grace than many people combined. Every morning God blesses the world with one hand, but if He sees a humble person, He blesses him with both hands. Whoever has more humility is greater than all others!"¹⁰⁴

Everything depends on a humble disposition. When a person has a humble disposition, then, naturally, earth is united with Heaven for him.

Through humility, people have found the key that, when turned, lifts them up to the Third Heaven¹⁰⁵ on the spiritual elevator of love. Yet some say, "Why does God demand humility from us?" So be it! If a person does not humble themselves, they will not pass through the narrow gates

¹⁰¹ Luke 1:46–48

¹⁰² Isa. 66:2

¹⁰³ James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5. See Proverbs 3:34

¹⁰⁴ Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Fathers of Mount Athos and Athonite Writings*. Thessaloniki, 2005. p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ See 2 Cor. 12:2

of paradise, nor will they find peace in this life. What did Christ say? “Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”¹⁰⁶

A single humble thought instantly sets God’s grace in motion

— It amazes me how a single humble thought instantly sets God’s grace in motion. Once, a kitten wandered into my cell. The poor thing had obviously eaten something it shouldn’t have, gotten poisoned, and was now begging for help, writhing in pain, jumping up and down like an octopus when it’s smashed against rocks... It was pitiful to watch, but what could I do? I crossed myself once, then twice—to no avail! “Look at yourself,” I said to myself then, “you’ve been a monk for so many years, and you can’t even help a poor little kitten!” No sooner had I reproached myself than the kitten, who had been on his last breath, suddenly came to. He ran up, began rubbing against my legs, and hopping joyfully... Such is the power of humility! That is why it is said: “In our humility, the Lord will remember us.”¹⁰⁷

I’ve noticed that from a single humble thought, a person begins to glow, to shine. When a person takes all the blame upon himself, God’s grace pours out upon him. The day before yesterday, a doctor with many children came to visit; he told me, “Geronda, I am very proud, and because of my pride, my children are misbehaving.” And he said this in front of his children, with tears in his eyes—yet his face was beaming! I saw something similar here a few days ago. Several sisters came to me for a conversation. We talked about various things, and I had to scold them severely. One of them shrank back, almost to the point of tears. She humbled herself, and afterward her face was radiant. See what a single humble and contrite thought can do! All her shortcomings are immediately cast aside; she gathers herself, and her face shines. The other one, however, gained nothing for herself: she came with a cold heart and left with a cold heart, talking only about other people’s shortcomings—and in great detail. For those who do not work on themselves, even a single proud or slanderous thought is enough to cast a shadow over their face.

A single humble thought can instantly lift a person to such spiritual heights as they could not reach even after years of superhuman feats.

— Geronda, if a proud person brings a single humble thought to mind, will God help him?

— If he has even one humble thought, then he will no longer be proud but humble, and God will help him. A person is fickle: sometimes he leans one way, sometimes the other— —depending on what thought he has. A proud person, if he brings a humble thought to mind, receives help. And a humble person, if he harbors a thought of pride, ceases to be humble. He becomes proud—and God’s grace leaves him, and he falls into a bad state. But if he recognizes his transgression and sincerely repents, humility returns, and his condition changes for the better, because humility brings God’s grace. However, for humility to become a permanent state for a person and for God’s grace to abide in him, spiritual work is required.

Chapter 2. The Labor of Acquiring Humility

How Humility Is Cultivated

— Geronda, how is humility cultivated?

¹⁰⁶ Matt. 11:29

¹⁰⁷ Ps. 135:23

— Humility is cultivated through self-denial and is nourished by the manure of one's failures. A self-denying person attributes everything good that he has to God. He sees the multitude of God's blessings and realizes that he is unworthy of them; he humbles himself and constantly glorifies God. And the more he humbles himself and glorifies God, the more abundantly Divine Grace is poured out upon him. This is voluntary humility. But humility that arises from constant failures is forced humility.

Undoubtedly, voluntary humility is of greater value than forced humility. It is like a plot of fertile land where trees grow without fertilizer or manure and bear delicious fruit. Compelled humility, on the other hand, is like poor soil, where both fertilizer and manure are needed to produce a harvest—and, again, the fruit will not be as delicious.

— Geronda, it's hard for me when, because I've treated someone badly, I humiliate myself in the eyes of others and am forced to humble myself.

— Through forced humility, you are paying off at least part of the debt you have accumulated through your sins. However, you need to begin to humble yourself voluntarily.

— But I'm in a very difficult state. I'm tormented by carnal thoughts, and I fall into despondency. I'm afraid I'll never get out of this state.

— Take heart, my good man, and in the end Christ will triumph. Sing: "From my youth the enemy has tempted me, he has burned me with delights; but I, hoping in You, O Lord, overcome him."¹⁰⁸ In truth, it is not so much the poor flesh that is to blame, but pride. In reality, you have many virtues, which are, of course, gifts from God, but because of a certain lack of diligence and inattention, the enemy finds an opportune moment and plunges you into pride. And instead of washing your face with tears of joy and gratitude to God, you bathe it in tears of sorrow and grief. From this follows the conclusion: if we do not humble ourselves willingly, we will be humbled by force, for the Good God loves us. So take heart, my child, and Christ will triumph. "For even if you are defeated again, you will be victorious again: for God is with us."¹⁰⁹ The storm will pass and bring much good in its wake. You will come to know yourself better, you will be humbled against your will, and, according to spiritual laws, God's grace—which was previously hindered by pride—will surely come upon you.

We have not yet come to know ourselves. If we do, our soul will rejoice and humbly ask for God's mercy. Self-knowledge gives birth to humility. For the more a person comes to know himself, the wider the eyes of his soul are opened, and the more clearly he sees his own great weakness. He comes to know his own wretchedness and ingratitude, and at the same time, God's great nobility and mercy. Because of this, he is inwardly contrite, humbles himself to the ground, and begins to love God deeply.

Humility of the heart is everything

— Geronda, is it possible for a person to be humble in their mind but not in their heart?

— In the past, in monasteries and in many homes, the doors were very low, and in order to enter, a person had to bend down: if he didn't, he would hit his head on the doorframe. So they had to bend down, and whether they wanted to or not, they'd think about it and make sure not to be careless next time, so as not to injure themselves or embarrass themselves in front of others. This example shows that intellectual humility is only good for protecting one's head and preserving one's reputation. The day before yesterday, a sister came to me and said, "Geronda, the abbess told me that when I sing, I'm showing off my voice; ever since then, I've kept that in mind and try to sing more humbly." "Did you understand what the abbess told you?" I asked her. "—You must feel and

¹⁰⁸ Stepenna, Tone 8, Antiphon 1.

¹⁰⁹ A verse from the Great Compline.

recognize this weakness and want to get rid of it. Because if your effort not to boast about your voice is purely superficial—just so the abbess won't reprimand you anymore—you may end up not just boasting about your voice, but taking pride in yourself.”

“Geronda, even though I bring humble thoughts to mind, deep down inside me there is a certain self-esteem. How can one go hand in hand with the other?”

— You're simply bringing humble thoughts to mind, but these thoughts don't reach your heart. If they touched your heart, they would transform you from within for the better, and you would now be an angel. Humility of the heart—that is everything. What does Abba Isaac say? “The truly humble person is one who has no need to devise ways to be humble through his own wisdom... but is so in his heart without compulsion.”¹¹⁰

Humility in deed, not just in words

— Geronda, if a person humbles and reproaches himself, saying, “I am flawed, worthless, a lost soul, and so on,” does this help him attain humility?

— It is easy for a person to reproach himself, but he has a hard time accepting reproaches from others. He may say to himself, “I am pitiful, the most sinful, the worst of all people,” but at the same time, he cannot accept a single remark from others. When a person stumbles and falls on his own, let it hurt him, but he does not get too upset. Or if someone who loves him hits him, he'll say, “Okay, no big deal.” But if someone he doesn't like so much so much as scratches or pushes him—well, then, yes! He'll start screaming, pretending he's in so much pain he can't get up!

When I lived on Mount Sinai, there was a layperson named Stratis. If you called out to him, “Mr. Stratis,” he would reply, “What ‘Mr.’? Call me sinful, sinful Stratis.” Everyone would say, “What a humble man!” Once he overslept in the morning and didn't get up in time for the service. Someone went to wake him up. “Stratis, are you still sleeping? They've already read the Sixth Psalm. Aren't you going to the service?” He started shouting: “I have more piety than you do, and you're telling me to go to church?” He was shouting like a madman... He even grabbed a door key—as big as a barn lock key—and swung it at the man because his pride had been hurt. The people who heard him shouting were speechless, since everyone considered him very humble and looked up to him as a role model. Stratis disgraced himself. Do you see what's happening? He called himself a sinner, but as soon as his pride was hurt, he simply went berserk!

Another man in Epirus did some repairs on a church. He himself said he hadn't done anything special—just touched up a few spots here and there. But when I told him, “All right, ‘touched up.’ You did do something after all,” that's when he got angry! “As if you could have done it better,” he started saying. “I know what it means to build—I'm not some carpenter like you. My father took on contracts himself!”

It's easy to humble oneself, but that doesn't mean a person possesses true humility.

— Geronda, how can one recognize true, genuine humility?

— When someone else humiliates you and you accept it, that is when you have true humility, because true humility is humility in action, not just in words. Once, Saint Cosmas of Aetolia asked the people gathered around him, “Which of you is free from pride?” “I am,” said one man. “Come here, you who have no pride,” said Saint Cosmas. “Cut off one of your mustache hairs and go out into the square.” “Uh, I can't do that,” he replied. “Well then, you have no humility,” the saint told him.¹¹¹ By this, Saint Cosmas meant that active humility is necessary.

— “That's exactly how I am; when someone provokes me, I talk back.”

¹¹⁰ Quoted from: *The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Moscow, 1993. p. 236.

¹¹¹ See Archimandrite Charalambos Vasilopoulos, **Saint Cosmas the Aetolian**. Athens, 1993, pp. 198–199.

— You lack humility, which is why you retaliate. Look at the humility of Abba Moses. When he was ordained a priest, the archbishop wanted to test him and said to the clergy: “When Abba Moses enters the sanctuary, drive him out and follow him to hear what he will say.” No sooner had Abba Moses entered the sanctuary than they began to drive him out: “Get out of here, you Ethiopian.”—“What has been done to you is just, you dark-skinned Ethiopian,” Abba Moses said to himself, “you are not a man; why then do you walk among people!”¹¹² He was not offended, nor did he become angry.

— But can a person lack humility yet still be meek and not retaliate when insulted?

“A humble person is meek. But that does not mean that everyone who is meek is also humble.” Meekness must also include humility, because without it, a person may appear meek on the outside but be filled with pride on the inside and say of others: “They’re crazy; there’s no point in paying attention to them—let them say what they will!” Like that monk whom the fathers had never seen get angry and who never retaliated when people annoyed him. So one day he was asked, “What thought does he always have in his heart that, when subjected to insults or suffering an offense from someone, he shows such long-suffering?” To which he replied, “Why should I pay attention to their faults... They are barking dogs.”¹¹³ In other words, he despised others.

When we ask God for humility, we must accept humiliation

— Geronda, what will help me attain active humility?

— How do you acquire humility? Do you say one word but expect ten in return? Can’t you tolerate even the slightest rebuke? You know what, my dear, when you’re given the opportunity to humble yourself, humble yourself.

Your remedy is to behave simply and humbly, like the earth: to accept rain, hail, trash, and spit, if you want to free yourself from your passions. Humiliations from others help a person quickly free themselves from their old “self,” if they accept them.

— Geronda, I need a lot of humility.

— Go, buy some. There are many people who sell humility, or even give it away for free, as long as you desire it...

— Who are they, Geronda?

— They are people who, lacking a good spiritual disposition, treat us rudely and humiliate us with their behavior. You can’t buy humility at the grocery store like you buy groceries. When we ask, “God, give me humility”—that doesn’t mean God will take a scoop and start doling it out to everyone: “A kilogram of humility for you, half a kilogram for you.” God will allow a rude person to appear and treat us harshly, or God will withdraw His grace from another, and that person will begin to insult us. This will be a trial for us, and if we want to acquire humility, we must work at it. But we do not consider that God has allowed our brother to become angry for our own good, and so we get angry at him. And although we ask God for humility, we do not take advantage of the favorable opportunities He provides us for humility; instead, we get upset and indignant. In all fairness, we should be grateful to the person who humbles us, because he is our greatest benefactor. Whoever asks God for humility in prayer but does not accept the person whom God sends to humble him does not know what he is asking for.

When I lived at the Stomion Monastery, there was a priest in Konitsa who had loved me dearly ever since I was a layperson. One Sunday, I went to Konitsa for the Liturgy. The church was packed. As usual, I went into the sanctuary, and as I entered, I said to myself, “My God, take all these people to heaven, and if You will, give me at least one little corner there.” When it was time for Communion,

¹¹² Cited from: *Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 114.

¹¹³ Cited from: *Abba Dorotheus*. Sermons, Epistles, Questions, and Answers. Moscow, 1991. pp. 96–97.

the priest, who usually gave me Communion in the sanctuary, turned toward me and said loudly, “Leave the sanctuary; you will receive Communion last, along with everyone else, because you are unworthy.” I left the sanctuary without saying a word. I stood on the choir loft and began to recite the prayers for Holy Communion. As I approached Communion last, I said to myself, “God enlightened the priest, and he revealed to me who I truly am. Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a wretch.” No sooner had I received Communion than I felt a great sweetness within me. When the Divine Liturgy ended, the priest approached me, deeply contrite: “Forgive me,” he said. “I don’t know how this happened! After all, I have never put my children, my wife, or even myself ahead of you. How could this have happened to me?” He bowed down to the ground before me, begged for forgiveness, and tried to kiss my hands. “Father,” I replied, “don’t worry. It’s not your fault; it’s mine. God used you to test me.” The priest couldn’t understand what I was saying, and, it seems to me, I never quite convinced him. The reason for what happened was my prayer.

And you, when you see that a sister is losing her temper and speaking rudely to you, know that, in most cases, the reason for this is your prayer. Since you ask God for humility, love, and so on, God temporarily withdraws His grace from the sister, and she humiliates you and upsets you. In this way, you are given the opportunity to pass a test of humility and love. If you humble yourselves, you will benefit. As for your sister, she will receive a double blessing: first, because God withdrew His grace from her to test you, and second, because she humbles herself upon seeing her transgression and asks God for forgiveness. So, you cultivate humility, and she becomes a better person.

“Humble yourself in everything”¹¹⁴

— Geronda, when I sin and see that others could have warned me against it, I hold a grudge against them.

— When it comes to your own improvement, you should make demands only of yourself. But you’re acting like a little child who has nothing but demands.

— When will I grow up? When will I realize that I also have responsibilities?

— When... you humble yourself! That is, when you cultivate humility and love.

— Abba Isaac writes: “Humble yourself in everything before all people.”¹¹⁵ How can this be achieved?

— Through a humble disposition. When there is a spirit of healthy competition in spiritual growth within a family, a monastery, etc., and one person humbles oneself before another, everyone benefits from it—just as in the early Church, where confession was public, and everyone benefited from it. Whoever humbles themselves receives grace from God and then helps others. A humble attitude never hurts another, because a humble person always has love.

— What can help me feel inferior to all the sisters?

— To feel lower than all the sisters, think about how many gifts God has given you, yet you have not doubled them. Tell yourself: “I’ve only learned to strike a wooden mallet¹¹⁶, but I still haven’t been able to double my talents.”¹¹⁷

When a person sees themselves as lower than everyone else, at the very bottom... that is when they are lifted up to Heaven. And what do we do? We compare ourselves to others and conclude that we are better than them. “I’m better than this one,” we say, “and better than that one... I’m not like

¹¹⁴ Cited from: The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian. Moscow, 1993. p. 303.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ A wooden mallet (Greek: *τάλαντρο*) is often used in Greek monasteries instead of a bell. A monk designated by the monastery’s rules strikes the wooden mallet with a wooden hammer to announce the beginning of the divine service. — *Translator’s note*

¹¹⁷ See Matt. 25:14–30.

him...” As soon as the thought takes root in us that another person is inferior to us, we close ourselves off from God’s help.

— Geronda, when I acknowledge another’s virtue, is there humility in that?

— Of course, if you honor and love a person who possesses virtue, it means that you have humility and that you truly love virtue. Here’s another sign of spiritual progress: you don’t consider the good qualities you possess to be important, but you regard even the slightest good in another as far superior to your own—that is, you always value the good in others. Then God’s abundant grace descends upon you. Therefore, the one who considers others superior to himself is superior, because God’s grace rests upon him.

All people have flaws, and they also have virtues that they have either inherited from their parents or acquired through their own efforts: in some, ten percent; in others, thirty; in still others, sixty; and in yet others, ninety. Consequently, from every person you can learn something good, gain benefit, and help others. On the other hand, this is precisely what constitutes the Orthodox spirit. I even benefit from small children, though I do not show it, so that they do not become proud and harm themselves.

“Lower than all creation”¹¹⁸

— What is the highest calling for a monk, Geronda?

— Don’t you remember what Abba Siso replied to that monk who told him that his mind was always with God? “That’s not what matters; what matters is seeing yourself as ‘lower than all creation.’”

— How is it possible, Geronda, to feel “lower than all creation”?

— Once I tried to figure out which animal I should compare myself to, and I decided it was a dung beetle. But when I took a closer look at what it does, I realized that I’m worse than it. Do you know what a dung beetle does? When it finds dung on the road, it breaks it into pieces, rolls the pieces into balls, and pushes them to the side of the road. That’s how it cleans the road. Seeing what it does, I said to myself: “You’re worse than a dung beetle, because it—a tiny insect—cleans the road of dung, while you, whom God created as a human being, are gathering dung in the ‘temple of God’ through your sins.”¹¹⁹ What I mean to say is that a person, reflecting on God’s blessings and realizing that he is unworthy of them, increasingly considers himself deserving of punishment; he sees himself as worse than all people, worse than animals, and even worse than the devil himself. He says to himself: “The devil sinned only once in thought, but I sin every day—both in thought and in feeling. Therefore, I am worse than he is.”

— Isn’t it dangerous to consider oneself worse than the devil?

— It’s dangerous only for the person who lacks spiritual boldness and who easily falls into despair. Such a person must say to the devil: “No matter what I am like, I’m still better than you. Christ will not forsake me; I hope that He will save me.” But one who possesses spiritual courage can say this: “The devil is doing his job well, but what am I doing?”

Chapter 3. Humility—The Great Power of the Spiritual Life

¹¹⁸ Quoted from: *Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 174.

¹¹⁹ See 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16.

Where there is humility, there is no place for the devil

— Geronda, in the book **The Holy Mountain Fathers**, you write that demons beat up Elder Evlogios.¹²⁰ How did God allow such a thing to happen?

— Who tasted the porridge?

— Elder Evlogios.

— No, the demons! And in a situation where God allows one person to beat another, and the one being beaten accepts it all with humility, in the end it is the one doing the beating who is left maimed. Tell me, what does the devil fear most?

— Humility, Geronda.

— And I thought he feared pride more, because he feels... an inferiority complex! “He’s proud, I’m proud—who’s prouder?” Well, of course, that’s exactly it—the devil fears humility: it inflicts such wounds on him! Where there is humility, the devil cannot dwell.

Through humility, a person is enlightened and never stumbles on his spiritual path; he overcomes all the obstacles that temptation places in his way. Remember St. Anthony, who saw the enemy’s nets spread across the whole earth? “Who, then, can escape them?” he exclaimed. And immediately he heard a voice saying to him, “Humility.”¹²¹

On Mount Sinai, I lived in the cell of Saint Epistimia; there was a small church and a very tiny room. Above was a mountain, and below was a wall four or five meters high. There I had a log on which I planed small boards for carved icons. One day, I was planing my little boards and saying a prayer when I heard a voice: “You can jump down without hurting yourself.” I turned around and saw a black shadow with a large head. “A tangalashka,” I thought. Fine, I’ll ignore it. But it was still standing right there, not going away! “You can jump down without hurting yourself,” it said. I pretended not to hear. For about fifteen minutes, it kept repeating the same thing. Then I said to it, “Fine, I’ll throw a rock down.” “Even Christ,” it said, “didn’t think of that!”¹²² Your answer is better than His!” That’s when I lost my temper. “Christ,” I told him, “was God, not like me—a scarecrow sitting here staring at you. Now get out of here!” That was enough. He vanished immediately.

When there is humility, the devil cannot defeat the soul. The humble do not fall, because they walk humbly. That is what happened to the elder Avvakum when he was living as a hermit in the Vigla Desert! Once, when he was sitting on a rock and praying with his rosary, the devil appeared to him in the form of an “angel of light.”¹²³ “Avvakum,” he said, “God has sent me to take you to paradise, because you have already become an angel. Come on, let’s fly.”—“Yes, but you have wings; how am I supposed to fly?” And that “angel” replied, “You have wings too, but you cannot see them.” Then Elder Avvakum crossed himself and said, “Mother of God, who am I to fly?” Instantly, this “angel” turned into a strange black goat with wings like a bat’s and vanished.

Do you see how, through humility, we can recognize the devil’s traps?

Spiritual progress comes where there is great humility

— Geronda, why can one person change in a month, while another struggles for years and makes no progress?

— What do you think? Why does this happen?

— My mind tells me that if a person humbles himself and calls upon God’s mercy, then God helps him and he prospers.

¹²⁰ Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Fathers of Mount Athos and Athonite Writings*. Thessaloniki, 2005. pp. 41–42.

¹²¹ Quoted from: *Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 12.

¹²² This refers to the Lord’s reply, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matt. 4:7), which He gave to the devil when the latter suggested that He throw Himself down from the wing of Solomon’s temple. — *Compiler’s note*.

¹²³ 2 Cor. 11:14.

— That is exactly right. Humility is essential. Spiritual progress comes where there is great humility.

Those who have found the path of humility prosper in the spiritual life quickly, consistently, and effortlessly. We have not yet understood what humility is—this great power! All progress depends on it. The more a person humbles himself, the greater the grace he receives from God, and the more he prospers. How much power there is in humility, and yet people do not make use of it!

— Is the spiritual struggle easier for a humble person?

— Of course. Because if you give a humble person just a little nudge, he flies forward. Take a billiard ball: you hit it from one side, it rolls; you hit it from the other, it rolls again; it's round—that's why it doesn't get stuck.

— Geronda, could it be that a person, in order to attain humility, will constantly humble themselves and eventually fall into despair?

— No, because true humility brings hope, not despair. Despair leads to selfishness, because the selfish person relies on himself, while the humble person relies on God's mercy. Through the brokenness of humility, the spiritual person gradually grows. A person's entire life becomes a great and noble feat, but he always moves forward with great hope in God, disappointed in himself—in a good sense—that is, disappointed in his "self."

— Can a person who is not in a good spiritual state hope for God's mercy?

— And how can a person know that he is in a good spiritual state? A person can know only one thing—that he is not in a good spiritual state. Even if he is, he does not see it, because even then he sees only his own sinfulness. For the one who strives for spiritual progress never sees his own progress; he sees only his own failures.

The humble keep their spiritual wealth in God's treasury

— Geronda, I don't like being unnoticed. Maybe that's why I feel empty inside?

— Yeah, you'll never make a holy fool out of yourself!... To be a holy fool, you need great humility. You know what? If you want to learn to love obscurity, read the life of the Venerable Isidora.¹²⁴ You'll see what treasures and virtues she possessed. And you, throw away your fake, copper trinkets of virtue and from now on collect golden ones; hide them in your heart and lock them up properly so that the thief doesn't steal them.

The holy fools for Christ's sake have no emptiness within; they are filled to the brim with Divine love, which overflows. They are great saints. The seemingly nonsensical things they say are, in fact, genuine teachings—very profound ones. They possess great humility; they do not consider themselves to be anything at all, which is why God grants them knowledge of the sacred mysteries and endows them with great gifts.

— Geronda, why did some residents of Faras, despite having witnessed the numerous miracles performed by Saint Arsenius, fail to recognize him and feel embarrassed?

— The saints expended more energy on concealing their spiritual riches than on acquiring them. And Saint Arsenius, too, hid his virtues under various outward disguises, which is quite understandable. People did not "recognize" him outwardly and were perplexed because they saw only the exterior—his "artificial" eccentricities. Saint Arsenius always tried to show people not his

¹²⁴ The Venerable Isidora lived in the Tavenisi Monastery, founded by the Venerable Pachomius in the early 4th century. She humbled and abased herself, feigning madness for Christ's sake. She always walked barefoot. While the other sisters wore a veil on their heads, Isidora covered her head with a simple rag. Although everyone insulted and beat her, she never complained. The holiness of her life was revealed in a vision to the great ascetic Pitirim. He visited the monastery and showed the sisters that Isidora, whom they had regarded as nothing, was in fact the spiritual mother of them all. — *Compiler's note.*

virtues, but their opposites, in order to avoid being venerated. Of course, some still understood what riches the saint harbored within himself.

The humble and unassuming warriors of Christ are wiser than anyone in the world, because they manage to keep their spiritual wealth in God's treasury. Therefore, we should rejoice if we live unnoticed, because we will behold the face of God in the life to come, and in this life we will constantly feel His presence.

Part 2. Spiritual Love

“A spiritual person gives his love first to God, then to people, and the remainder of his love to animals and all living creatures.”

Chapter 1. God's Inexhaustible Love and Our Love for God

“The Intense Fire” of God's Love

— Geronda, sometimes I feel God's love very strongly and suffer when I see my own ingratitude.

— I pray that you may prove worthy of God's many blessings. “Your mercy, O Lord, will pursue me¹²⁵ all the days of my life,”¹²⁶ — said David. And you should say the same, for God's mercy accompanies you as well. It is good that you see this, give thanks, and glorify God.

When a person feels divine love, then a “dense fire” of God's love descends upon him. Perhaps this expression—“dense fire”—seems strange to you. But to remove the calcified deposits from the heart or to break down the granite wall surrounding it, shells are needed that contain the most powerful explosive—Divine love. When this hard shell is destroyed, the heart becomes receptive, and a person begins to rejoice even at God's smallest blessing.

He feels himself to be an unpayable debtor before God and is constantly moved to tenderness, because he thinks constantly of his debt, while God sends him blessings, one greater than the other, so that in the end his loving soul melts away in God's love.

— Geronda, why does God love us so much?

— Because we are His children; I can't tell you anything more than that!

— And if a person strives but keeps stumbling over the same thing, does that anger and disappoint God?

— Does God expect us to succeed? No. We are His children, and He loves us all equally. Once I saw a father. One of his children was a bit slow, and would constantly wipe his nose on his sleeve. But the father would still hold him close, kiss him, and gently stroke him, just like the others. In the same way, God, as a Good Father, loves not only His beautiful children but also those who are spiritually weak. And He worries about them and cares for them even more than He does for the healthy ones.

¹²⁵ Pozhenet: “may he accompany” (Glorified) – *Translator's note*.

¹²⁶ Prokeimenon for Tuesday evening. Cf. Ps. 22:6.

No one can comprehend how God loves a person! His love is incomparable! It knows no bounds! It is so great that if a person were to feel even a small part of it, his heart could not bear it and would melt away, for it is made of clay.

God often allows His love to pour out in abundance upon His creation, and then our souls are warmed; we see how sweet Divine love is, how great—so great that we cannot bear it and plead, “Enough, my God! Restrain Your love, for I cannot bear it.” This is how God wants to show us that He, for His part, is ready to bestow His love upon us in abundance, but does not do so because the capacity of our “battery” is small. We need to increase its capacity so that it can hold more of God’s love, for the flow of God’s love comes to us according to the capacity of our battery.

— How can we increase the battery’s capacity?

— The more the heart is purified, the more its capacity increases, and the more we will be able to receive Divine love—which is boundless, immeasurable, and inexhaustible.

The Proper Distribution of Love

— Geronda, could my love for a particular saint weaken my love for God?

— No, because when a person deeply venerates a saint and has great love for him, behind that lies even greater love for the Triune God and the Mother of God.

Whoever venerates the saints undoubtedly venerates the Mother of God even more. Just as whoever venerates the Most Holy Theotokos naturally venerates the Most Holy Trinity even more. If you are closely connected to one of the saints and feel a deep sense of gratitude toward him, it may even happen that you are ready to sacrifice yourself for that saint. But if you sacrifice yourself for a saint, does that not mean that you are sacrificing yourself for God?

Love for Christ, for the Mother of God, and for the saints is a great thing. This love is incomparable to any other. It is a steadfast love that does not go unanswered.

— Is it possible to love God and not love people?

— No, because if you love God, you cannot help but love the image of God—human beings. Love for God brings with it love for one’s neighbor, because whoever is close to God is close to all people, just like the saints. But behind love for one’s neighbor lies a great love for God.

When a person gives his heart to God, he begins to love everything—not only people, but also birds, trees, and even snakes. Then he not only reverently worships God and the saints, but also the image of God—people. Every creature, large or small, precious or humble—pebbles and splinters—he reverently picks up and kisses as a blessing from his Creator, just as he kisses an object, large or small, that he has received as a blessing from a person he respects.

The Ascent to Heaven

— Geronda, how does a person come to God?

— There are two ways a person can ascend to God on high and “entreat” Him to come down and dwell with them. The first way is sincere repentance—this applies to great sinners. When they realize their great fall and humble themselves deeply, then God, for the sake of their great humility, shows them great love and lifts them up to Heaven. “There is great joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents,”¹²⁷ — as it says in the Gospel. Then, of course, sinners also feel great love for God, because He has spared them a great debt. The second way is as follows: when a person remains free from mortal sins, he must thank the Good God for having protected him from childhood, so that the garment of his soul has not been defiled. And you, if Christ had not kept you, like a fledgling, under His wing, might well be the greatest sinner in the world today. Therefore, day and night, glorify the

¹²⁷ Cf. Luke 15:7

Good God for this great gift of His and shed tears of joy and gratitude before Him. These tears have equal—and perhaps even greater—power than tears of repentance. Then a person is lifted up to Heaven, comes to God, and glorifies Him unceasingly, like the angels. And although he lives on earth, it is as if he were in Heaven. His life becomes one continuous act of praise, and he awaits death with praise, because he knows that then he will be with God forever—which is his ultimate goal. Then the greatest praise is born within him: “Glory to You, Who has shown us the Light...”

Let us give our love to Christ

— Geronda, how should I strive to love God?

— Start with sacrifice. When a person sets aside his own interests and sacrifices himself, then everything falls into place: he loves his neighbor, he loves God. Those people who say they love God but do not sacrifice themselves for the sake of their neighbor “love God with their lips, but with their tongues they lie to Him.”¹²⁸

— Geronda, how does love for God grow?

— Let your mind be constantly on God; think about God. Pray; talk to God. When a person engages in such practices, at first he feels God’s love only faintly, but the more he continues, the stronger he feels it. Now his mind abides constantly in God; he is not preoccupied with anything earthly or vain. Love for God grows in his heart, filling him, and he wants to think of nothing but God. He is not concerned with anything in this world; he constantly thinks of the Heavenly Father. Those who are engaged in science are completely absorbed by it. But are we absorbed by Christ?

— What, then, are we lacking that prevents us from seeking Christ with the same zeal?

— We have everything. We have a mind; we have maturity. The obstacle is ourselves—our “self.” If we do not deny ourselves, how will Christ enter us? But if we deny ourselves, and that unscrupulous tenant—our old self—leaves our dwelling, then a new person, the person of the New Covenant, will take up residence in the space vacated in our heart. Our temple, our entire being, will be filled with love, because Christ, Who is Love, will dwell within us. Then the human heart is transformed into a bell that constantly rings out the Gospel so loudly that the walls—the ribcage and ribs, which, like the walls of a house, are plastered with clay that became flesh by God’s command—tremble at its sound. And if you find yourself in the desert, where there is no church, then your body will be the church, and your heart the bell.

When a person gives his heart to God, then his mind is filled with God’s love, and his heart trembles with joy. His head feels light, and his body is as light as a feather. And when God’s love is greater than the heart can contain, then the ringing of the heart is heard by those around him, for in this state the body also participates.

Such a small heart, yet capable of loving so deeply! And if a person’s love for God is like this, then how much greater must God’s love be! I am referring to quantity, because in terms of quality, God’s love is the same as ours, provided ours is spiritual.

What a great evil is committed by people who do not want to give their love to Christ, but squander it on earthly, empty, and vain things! Even if we lived a thousand years and had a thousand hearts, it still would not be enough to repay Christ for His great love for us—the love He has shown us and continues to show, forgiving us, bearing with us, and purifying our foul souls with His Divine Blood.

¹²⁸ Cf. Ps. 77:36

The Fire of God's Love

— Geronda, why don't I love God as much as I love people? After all, when I love someone, I want to be with them all the time, don't I?

— It comes gradually as a result of struggle; otherwise, people would burst into flames and burn with God's love. It would be cold all around them, but they would think they were on fire and would flee to the mountains. During the war, one soldier left his unit and fled to the mountains. Such love was kindled in his heart that he couldn't contain it; he wanted to leave and pray. He forgot everything else. He found a cave, went inside, and began to pray! When the other soldiers went on a mission, they found him and shouted, "Deserter!" Then the unit commander summoned him for questioning. "What do you call this?" he asked. "I'm on fire, sir, on fire with love for Christ. Do you know what 'on fire' means?" "And don't you think I'm on fire too?" the commander asked. "I'm on fire, Commander, do you understand or not?" he repeated, as if to say, "If you're on fire, then run!" God helped him, and he avoided a court-martial. Even in peacetime, if a soldier runs away from his unit, he faces a court-martial—let alone in wartime!¹²⁹

— Geronda, when a person is in such a state, does he feel warmth throughout his whole body?

— Yes, but most of all in the chest area. When spiritual love is kindled, the entire chest blazes with fire. The whole chest cavity turns into a flame. A person burns with the strong, sweet fire of God's love, soars, and loves with true, motherly love.

This inner fire, which Christ Himself kindles with His love, warms the body more intensely than physical fire. It has the power to burn away any debris, any evil thought that the devil throws up, as well as any lust and any unseemly sight. Then the soul experiences divine bliss, which is incomparable to any other joy!

What a pity that this fire has not yet entered you! If it flares up and blazes in your heart, you will not be enticed by any vain things. May God set your hearts ablaze with His love!

Divine Eros

— Is divine eros love for God?

— Divine eros is something higher than the love of God—it is madness. Love-eros-madness is like envy-hatred-murder. Great love for God, united with sacrifice, sweetly inflames the heart, and, like steam, Divine Eros bursts forth—unable to be restrained—and unites with God.

Divine eros softens the hard bones, which become so soft that a person cannot stand on their feet and falls! They become like a candle placed in a warm spot, which cannot stand upright and tilts first one way, then the other. You straighten it, but it tilts again, falls again, because it's warm all around, very warm... When a person is in this state and needs to go somewhere or do something, they can't; they have to struggle, trying to break free from this state...

— Does a person overcome by Divine Eros feel pain?

— If the pain is very intense, it subsides and becomes bearable; if it's mild, it disappears. You see, when people are in love, they're in such a state of rapture that they even forget to sleep. One monk told me: "Geronda, my brother fell in love with a Gypsy woman; he's even stopped sleeping. All you hear is, 'My little Paraskevi, my little Paraskevi.' Has she bewitched him, or what? I don't know! I've been a monk for so many years, and I don't love the Mother of God the way my brother loves his Gypsy girl! I, for example, don't feel any joy in my heart at all."

Unfortunately, there are spiritual people who are troubled by the words "divine eros." They don't understand what "divine eros" is, and they want to remove this word from the Menaion and

¹²⁹ Elder Paisios, who himself was always law-abiding in everything, cites this example of an undisciplined soldier to help us understand that if the fire of divine love is kindled within a person, then "the person's mind is filled with love for God," and he begins to do things that are difficult to understand and explain. — *Compiler's note.*

the Octoechos because it troubles them. This is what we've come to! Conversely, laypeople who know what human eros is, when you speak to them about Divine Eros, immediately respond: "That must be something higher." With many of the young people who have experienced worldly, human eros, I quickly find common ground when I begin to speak to them about Divine Eros! "Have you ever fallen to the ground, completely overcome by Great Love? Have you ever felt that you couldn't move, that you couldn't do anything?" They immediately realize that this is something higher, and we begin to understand one another. "If," they say, "simple, worldly love has this effect on us, then one can imagine what heavenly love is like!"

Holy Madness

— Geronda, how can one go mad with love for God?

— By associating with... mad people, so that they might infect you with their spiritual madness! I hope to see you... mad for God! Amen.

And I have had a little experience of spiritual ecstasy stemming from divine eros. At such times, a person enters a state of sacred absorption and wishes to think of nothing but God, nothing but what is holy, spiritual, and heavenly. While in a state of divine love, they burn sweetly from within, pouring themselves out outwardly in ecstasy—within the bounds of sacred piety—like an angel, glorifying their God and Creator day and night.

— Is that called ecstasy?

— Yes, that's when a person is beside themselves—in a good way. That is precisely... "Be awestruck, fear the heavens..."¹³⁰

Sacred madness lifts a person beyond earthly gravity, elevates him to the throne of God, and the person begins to feel like a little dog at his master's feet, joyfully and respectfully licking his legs.

Divine Ecstasy

— Geronda, I'm afraid I won't be saved.

— Don't be afraid; we'll go up together. Just tell the abbess to give us two large plastic bottles for the journey. Make sure they're plastic, not glass, so they won't break along the way!... We'll fill them with water and drink from them on our way to Heaven when we get tired! We'll leave just three fingers' worth of water in them, and we'll ask Christ to bless it and turn it into wine. We'll drink it and become spiritually intoxicated alongside Christ.

— Geronda, what kind of water is this?

— It is love for Christ and for our brothers.

— And the intoxication?

— Intoxication from the Holy Spirit. Those intoxicated by the Holy Spirit rejoice constantly in the tender love of God, their Father.

If a person becomes spiritually intoxicated by heavenly wine, his life here on earth becomes one of martyrdom—but in a good sense. He becomes unfit for the world; nothing earthly concerns him, and he regards everything as rubbish.¹³¹ You see, people, when they drink a lot, they get drunk, and then nothing matters to them anymore. "Grandpa Fanasiy, your hut is on fire!" people shouted to an old man whose hut had caught fire. "So what? Let it burn," he replied, because he'd had too much to drink and was drunk!...

¹³⁰ Words from the irmos of the 8th ode of the Great Saturday canon. The Greek word "εκστηθι," translated into Church Slavonic as "be awestruck," literally means "be carried away." — *Translator's note*

¹³¹ See Phil. 3:8

Another kind of drunkenness—heavenly drunkenness—is good, but a person must be there all the time, near the bottomless barrel of heavenly wine. I wish for you to find that cherished, heavenly, sacred tap, to drink, and to be constantly intoxicated by heavenly wine. Amen!

Chapter 2. **Love for One's Neighbor**

Love and humility—two sister virtues

— Geronda, how will I be saved when I have so many passions?

— Through love and humility. As soon as love and humility take root, pride and malice will be exhausted, and the passions will begin to wither away. Thus, little by little, all passions will perish, and all other virtues will follow naturally. Therefore, direct all your efforts toward acquiring love and humility.

True love is inseparably linked to humility, like twin brothers who love each other very deeply. Love is inseparable from humility. In love you find humility, and in humility you find love.

For me, the foundation of the spiritual life is love and humility. Where there is love, there dwells Christ—Love—and where there is humility, it seems to hold God's grace within a person by its very power. Then God reigns everywhere, and the earth is transformed into paradise. But where there is no love and no humility, there dwells the tangalashka—the enemy—and people, together with him, already live here as if in hell, and day by day they worsen their fate in the life to come.

The easiest path to salvation is love and humility. If we lack them, we will be judged. These two virtues move God to mercy and lift His creatures up to Heaven. By these distinguishing marks—humility and love—the holy angels recognize God's children, take them up with love, guide them fearlessly through the trials of the air, and lift them up to the tenderly loving Father, God.

True Love

— In my opinion, there are three kinds of love: carnal love, which is full of spiritual germs; worldly love—which is superficial, outward, hypocritical, and shallow; and spiritual love—which is true, pure, and precious. This love is immortal; it endures forever and ever.

— How can I tell, Geronda, whether I have true love?

— To understand this, you must test yourself: do you love all people equally, and do you consider everyone better than yourself?

— Geronda, my love for God and my neighbor has grown cold.

— Sow that small remnant of love that you have. Let it sprout, grow, and bear the fruit of love, which you will then harvest. Then you will sow even more love and harvest even more; gradually your granary will fill up, so that you will have nowhere left to store it, for the more love you sow, the more it grows. Suppose a farmer has a small packet of seeds and sows them. Then he gathers the harvest and fills a large bag with it. If he then sows the seeds from that bag, when he reaps the harvest, he'll fill an entire sack with seeds. And when he has plenty of seeds and sows them, he'll eventually fill an entire granary. But if he keeps the seeds in the small bag and doesn't plant them, they'll get worm-eaten. He must sow the seeds in the ground so that they can sprout, grow, and bear fruit.

What I mean is that the same thing happens with love. For love to grow, you have to give it away. A person who doesn't give away even the little love they have is like someone holding a

handful of seeds in their hand and refusing to sow them. Such a person is a wicked servant who has hidden his talent.¹³²

Depending on how much love you give, that is how much you will receive. If you don't give love, you won't receive love. You see, a mother constantly gives her love to her children, but she also constantly receives from them, and her love keeps growing. But when we demand love from others only for ourselves, when we want only to receive from others, and when we do a good deed thinking only of the reward, then our love is not precious but cheap. Then we become strangers to God and receive no love either from God or from other people.

Those who possess worldly love argue with one another over who can grab the most love for themselves. But those who possess spiritual, precious love argue with one another over who will give more love to the other. They love without thinking about whether others love them or not, and they do not even demand that others love them. They constantly wish to give of themselves and their possessions and do not demand that others give of themselves or their possessions to them. Everyone loves such people, but most of all God, with whom they are of the same kind.

Love without expecting anything in return! Do not do good deeds in order to receive benefits. We must cultivate noble, precious love—the kind God loves—and not cheap, worldly love, which is filled with all human frailties.

— Geronda, I find it hard to give my love where it won't be appreciated.

— You don't have true love, which is why it's hard for you. Someone who has true love doesn't care whether his love is appreciated or not. He doesn't even remember the sacrifice he makes for his neighbor out of pure love.

— How can I learn to forget the good deeds I do?

— Throw it into the sea... That's how you'll forget it. But you must also forget the wrongs done to you. That way, without even realizing it, you will accumulate spiritual wealth.

Removing the "I" from our love

— Geronda, what is the standard of love?

— "Love one another, just as I have loved you."¹³³ By this, Christ is saying that we must always sacrifice ourselves for others, just as He sacrificed Himself for us.

— Can there be self-interest in sacrifice?

— Yes, it can. I remember (I was still a layperson then) that one of the residents of Konitsa, after the Easter service, would tell everyone he met: "I'm going to the monastery on the mountain, to the Mother of God, to light the lamps." But from the way he said it, it was clear that pride and self-interest were at work in him... He went to the monastery at night to light the oil lamps—a two-hour walk there and two hours back. And the road was dreadful! The church was abandoned, with things scattered everywhere—where was he supposed to find wicks and floats for the lamps! So it turned out that all his effort was in vain. And yet, if someone had simply told him after the service, "Light a lamp when you get home," perhaps he wouldn't have lit one at all! If he had truly wanted to make a sacrifice to God, he would have gone to the monastery to light the lamps quietly, without fanfare.

— So, is a person capable of sacrificing himself out of pride?

— Why not? He can even sacrifice, as the Apostle Paul says, his very life, yet have no love.¹³⁴

— Does such a sacrifice have any value?

¹³² See Matt. 25:25

¹³³ John 13:34

¹³⁴ See 1 Cor. 13:3

— Don't you remember what the Apostle Paul says before that? "But if I have not love, I am nothing."¹³⁵ For a sacrifice to be pleasing to God, it must be free from human motives: self-interest, pride, and so on. When a person humbly sacrifices himself, it means he has love; then he draws God to himself. When I speak of love, I am speaking of true, genuine love, which is noble. After all, a person may be confident in their intentions and think they possess love because they give everything away, and yet lack love because their love contains their "self"—that is, their love is directed toward achieving their own personal interests.

For our love to be genuine, we must purify it, removing our "self" from our love. And when everyone removes their "self" from their love, then each person is in the other, and all are united by the one love of Christ. And in Christ, all problems are resolved, because the love of Christ eliminates all problems.

A Mother's Love for All

— Geronda, how can a person embrace the whole world in their heart?

— How can one embrace the whole world when one's arms are too short?.. In order for a person to hold the whole world in their heart, they must expand their heart.

— How can one do that, Geronda?

— Love. But even that isn't enough. You need a mother's love. A mother loves her children more than she loves herself. If a person comes to possess such love, he will come to love not only those who love him, but also those who harm him, because he will always find extenuating circumstances for others and blame himself for everything. Even if he is robbed, he will feel remorse when the thief is caught and sent to prison. "Because of me, that person ended up in prison," he will say. "If I had found a way to give him the money he needed, he wouldn't be in jail right now."

A mother's love covers everything and extinguishes everything. If a child damages something, breaks something, or does something wrong, his mother forgives him immediately, because he is her child. So, if you love your neighbor with a mother's love, you excuse all his weaknesses and do not see his transgressions; and even if you do see them, you forgive him immediately. Then your heart overflows with love, because you become an imitator of Christ, Who bears with us all.

— Geronda, I tend to approach everything in a rather narrow-minded way. Maybe I don't have a heart?

— Do you not have a heart? Do you know what kind of heart you have? But you allow your narrow-mindedness to stifle it, and then you suffer. Those with a broad heart can bear anything, but those with a narrow heart—the faint-hearted—fall into despondency because of a single remark or an unpleasant event; they cannot bear it.

— Why?

— Because that's all their battery can handle.

— What should I do to increase the power of my battery?

— Excuse others' shortcomings and imperfections. Approach everything spiritually, with faith and trust in God. Remember that you are in God's hands, and if something doesn't go the way you want or hope, accept it with gratitude.

— And will my heart expand?

— For your heart to become wider, you need to remove something from it: get rid of self-love. If the vine of self-love and the narrowness of thought that is suffocating you withers away, then your spiritual tree will begin to grow freely. I wish that your heart will soon be completely set free, grow, and expand. Amen.

¹³⁵ 1 Cor. 13:2

You know what I'm feeling right now? I'm feeling such maternal love, such gentleness and tenderness, the likes of which I've never felt before.¹³⁶ The whole world fits within me. I want to embrace everyone; I want to help them. Because love cannot remain hidden in the heart. Just as milk flows from the breast of a mother who has lost her child, so too does love seek a way out.

The heart never grows old

— Geronda, Abba Pamvo says, “If you have a heart, you can be saved.”¹³⁷ What does he mean when he says, “if you have a heart”?

— There are many possible meanings. First, “if you have a heart” can mean “if you love God.” Second, “if you have a heart” can mean “if you are sensitive and not callous.” Third, “if you have a heart” can mean “if you are kind.” Fourth, “if you have a heart” can mean “if you are patient.” Fifth, “if you have a heart” can mean “if you have courage.” When we say “heart,” we do not mean a piece of flesh, but a disposition toward self-sacrifice and noble love.

The power of the heart is a great thing! The heart is like a rechargeable battery that is constantly being recharged. It never tires or grows old; its power is never exhausted. But we must work on our hearts. After all, I have a heart, and you have a heart, but what good is it if we do not work on it? If a person does not work on their heart, they may be a giant yet lack any boldness at all. Another, small and frail, does everything with their heart and never grows weary. Here, too, there is a frail sister, but since she puts her heart into every task, she feels no fatigue. She doesn't look for ways to shirk work, but for ways to help others. She does every task with love because she cares deeply about it, not because she expects others to notice and praise her. She has no pride or desire to please others; she lives in such a way that she remains unseen, and that is why she receives Divine Grace and accepts help from God.

If a person is naturally frail or has grown old, and his body cannot withstand heavy exertion, but he has learned to work on his heart, then his heart compels his body to work. He is like an old car with flat tires and broken axles, but with a strong engine—if you push such a car, it moves forward. Another person, however, is both young and strong, but if he does not work on his heart, he is like a new car with a weak engine that cannot move forward. Any task, even the easiest one, seems impossible to him. Sometimes an elderly man leaves an umbrella or a bag behind in my cell, and I ask one of the young men, “Come on, Eagle, run after the old man.” No sooner do I say this than the “eagle” sighs heavily: “Father, won't he come back on his own?”—“Come on, do a good deed,” I ask again. He sighs once more. He's already tired just from the word “run”—let alone actually running!

If a person doesn't work on his heart, he's not even like an animal—he becomes like a statue, a monument. His heart is good for nothing.

The Joint Work of the Mind and the Heart

— Geronda, sometimes I understand with my mind that I need to love another person, but I don't feel any love inside.

— Little by little, it will move from your mind into your heart, and you'll feel love. To love another person, your heart must be working too; the mind alone isn't enough. The most the mind can do is bring you to a state where you can say: “I must be patient with this person, or I must control

¹³⁶ In 1981, Elder Paisios said: “It is possible for a person to always have the fire of divine love within them. I constantly experienced this heavenly sweetness. I was burning all over, and my bones became like burning candles. When I needed to do something or go somewhere, I forced myself to come out of that state. Many times, because of this heavenly sweetness, I fell to the ground. Now it has turned into pain for the world. I ache for the world, and day by day this pain grows. I am, quite literally, worn out.” — *Compiler's note*.

¹³⁷ *The Gerontikon*. Athens, 1981. p. 102.

myself so as not to say or do something hurtful to him,” and so on. This means that you do not love the other person. You look at him as a stranger; you do not see him as a brother, so you do not care about him, and your heart does not tremble for him.

— If there is a distance between the mind and the heart, can I use logical reasoning to make the heart follow the mind?

— And what is the distance between the heart and the mind? Why must there be a distance?

— Because even though I think correctly with my mind, my heart cannot follow it, since it is captive to passions.

— The diagnosis is correct, but that’s not enough; we need to focus on the treatment. All spiritual work is done by the mind together with the heart. The mind is the transmitter, and the heart is the receiver. However a person tunes the transmitter, the receiver operates on that same frequency. If the mind operates in a worldly manner, it sends worldly messages to the heart. If it operates spiritually, the heart is moved and yearns spiritually. How can you, for example, overeat when you know that in other places people are dying of hunger or that Bedouins eat camel dung?¹³⁸

— Geronda, I’ve noticed that I love with my mind, not with my heart. How can I get my heart to work?

— Don’t you know? These days, to get the heart to work, doctors cut open the chest and insert... a battery. And we must make sure that the mind cuts into the heart, starts it up, and makes it work.

— How so?

— I think this happens in three ways. Either a person feels gratitude for God’s blessings, so much so that they are overcome with emotion and glorify God. Or they feel the weight of their sins and painfully ask God for forgiveness. Or they put themselves in the shoes of someone in a difficult situation and feel compassion for them in the most natural way.

— Geronda, I act spontaneously, just as I feel. Is that good?

— Look, when there is pure and wholehearted love for God in the heart, then every spontaneous movement of the heart is pure. But when there is no pure love in the heart, then you need to restrain your spontaneity, because then that spontaneous movement of the heart is filled with worldly toxins.

— What should I do to curb my spontaneity?

— Haven’t you ever driven a car? Does a car have brakes? Well, tell me now, a person... without brakes—what should they do?

— You need to put brakes on your heart.

— Yes, the mind must rein in the heart, because if the heart runs ahead of the mind, it runs idle. God has given you a great mind and a big heart, but you don’t use your mind to rein in your heart, and that’s why it’s running on empty. Before you do anything—think, and work on the heart that God has given you, simply and with love.

“From deprivation...”¹³⁹

— Geronda, the Apostle Paul says: “God loves a cheerful giver.”¹⁴⁰ I force myself when I need to give something or do some good deed.

— We are children of God, and it is our duty to do good, because God is love itself. Do you remember the widow who took in the prophet Elijah?¹⁴¹ She was a pagan, but what love she had! When the prophet came and asked her for bread, she said: “We have a little oil and flour; we’ll eat

¹³⁸ This refers to the 1960s. — *Compiler’s note.*

¹³⁹ Luke 21:4

¹⁴⁰ 2 Cor. 9:7

¹⁴¹ Because of the drought, the prophet Elijah came to the brook Horeb. When that brook also dried up, God sent him to Zarephath of Sidon to be fed by a widow (see 3 Kings 17:1–24). — *Compiler’s note.*

that with my children and die.’ She didn’t say to him, ‘We have nothing.’ And when the prophet, to test her willingness, told her to make bread first for him, and then for herself and her children, the poor woman agreed right away. If she hadn’t had love in her, all sorts of thoughts would have begun to arise in her mind. “It’s not enough,” she might have thought, “that I told him we have little oil and flour; now he even wants me to bake bread for him first!” Her goodwill was evident, serving as a good example for us. We read the Holy Scriptures, find so much in them, but how do we actually apply them?

I remember how, on Mount Sinai, the children of the Bedouins—¹⁴²—who did not know what the Gospel was, would share whatever I gave them among themselves, even if I gave them only a very little. Everyone received a little. And if the last one did not have enough, then everyone would give him a portion from their own share.

Let all this serve as an example for you. Examine yourselves to understand where you stand. If a person strives in this way, he derives benefit not only from the example of the saints and ascetics, but from the lives of all people, thinking: “Do I possess this good quality? How will I appear at the Judgment?”

What is valuable is what we give to others from our own meager resources, whether it be spiritual or material help.

Let’s say I have three pillows. If I give someone the pillow I don’t use, there’s nothing valuable about that. But if I give them the pillow I sleep on myself, then that is valuable, because there is a sacrifice involved. That is why Christ said of the widow: “This poor widow has given more than all the others.”¹⁴³

Throw your old calculations into the fire of love

— It’s not easy for me to forgive others, Geronda.

— Don’t you want Christ to forgive you?

— I do, Geronda. How could I not?

— Then why don’t you forgive others yourself? Think about it carefully, because by doing this you are causing Christ great sorrow. He forgave you a debt of ten thousand talents, yet you are unwilling to forgive another a hundred denarii.¹⁴⁴ Say this in your heart: “How is it possible that Christ, Who is without sin, constantly bears with me, and even bears with and forgives billions of other people, yet I do not forgive a single sister?”

Once, a young man came to my cell who had quarreled with someone, and even though that person had asked for his forgiveness, he would not forgive him. One day he said to me, “Pray, Geronda, that God will forgive me.”—“I will pray,” I replied, “that God will not forgive you.” He asked me again: “I want, Geronda, for God to forgive me.”—“If you, my dear,” I told him, “do not forgive others, then how can God forgive you?”

God’s justice is love and long-suffering. It has nothing to do with human justice. It is this divine justice that we must strive to attain. Once, a layman came to Father Tikhon’s cell to rob him. After he had tormented the elder enough—choking him with a rope—he realized the elder had no money and was about to leave. As he was leaving, Father Tikhon said to him, “God will forgive you, my child.” Later, this criminal went to rob another elder’s cell, but the police caught him there. He himself confessed that he had also gone to rob Father Tikhon’s cell. The police officer sent a gendarme to bring Father Tikhon in for questioning, but the elder refused to go. “My child,” the

¹⁴² Elder Paisios speaks of the time when he lived on Mount Sinai (1962–1964). — *Compiler’s note.*

¹⁴³ Luke 21:3

¹⁴⁴ See Matt. 18:23–35. The value of ten thousand talents was seven thousand times greater than that of one hundred denarii. — *Compiler’s note.*

elder said to the gendarme, “I have forgiven the thief with all my heart.” But the gendarme paid no attention to his words. “Come on, Father, let’s go quickly,” he said. “I don’t care about your ‘forgive’ and ‘bless.’” Finally, when the elder began to weep like a little child, the police chief took pity on him and let him go. When the elder recalled this incident, he could not understand it at all: “My child,” he would say, “these worldly people have their own code; they have neither ‘bless me’ nor ‘God will forgive!’”

— Geronda, what does “holding a grudge” mean? Is it remembering the wrong that was done to you, or being angry at the one who did it?

— If you remember the wrong and feel upset when things are going well for the one who caused it, or rejoice when things are going badly for them, then that is holding a grudge. But if, despite the wrong another has done to you, you rejoice in their success, then that is not holding a grudge. That is how you can test yourself on this matter.

I forget any wrong done to me. I throw old grievances into the fire of love, and they burn away. During the civil war in 1944, rebels came to our village. It was very cold. I thought, “They probably don’t have any food. These people will go hungry. I’ll take them some bread.” When I brought them the bread, they found me suspicious and detained me. It never even occurred to me that these rebels were hunting for my brothers, who were hiding in the mountains. What did Christ say? “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.”¹⁴⁵

Love with Compassion

— Geronda, it must be so hard for you in your cell! Mentally ill people and drug addicts come...

— That’s exactly when it becomes clear whether we have true love within us. In the face of our brother, we see Christ. Because when we do something for a brother, we do it for Christ Himself. “For inasmuch as you did it to one of these least of My brethren,” said Christ, “you did it to Me.”¹⁴⁶

Once, a father came to my cell with his young son, who was possessed. Almost at the same time, an acquaintance of mine arrived. I took the boy’s father aside to talk to him for a moment, since he was the cause of the boy’s possession. Poor guy! He was healthy, yet snot was running from his nose... Seeing this, my acquaintance approached him, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the boy’s nose, and then put the handkerchief back in his own pocket. Then he took off his gold pectoral cross and placed it around the boy’s neck. But it wasn’t that which struck me—it was the love with which he wiped the boy’s nose—and if only you could have seen the state that young man was in! This man felt compassion for him as if he were his own brother. If he hadn’t seen him as a brother, would he have acted that way? If you love another person as a brother, then you can wipe his nose with your handkerchief and then put the handkerchief back in your own pocket! But if that feeling isn’t there, then another person is like a foreign body to you, which is why you flinch at any touch from him, and if he happens to splash you with saliva, you’ll immediately run headlong to wash your face.

Since the Good Lord has given us abundant gifts and has not allowed us to suffer, we must have compassion for our neighbor who is suffering. For example, let’s say we see a person with a disability. If we think, “If I were disabled and couldn’t walk, how would I feel?”—then we will feel compassion for them. Or, if someone in a difficult situation asks us for help, we should immediately think: “If I were in their place, wouldn’t I want someone to help me?” That is where our compassion for them lies. But even when a person is in distress themselves, if they possess genuine love for their neighbor combined with compassion, such a person forgets their own suffering and worries about

¹⁴⁵ See Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27.

¹⁴⁶ Matthew 25:40

others instead. When someone tells me about their pain, I cease to feel my own pain, even if I were sitting on nails or walking barefoot on broken glass.

— Saint Mark the Ascetic writes: “One passion prevents us from doing good to the best of our ability—indolence. This passion is cured by prayer and almsgiving.”¹⁴⁷ Why does he mention almsgiving in this context?

— Because almsgiving and kindness soften the heart. Almsgiving acts on the heart like oil on a rusty lock. A hard heart softens when a person sees the suffering of others; he becomes more receptive and humble. God did not create man to be cruel and unmerciful, but people fail to cultivate the mercy God has given them; they do not feel compassion for their neighbor, and through neglect they gradually become hard-hearted.

— And how can one soften one’s heart?

— To soften your heart, you need to put yourself in the shoes not only of other people, but also of animals, and even snakes. Let’s think, for example, like this: “Wouldn’t it be nice if I were a snake: I crawl out into the sun to warm myself, and a person runs up to me with a stick and hits me on the head? No, that wouldn’t be good.” If we think this way, we’ll come to feel compassion for and love even snakes. If a person doesn’t put themselves in the shoes of others—not just people, but even animals and insects—they cannot become truly human.

Compassion conceals a love so powerful that it surpasses ordinary love. If you feel compassion for another, you begin to love them more deeply. When compassion is present in love, you embrace your brother who is possessed by a demon, and the demon leaves him. For strong love—spiritual love, which contains compassion—comforts God’s creatures with holy consolation, overwhelms the ranks of demons, sets the soul free, and heals its wounds with the balm of Christ’s love poured out upon it.

A spiritual person is one great act of compassion. He grows weary from sympathizing with others, prays, and comforts. And although he takes upon himself the sufferings of others, he is always full of joy, for Christ takes away his pain and comforts him spiritually.

Love reveals

— Geronda, how can I show love?

— Show love? I don’t understand that. That’s a lie and hypocrisy. We have love within us, and that love reveals us? That’s understandable. True love reveals itself to another person without ostentatious displays. Love means listening with compassion to another’s pain. Love means a compassionate gaze and a word spoken to someone in a moment of distress. Love means sharing their sorrow and bringing them comfort in times of difficulty. Love means accepting a harsh word from them. All of this is more helpful than many words and ostentatious displays.

When you feel compassion for another person in your heart, God makes them aware of your goodwill and your love, and they understand it without any outward display. Likewise, if malice is not expressed outwardly but exists inwardly, the other person senses it. For even the devil, when he appears in the form of an “angel of light,”¹⁴⁸ brings confusion, while a true angel brings an indescribable, light joy.

— What, Geronda, is preventing me from receiving the message of other people’s love for me?

— Perhaps you haven’t developed love within yourself? A person who loves receives the message of another’s love for them, but also conveys their own love to the other person.

A person can tell whether you truly love them or are just pretending, because love reaches them as quickly as a telegram. If, for example, we visit an orphanage, the children will immediately sense

¹⁴⁷ By our holy and God-bearing Father Mark the Ascetic. *The 200 Chapters on the Spiritual Law*. Thessaloniki, 1974. p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ 2 Cor. 11:14

the attitude with which we've come. Once, several people came to my cell who wanted to set up a children's shelter. "The main thing," I told them, "is to care for these children as if they were your own—and even more than your own. If that's not the case, then it's better not to start at all." Then a doctor, a very devout man, said: "You're right, Geronda. When we first visited the orphanage, the children immediately understood what each of us was there for. 'This gentleman,' they said, 'came just to visit; this one came to play with us; but this gentleman truly loves us.'" Do you see how love reveals itself?

Love bridges distances

- Geronda, how do people communicate spiritually with one another from a distance?
- They send each other messages by walkie-talkie or using Morse code!...
- How so?

— For people to communicate spiritually with one another, they must be on the same wavelength. Scholars simply cannot understand this. Do you remember the story mentioned in the book **The Holy Mountain Fathers**?¹⁴⁹ Once, a monk decided to visit another monk living in Kapsala and began thinking about what gift to bring him. He caught two fish and began to clean them, preparing to give them as a gift. Meanwhile, the other monk received a message from God about his brother's visit and wondered, "What shall I serve my brother when he arrives?" Just as the first brother was cleaning the fish, a raven suddenly flew in, snatched one of the fish, and carried it to the second monk in Kapsala—a journey of five and a half hours. Do you understand? One man was thinking about how to please another, and the raven became the mediator between them!

When a person has Love—Christ—even if he is mute, he will find a common language with billions of different people, with people of any age, even though every age has its own language of communication. Sit two people next to each other who do not love one another and tell them to sit in silence—and sit those who love one another next to each other and tell them to sit in silence. How will both groups feel? The first group remains silent, and the second group remains silent. However, the second group, even though they are silent, is communicating because there is a bond between them. Conversely, the first group will be unable to communicate because they are isolated from one another. When there is no love, two people may be physically close, but they remain far apart from one another.

- Geronda, I am sorry that the day has come when you must leave us again and travel far away.

— In the spiritual life, there is no such thing as "far" or "near." The love of Christ is not divided by distance, because Christ, through His love, abolishes distance. Therefore, whether a person is far or near, he always feels that he is close by when he is close to Christ and bound to another person by the brotherly bonds of Christ's love.

I thank God that I have this kind of love—spiritual, angelic—so that distances are abolished, and I will continue to communicate with you both in this life, even from a distance, and upon passing into the next life, even though the distance will be much greater—because even that will be quite short, since we are united by Love—Christ.

Chapter 3. Love for All Creatures

¹⁴⁹ See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Fathers of Mount Athos and Athonite Writings*. Thessaloniki, 2005. pp. 9–10.

Man's Relationship with Animals Before and After the Fall

— Geronda, please give me a Christmas wish.

— I wish for you to be close to Christ and the Mother of God, like that little lamb standing by the manger. I think she has nothing to complain about, just like the ox and the donkey, who warm Christ lying in the manger with their body heat... “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s manger,”¹⁵⁰ — says the prophet Isaiah. This means: the ox knows its master, and the donkey knows its master’s manger. They recognized Who was lying in the manger and warmed Him with their breath! They recognized their Creator! And the little donkey—what an honor it was for him to carry Christ to Egypt! Rulers rode in chariots adorned with gold, but what did Christ ride on! How I would love to be that little donkey!

In Paradise, the animals sensed the fragrance of grace and recognized Adam as their ruler.¹⁵¹ But after the Fall of man, they too were deprived of Paradise, though they themselves were not to blame. Now they no longer recognized Adam as their ruler, but rushed at him, seeking to tear him apart, as if saying, “You are evil; you are not our ruler.”

Now, when man, through keeping God’s commandments, draws near to God once more and is clothed anew in Divine Grace—thus returning to the state he was in before the Fall—the animals once again recognize him as their ruler. He walks fearlessly among wild animals, which are no longer wild, since their master has tamed them.

Animals sense a person’s love

— Abba Isaac says: “A merciful heart is the burning of a person’s heart for all of creation...”¹⁵²

— Yes, that’s right—a burning love for animals and even for demons. A spiritual person gives his love first to God, then to people, and the remainder of his love he gives to animals and all of creation. This divine love touches the animals. They recognize the person who loves and has compassion for them, and they approach him without fear. Even wild animals can distinguish a person who loves them from a hunter who hunts them. They hide from the hunter but approach the person who loves them. I used to think this didn’t apply to snakes, because the snake is the only animal that people don’t love. However, I later became convinced that even snakes sense a person’s love and can become their friends. If a person puts themselves in a snake’s place and feels compassion for it, the snake immediately understands this and approaches the person as a friend. It’s as if it’s saying, “Thank God, I’ve finally found a friend!”

— Could this be a manifestation of instinct?

— God has endowed animals with what they need; He gave them intuition. After the Fall, humans lost their supernatural gift, but they retained their intellect and capacity for reason. For example, people see sycamore trees and realize there’s water somewhere nearby; they dig and find it. But animals sense it differently; it’s as if they have some kind of radar. When a camel in the desert gets thirsty, it runs on its own to where there’s water, and the camel driver simply follows it. It’s as if the camel picks up some kind of signal.

Animals Ask Humans for Help

— To animals, a person is God. Just as we ask God for help, so they ask people for help.

On Mount Athos, I heard about Elder Theophylact of the Skete of St. Basil, who was friends with wild animals. They sensed his love and would come to his cell when they were in need. Once, a roe deer that had broken its leg came to the window of his cell and began to moan pitifully. The

¹⁵⁰ Isa. 1:3

¹⁵¹ See Gen. 1:28

¹⁵² Quoted from: *The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Moscow, 1993. pp. 205–206

elder stepped out of his cell and saw that she was holding out her broken leg to him, as if to show where it hurt. He brought her some crackers to eat, took two splints, and tightly bandaged the broken leg. Then he said to the roe deer, “Now go in peace, and come back in a week; I’ll take a look.” This blessed elder spoke to the animal as a doctor speaks to a sick person, because he himself had become a man of God!

— Geronda, I’m amazed that the Reverend Gerasimos wasn’t afraid of the lion that came to him so he could remove a thorn from its paw.¹⁵³

— After all, he was a saint, and animals never harm a person when they’re in a difficult situation. Once, workers were carrying firewood on mules past my cell. Suddenly, one mule fell, and the pack saddle with the firewood fell on top of it. I forgot about my hernia, about the fact that it was even hard for me to walk. I ran over and started taking the firewood off the mule. I tried to lift the saddle—but couldn’t. I gave the little mule a slap, pulled on the reins, and freed the animal. Then a priest who was nearby shouted, “Look, you have a hernia—don’t make it worse.” Only then did I remember that I had a hernia. “All right,” I said to him, “I have a hernia, but why didn’t you run to help me?” “I was afraid the mule might kick me,” he replied. “You know, my dear, even an animal—even a wolf—if it’s in a difficult situation, will ask for help and can’t harm a person.”

When animals suffer from hunger or thirst, they again turn to humans for help, because humans are their masters. I remember one summer at the Cell of the Holy Cross¹⁵⁴ a viper slithered down from the roof to the ground and coiled itself into a ring in front of me. It held its head high, stuck out its tongue, and began to hiss. It was thirsty—it was very hot—and was threatening me. It demanded water, as if I were obligated to provide it. “Yes,” I told her, “you’re not exactly winning people over with that kind of behavior!” Then I poured her some water, and she drank her fill. And the jackals really touch my heart, because when they want to eat, they cry just like little children. As for the kittens I have in my cell right now¹⁵⁵, they’re a real handful. They’ve figured out that every time the bell rings, I go out into the courtyard and sometimes bring them some food. So now, when they want to eat, they tug on the rope, and the bell rings. I go out, see that they’re tugging on the rope, and feed them. How wonderfully God has arranged everything!

— Geronda, do animals come to your cell?

— Of course they do! Jackals and wild boars come... Sometimes a little vixen runs up. When the cats leave, the vixen comes running. You don’t see wild boars in the summer because they’re afraid of hunters; you only see snakes because people are afraid of them.

Birds fly in flocks: big ones, little ones. I give them soaked crackers, and they eat them. I save the nuts from the Turkish delight especially for the birds that bring spring. These poor little birds, starting in winter when there’s still snow on the ground, sing as if it were spring. In short, they bring comfort. How they love those nuts!

— Geronda, were there animals on Mount Sinai?

— On Mount Sinai, since it’s a desert, there were mostly wild animals, as well as birds. Partridges, quails—the same kind the Jews ate in the desert.¹⁵⁶ There were also beautiful mice, resembling little turtles, without tails, whose backs were covered with bristles as thick as a brush! I fed them all—the partridges, quails, and mice! I laid out their food separately on the rocks so they wouldn’t fight! Otherwise, as soon as a bird started pecking, a mouse would come running, and the bird would fly away.

¹⁵³ The life of the Venerable Gerasimus of the Jordan recounts that a lion came to him on the banks of the Jordan, howling in pain because a large splinter had lodged in its paw. The venerable one took pity on the animal and removed the splinter from its paw. From then on, the lion followed the venerable one as a “faithful disciple.” — *Compiler’s note.*

¹⁵⁴ Between 1968 and 1979. — *Compiler’s note.*

¹⁵⁵ This refers to Panaguda’s cell. — *Compiler’s note.*

¹⁵⁶ See Ex. 16:13; Num. 11:31–32.

Wherever I went, the birds followed me. When I climbed up on the rocks and started singing, they would gather around, and I'd toss them a little rice. If I wanted some quiet, I had to stop singing, because as soon as I started, the birds would immediately flock over! I remember once I had a sudden back spasm and had to spend several days in bed. Then a little bird flew right into my cell and landed on my chest. It sat there, looked me in the face, and chirped for several hours straight—it was so beautiful. What a surprise!

Let's follow the example of animals

— What's that humming sound, Geronda?

— A swarm of bees has settled outside my window,¹⁵⁷ and now the bees are working so hard that I have to put up with all this noise in the evenings! Come on, I'll show you my apiary. Look how architecturally well-thought-out everything is with the bees, even though they have neither an architect nor a contractor! I wish for you, too, to labor rightly and spiritually, to create a spiritual hive that produces spiritual honey, so that laypeople may come, eat, and be spiritually refreshed.

— Geronda, what does the psalmist mean when he says, “You save both man and beast, O Lord?”¹⁵⁸

— It means that God helps animals, too. Just look at how many patron saints there are for animals! And as for the animals themselves—what they have to endure, poor things! We wouldn't be able to endure even a week of the obedience they bear while serving man. If they are fed—fine; if not, they go hungry. If they don't do what their owner wants, they are beaten. And how they labor without any reward! We can gain paradise for a single “Lord, have mercy.” Isn't that enough? So animals have surpassed us in non-greed, in patience, and in obedience.

Observe the lives of animals and insects—it's beneficial. I watch how diligently and conscientiously ants work, even without a leader. No human possesses the kind of tact that ants have. Young ants drag small twigs and many other useless things into the anthill because they don't yet know what's needed and what isn't. The adult ants don't stop them, but later they themselves carry all of it out of the anthill. Over time, the young ants begin to observe what the adult ants are bringing into the anthill, and they learn. If we were in their place, we would say something like this: “Hey, you, come here—what on earth are you dragging in? Go on, throw it out right now!”

God created animals so that they might serve humankind, but also so that humankind might follow their example. A person—if they are truly human—finds benefit in everything.

Olet—a Diligent Bird

— With your last letter, you sent me an icon depicting Adam with the animals in Paradise. So I thought I'd send you, in return, a drawing of a bird—my closest friend—because if I'd sent you a drawing of a snake, I think you would have been frightened. I named her Olet, which means “child” in Arabic. Olet lives on a hill five hundred meters from my cell.¹⁵⁹ Every day at noon, I bring her treats and snacks. When I give her food, she takes just a little and flies away. I call out for him to come back, but he flies away—only to return shortly afterward, quietly gliding up from behind and hiding under my vest. When I leave, he accompanies me for about a hundred meters, and so that he doesn't fly any further after me and get tired, I toss him some crumbs to distract him while I walk quickly ahead until he loses sight of me.

¹⁵⁷ A swarm of bees entered through the gaps in the closed shutters. The bees built a hive in the space between the closed shutters and the windowpane. At Elder Paissios's, this window was always closed and the curtain drawn. (The event described took place at the Hesychastery in June 1993.) — *Compiler's note.*

¹⁵⁸ Ps. 35:7

¹⁵⁹ This refers to the Cell of the Holy Cross. — *Compiler's note.*

Lately, Olet has abandoned his strict routine and is seeking pleasure! He won't eat either crushed rice or breadcrumbs soaked in water—only worms—and he wants me to offer them to him on... a plate—on my palm—where he perches and eats. Progress!

These days I'm enjoying Olet's company. Someone might ask, "Why are you making an exception for Olet? Why don't you treat the other birds the same way you treat him?" My answer is this: when I call Olet, he flies over along with the other birds, his friends; the others immediately pounce on the food, but Olet comes out of obedience and love. Even when he's hungry, he can sit with me for a long time, and then I'm the one who reminds him about food. Now the weather has settled in, and Olet has plenty of food—insects and grubs—but he still flies over when I call him, even though he's full—he flies over out of obedience. How can I not love this devoted, affectionate bird more than the others?

Often, out of great love, I want to hold Oleta tightly in my palms, but I'm afraid I might end up like that monkey who holds her children so tightly against her that, in the end, she suffocates them. So I restrain my heart and rejoice in Oleta from a distance, so as not to harm him.¹⁶⁰

Once I was delayed, and when I reached the hill, Oleta was already gone, since a strong wind was blowing that day. I left the food in the usual spot and left. The next day I went to see Olet very early, because I was worried that a hawk might have eaten him. When Olet saw the food I had left for him the night before, he was "tempted by the thought," flew in the direction of my cell, and waited for me halfway there.

When he saw me, he went wild with joy. I began to feed him, but he wanted my company more than he wanted food. I marvel at his self-restraint, love, and gratitude. Pray that I may emulate his virtues.

I don't think I've disappointed you; I've told you everything without holding anything back, without asking Olet's permission. I hope he won't be upset, though no one but you will ever find out about this anyway... A deep bow to you from Olet and me.

In my cell, there are not only birds, but also all the animals that come there—jackals, hares, weasels, turtles, lizards, snakes— — are nourished by the abundance of my love; I, too, am nourished when they are nourished, and all together, "beasts and all cattle, creeping things and birds of the air"¹⁶¹ "let us praise, bless, and worship the Lord."¹⁶²

Part 3.

Nobility and Love

"Where there is nobility, there is silence and unobtrusiveness; therefore, Christ rests there, and Christ's blessing dwells there."

Chapter 1.

Nobility—the Majesty of God

What Is Nobility?

— Geronda, what should we pay special attention to during Great Lent?

¹⁶⁰ Elder Paisios's love for animals was not a morbid attachment, but an expression of a "merciful heart," whose love poured out upon all creation. — *Compiler's note.*

¹⁶¹ Ps. 148:10

¹⁶² From the Songs of Scripture; Song 8.

— On nobility, on spiritual nobility.

— Isn't Great Lent primarily a time of repentance?

— Nobility, nobility—to be united with Christ—without this, success is impossible. If you knew what nobility brings, you would pursue it day and night, forgetting even to sleep. If a person carefully examines spiritual nobility, he will find the greatness of God hidden within it!

— What exactly is nobility?

— Spiritual nobility is spiritual excellence and self-sacrifice. A noble soul demands only of itself, but not of others. It sacrifices itself for the sake of others, seeking no reward. It forgets what it gives, but remembers every little thing it receives. It possesses love, humility, simplicity, selflessness, honesty... it possesses it all. It also possesses the greatest joy and spiritual exultation, jubilation.

Spiritual nobility bears the Grace of God; it is, how shall I put it, a divine attribute. Where there is nobility, there is silence and unobtrusiveness; therefore, Christ rests there, and Christ's blessing dwells there.

Spiritual nobility is spiritual justice

— Geronda, is spiritual nobility higher than spiritual justice?

— Spiritual nobility contains spiritual justice, and spiritual justice contains spiritual nobility—or, rather, nobility is spiritual justice itself. Therefore, for a person who possesses spiritual nobility, there is no law: "The righteous have no need of the law."¹⁶³ Such a person would rather be killed than kill another.

— Geronda, when I'm asked to do something, I immediately start thinking that I have a lot of other work to do, and I make excuses.

— If a person acquires nobility, he will overcome all of that. He acts not on the basis of dry logic, because nobility is beyond logic. You try to arrange everything according to human logic and worldly justice. But where is spiritual justice? Haven't I said that the more spiritually elevated a person is, the fewer rights they have in this life, and that a spiritual person only gives and never demands anything for themselves?

— Then why does the Gospel say, "Everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds"?¹⁶⁴

— That's different. If a person asks God for something for himself, rather than out of love for another, then, again, he is concerned only with his own comfort. After all, if, for example, a mother asks God for her child to recover from an illness or for everything to go well in the family, she is not asking this for herself, but for the good of her household. Take the Canaanite woman mentioned in the Gospel,¹⁶⁵ —she didn't ask for anything for herself. She ran after Christ and asked Him to help her daughter, who was possessed by a demon. Then the apostles approached Christ and said to Him, "Grant this woman's request, so that she may stop running after us and crying out." But He replied to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."¹⁶⁶ But the Canaanite woman continued to cry out and ask for help. Then Christ turned and said to her, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."¹⁶⁷ And she replied to Him, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And then Christ said to her, "Because of this word of yours, your daughter has been healed." See her faith, her humility, her nobility, her spiritual

¹⁶³ 1 Tim. 1:9.

¹⁶⁴ Matt. 7:8; Luke 11:10.

¹⁶⁵ See Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30.

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 15:24

¹⁶⁷ Matthew 15:26

superiority! Had she been a self-centered, proud woman, she would have said to Christ, “I did not expect You to compare me to a dog! You’ve disappointed me!” And she would have walked away from Him in a huff! And her conscience would have been clear, convinced that she had acted quite correctly and justly. She might even have said to herself: “I don’t understand how so many people can sit there and listen to Him!”

— Geronda, did her faith help her?

— Her nobility of character helped her find such faith. She was free from all conceit and had no pretensions. But she had a good intention: “Since God said this about the people of Israel, then it must be true; God knows what He is saying. And we belong to a different people.”

How Nobility Is Acquired

— How can I acquire nobility of character, Geronda?

— Conduct yourself humbly; act with pure zeal and diligence, and with love. Develop spiritual receptivity. Peacefully accept annoyance from others and rejoice that they are the ones being annoyed, not you. Because there are some people who don’t care if they cause someone trouble; they only care that no one bothers them. There are also those who do not want to trouble others themselves, but do not want others to trouble them either. Still others say, “I am a sensitive person; I cannot bear harsh words,” yet they themselves speak harshly to others. What kind of sensitivity is that? In pure sensitivity, there is nobility.

— If a person has flaws but strives to attain nobility, will he benefit?

— Nobility will drive out flaws.

— Does spiritual freedom mean freedom from passions?

— Spiritual freedom is the nobility I am telling you to acquire. And for a person to possess nobility, there must be no base passions, pettiness, meanness, etc., within them. There is no God in pettiness and meanness, because God is good by nature.

— Geronda, in order to learn to love suffering, do we also need to work on cultivating nobility?

— Oh, you still haven’t understood what nobility means! Nobility involves courage, because when a person possesses nobility, their heart is alive. To understand what nobility is, look to Christ. What did Christ take for Himself? Nothing. He gave everything away. He sacrificed Himself—and continues to do so—for all of us. He gives us His love and takes our sins upon Himself. We, on the other hand, want to receive love. Look at how good parents act. They constantly sacrifice themselves for their children, even though the children sometimes even hit them. Knowing what lies ahead, parents still sacrifice themselves for their children. Animals and birds do the same. A swallow cares for its chicks, but when the chicks grow up, they, too, will care for their own chicks. This is how God’s generous love works.

Through generous nobility, a person enters into communion with God

— Geronda, how does a person become akin to God?

— The main thing is for a person to acquire spiritual nobility. Then he becomes like God.

— Could it be that a sister engages in spiritual practice in her cell and then lacks the strength to participate in communal work?

— What kind of spiritual practice?¹⁶⁸ At the expense of others? That is, let someone else do the work, while I engage in spiritual practice? But that is not a spiritual approach, especially for a young person. A young person should think about how to help their elders. Just imagine: the young person

¹⁶⁸ Spiritual practice—the activities a monk engages in within his cell (praying with prayer beads, prostrations, reading edifying books, etc.). — *Compiler’s note.*

will supposedly be engaged in spiritual practice, while the older one struggles to do all the work alone! Where is the self-sacrifice in that? Where is the generous nobility? Am I supposed to read, say prayers, and leave the work to others? All of this is empty talk. Many people still haven't grasped the essence of the spiritual life. They haven't yet tasted that noble, generous transformation; they think only of themselves.

A person is tested in times of difficulty. I remember when I lived in a monastery,¹⁶⁹ I was told to stay in bed in my cell without getting up because I was bleeding constantly. Suddenly, I saw through the window an elderly gatekeeper trying to split a stump with an axe to make firewood for the fireplace. This elder had intestinal problems and was constantly bleeding; he was completely weakened. Imagine—he slept in his shoes because he didn't have the strength to take them off. I jumped up, ran over to him, grabbed the axe, struck the stump a couple of times, split it open—and then blood started flowing from my mouth. Do you understand? I didn't even think about the condition I was in; I didn't spare a thought for myself.

Spiritual nobility and generosity! Nothing pleases God more than that! It is the vessel of Divine Grace. How simple everything is, and how we complicate it all! Spiritual nobility is required in everything. If a person does not understand this, he may attend three night services a week, fast strictly for three consecutive days three times a month, pray for hours, and practice bodily chastity—and all of this will be useless. I'm not saying that all of this is unnecessary, but the main thing is for a person to strive to acquire what is most important—spiritual nobility, which is purity of soul. So that there may be no self-interest, self-will, selfishness, or a desire to please others, etc., within them, so that God may dwell within them. When all of that is absent, a person possesses purity of soul; and thus, even if a person does not pray, he is akin to God, united with Him.

Only through magnanimous nobility does a person commune with God, operating on the same frequency as God; otherwise, their receiver is tuned to a different station. So let's try to replace your antennas with new ones... There are vertical antennas and horizontal ones. Vertical ones are turned inward and have poor reception; they easily lose the signal! Horizontal antennas, on the other hand, open up widely, so they have a greater range and pick up even weak waves. What I mean is that whoever is turned inward has not freed themselves from themselves, from their "self"; there is no magnanimous nobility in that, and therefore there is no Grace of God, and they lack Divine enlightenment.

A person will either acquire nobility or sink into wretchedness

— Geronda, I feel envy, I quarrel with people, and generally behave in an unbecoming manner.

— You lack spiritual nobility, and as a result, quarrels arise. Strive to attain spiritual nobility so that you may acquire sound judgment along with it. Now tell me, what thoughts crossed your mind when you didn't receive a small icon from me as a gift, like the other sisters did, and what did you think when you received a larger one on another occasion? Go ahead and give me a spiritual account, and I'll see if I did the right thing by deciding to carve a small Mount Athos out of wood for you and send it to you from Athos. I had already started making one with monasteries, cliffs, trails, and paths... About twenty centimeters in size. It was half finished, but then the boys begged me for it. They pleaded so earnestly for my blessing that I had to give it to them.

— They must have been very good kids...

— If they were good, they'd have shown more generosity and wouldn't have demanded it so insistently! I told them, "Let me finish it first—I'm not going to give you half a finished piece!" But they wouldn't hear of it; they stood their ground: "No, give it to us as is! Why should you bother

¹⁶⁹ Elder Paisios lived as a monk at the Esfigmen Monastery from 1953 to 1955. — *Compiler's note.*

finishing it?” You see? They decided to make my life easier! What kind of people are they! Imagine, one person even asked me for an eye as a blessing.

— Seriously, Geronda?

— Yes, seriously! An eye as a blessing! A young man in his thirties had lost his sight and was preparing for surgery. They brought him to my cell. I felt so sorry for him that I told him, “Please don’t worry—if the surgery doesn’t go well, I’ll give you my eye. One is enough for me to live on.” Soon he came back, overjoyed, because the surgery had been a success: both eyes could see well. He came and said to me, “I’ve come to get an eye from you!” “Yes, but you can see now!” I said. “No, I want it as a blessing,” he replied. Then I felt sorry for him again—this time because I didn’t see even a trace of generosity or nobility! That’s a different kind of pain...

— Geronda, I’ve noticed that when I know people will appreciate my work, I work with greater enthusiasm.

— You know who you remind me of right now? A poor little girl named Spiridula. The blacksmith made her pump the bellows, and he’d keep telling her, “Pump, Spiridula, pump, and I’ll buy you a new dress.” And she, poor thing, would raise her little hands and pump the bellows with all her might, because she’d been promised a new dress! Do you understand? If you don’t acquire nobility of character, you’ll be just like Spiridula. A person either acquires nobility of character or gets bogged down in poverty.

— I have the feeling that you care less about me than you do about the other sisters.

— Although I’ve given you a great deal, both here and while I was on Mount Athos, it seems you haven’t been able to hold on to it. You’ve squandered everything, and now you resemble a desperate beggar who has lost all she had gathered. How can I help you? I will pray that you may soon be enriched in Christ, leave your hut with its rusty dishes, and become a princess of Christ.

I am moved to tenderness when I see people who possess nobility. A person of nobility enters my heart of his own accord—neither does he ask my permission, nor do I ask his—and dwells there; he is always with me, close by, no matter how far away he may be physically.

Chapter 2.

Kindness—the Love of Great Gratitude

Loving people are noble souls

— Geronda, what is “love of nobility”?

— What does the dictionary say? There is no such concept as “love of kindness” in any other language. Although the Greeks have certain shortcomings, they have received two gifts from God: love of kindness and courage; they look at everything with joy.

Listen to what is written in my dictionary. Lovefulness is the essence of kindness, a love born of great gratitude, all kindness and humility. It is the pure love of a humble person who seeks no personal gain whatsoever in what he does. His heart is filled with spiritual refinement, receptivity, and gratitude toward God and toward the image of God, the human person.

Loving people are inwardly moved to tears by their gratitude to God, which they express in every way spiritually, as children of God. Since they dwell in Heaven in the realm of praise, they joyfully accept trials as well. They glorify God for them, just as they do for His blessings, and constantly receive God’s blessing.

Gracious people are noble souls. They are deeply moved by even the smallest act of kindness shown to them by others and strive to repay it, but no matter what they do, they feel it is not enough. They never forget the kindness shown to them.

— Does someone who truly loves their benefactor demonstrate through this that they possess a loving heart?

— One who loves his benefactor does nothing. But, unfortunately, even that is lacking today; it's rare to meet a grateful person. What gratitude people used to have! My parents told me that an Austrian businessman who lived in Adana saved my father from the Turks. Later, he went bankrupt and considered it an insult to remain in Adana, yet he did not want to return to Austria either. Then my father, who never forgot that this man had saved his life, took him into his home in Faras and cared for him in his old age.

— Is there a limit to charity, Geronda?

— No, there is no limit. It is a constant, great folly... Spiritual folly!

— Geronda, does charity require reason?

— Love possesses reason, sensitivity, and nobility... It contains everything... A loving person is not naive; he may be humiliated, but Christ dwells within him, for the most humiliated of all is Christ.

Christ rejoices in our act of love

— Geronda, please say a few words about how I should strive.

— Courage, bravery, and love! Serve Christ with love. Christ works quietly and unobtrusively in a soul that is well-disposed, has the will to triumph, and is filled with love.

— Geronda, why doesn't prayer fulfill me, even though I take care to faithfully fulfill all my monastic duties?

— How can it fill you? You need to turn the lever the other way. Look at how much of your spiritual life you do with your mind and how much with your heart, how much you're guided by European punctuality and how much by Orthodox zeal. Behind what we call "consistency," our selfishness sometimes hides, and it robs us. Appearing consistent so that others think everything is fine with me. However, then my spiritual life turns into one big mess. In everything, one must act with love, because Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints operate on this frequency... Without love, Divine Grace does not come.

— Geronda, constant sobriety is exhausting...

— It becomes exhausting when selfishness creeps in, because then a person unnaturally forces themselves. But when love is present, the act is performed from the heart, and it does not become exhausting, for it is sweetened by love. I think you feel a struggle in your spiritual effort because you say, "I must do this and that." Thus, without you realizing it, discipline opens the door to selfishness: "Doing in order to be saved." You must strive not to be saved, but to bring joy to Christ. If you labor to bring joy to Christ, then your spiritual struggle will be easy, and you will feel divine consolation within yourself. Right now, however, your struggle is harsh, and there is no consolation in it. Christ is a tender Father, not a tyrant. Christ rejoices in our love-filled spiritual struggle.

When a person strives spiritually out of love, he feels inner joy, because God grants him spiritual delight. It is clear that a person who acts out of love never strives for the sake of comfort and pleasure. And even if God does not grant him paradise, he will not be offended, because he does not say: "I will strive to end up in paradise, to live well, and not to suffer in the underworld," but he does not sin out of love, since he does not want to end up in hell and offend Christ, his Benefactor. And if Christ were to tell him that even in paradise he would have to endure suffering, he would still want to be there for Christ's sake.

The enemy of love is self-love

— Geronda, is a person who possesses love for others always characterized by self-denial?

— If he has pure love for others, then he also has self-denial. The less of his own “self” there is in a person’s love, the more love for others he acquires. Where there is self-love, there is no love for others, because the enemy of love for others is self-love.

— Geronda, even though I work—sometimes twelve or thirteen hours a day, if necessary—and I work diligently and with love, I get upset when I’m asked to do something I hadn’t planned.

— Don’t call that love for others. Someone who has love for others doesn’t object when asked for help and doesn’t mention how many hours he works. In the monastery where I lived, the one who worked harder than the others tried to hide it. A certain brother would gather two sacks of olives but say he’d gathered only one basket and that another brother had gathered several sacks. That’s what love means. But here, the question is: “Who gathered the olives?”—“I did,” the sister answers right away. It would be better if she hadn’t picked them at all. If you came to the monastery to seek praise, then I feel sorry for you.

— When I see that we have a lot of work, I start to rush about and feel overwhelmed.

— If I were in your place, I’d force myself to do the work for the other sister as well. When I was training to be a carpenter, the master took on another young man as an assistant besides me. He was older and stronger than me, but lazy. The master gave us work, but he just sat there with his arms folded. “What? Am I supposed to earn money for the boss?” he would protest, and do nothing. “Listen,” I’d tell him, “if you want to learn, do what you’re told!” But it was no use, and I had to do the work for both of us. “At least,” I’d say, “if you’re just going to sit around doing nothing, sit down at the workbench and hold the boards down while I saw them—that way we won’t waste time clamping them in the vise.” But I could have just as easily said, “I’ve done my part; the rest doesn’t concern me.” The boss would have come in and started scolding my partner: “Where’s your work? Look at him—he’s weaker than you, yet he’s gotten so much done!” Would I have enjoyed hearing someone else get scolded? What good does it do me to be praised while someone else is scolded? In the end, my partner only made things worse for himself because he never learned the carpentry trade, and later he had to work with a pickaxe instead of a plane. A person who possesses diligence will succeed wherever he finds himself, because everything he does, he does with diligence. But a person who does not cultivate the diligence given to him by God will, no matter what he does, remain stuck in the same place.

In the past, we used to look at poor animals, like an ox or a horse: in a team, one animal might be diligent and hardworking, while the other was lazy, and the diligent one would drag the lazy one along. And in the end, the lazy one would end up under the butcher’s axe. You know how sorry I felt for one buffalo! We harnessed three buffaloes together, and one of them—not particularly strong—tried so hard, worked so hard! He pulled the other two along with him. From the strain, the poor thing was covered in sweat. And if Christ were to point out such an animal to us and say, “Look, it was pulling the other two along—and what have you done?”—what would we answer? Oh, sea,¹⁷⁰ take the question of your own salvation to heart. After all, you have so many opportunities!

People who love God have a refined conscience, and God helps them

— Geronda, does a person who possesses love of God understand this themselves?

— Do you possess it? You can really feel it, dear! A person has a general sense of who they are; they receive this insight because they feel inner stillness and peace. But even when they possess

¹⁷⁰ Lit.: infant, simple-minded person (Greek); used as an interjection in colloquial speech. — *Translator’s note*

love, they do not boast or say, “I have love.” After all, the thought “I need even more love” is always present in their mind.

A loving person is sincere, selfless, simple, and humble. All of this brings peace to them, but it’s also evident to others, because they have an inner connection with other people and understand them. And if you’re feeling down, but to avoid upsetting them, you tell them: “Everything’s great with me,” they’ll understand that you’re not feeling well and will try not to bother you. Whereas another person, even though they see that you’re tired and not feeling well, will say—because they want you to pay attention to them—“Geronda, you look better today than last time; I can see you’re completely healthy!” Even if there were something serious going on. But a humble person, on the contrary, even if he really needs something, will say only: “Geronda, I won’t trouble you—just bless me.” I keep such a person with me for a long time, and tears well up in my eyes out of tenderness. “I’ll be going now, Geronda; I can see you’re tired,” he says. Could it be that God won’t help such a person?

There are people who, driven by love for others, immediately understand what is helpful and what brings joy to another—in a good way—because they are constantly thinking of others rather than themselves. Some, even though they don’t know me, sense what I need and send packages containing exactly what I need at that moment. Looking at such a package, one can understand the whole inner world of a person. The refinement of their consciousness shines through in every item.

— Geronda, do you sometimes have people come to your cell who are a bit reckless and presumptuous?

— Yes, but it is the sincere people—who, out of modesty, do not want to disturb me—who benefit. Last time, a family man came here. I’d met with him separately before; he’d also visited with his wife and children. Then, three days later, he came again. At that moment, I was talking with someone, and a young woman was waiting outside the door—she had flown in from Athens specifically to discuss a matter that was troubling her. “Won’t you let me speak with Father for five minutes?” he asked, and the young woman let him go ahead. Then she had to wait an hour and a half for the gentleman who had asked to be let in—for just five minutes—to come out. When he finally emerged, she already had to rush to the airport, and she said to me only: “Bless me, Geronda; I came all the way from Athens to consult with you on a matter, but now I’m running out of time. I took time off from work, and I have to go to the airport to catch my flight.” How could one ever forget such a person! Ultimately, it is only through a broad-minded spirit that a person finds help from God.

— Geronda, when a loving person lives with difficult people, doesn’t he suffer?

— The point is to demonstrate one’s love in dealing with difficult people. The Gospel says: “And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you...”¹⁷¹

Loving and spiritually receptive people willingly endure hardships because of the concessions they make to others out of love for them, or because of the deceitfulness of others, but they themselves never seek justice in this fleeting life. People of integrity in this life pay off all their debts, yet they also receive help from God and will receive a great reward in the next life.

Part 4.

Children of Love and Humility

“Only in Christ does a person find true, genuine joy, because only Christ gives true joy and comfort”

¹⁷¹ Luke 6:32

Chapter 1. Simplicity and Purity

Simplicity—the First Fruit of Humility

— The first fruit of humility is simplicity. When a person possesses simplicity, then there is also love, self-sacrifice, kindness, and piety. A simple person possesses purity of heart and unquestioning trust in God, without doubt. Simplicity was Adam's state before the Fall, when he saw everyone as pure and without malice, for he was clothed in the Grace of God.

— Geronda, when people say, “Beauty¹⁷² lies in simplicity,” are they referring to Divine Grace?

— Of course. A simple and sincere person, possessing humility, receives grace from God, Who is by nature simple and good.

— Is it possible for a person to behave simply and yet be proud at the same time?

— That cannot be. A person who possesses true simplicity has no pride.

— Can someone outwardly pretend to be a simple person without actually possessing true simplicity?

— Yes, and by pretending to be simple, to get what they want! The outward simplicity of a person who pretends to be simple in order to achieve something conceals the crudest form of deceit. It's as if an old man were to put on a pair of children's socks so that others would indulge his every whim, as if he were a little child! Whereas a truly simple person possesses both straightforwardness and sound judgment.

Simplicity and Arrogance Are Different Things

— Sometimes it seems to me that I'm acting with simplicity, but others say I'm being brazen. Geronda, how can one tell the difference between simplicity and brazenness?

— Simplicity and arrogance are two different things. Arrogance allows a person to feel comfortable in a worldly sense. A person acts insolently and thereby feeds his own selfishness. He says, “Look, I put him in his place.” This gives a person a sense of satisfaction in a worldly sense, but it does not bring him true peace. Whereas simplicity brings spiritual delight—it leaves a certain lightness in the heart.

— Geronda, people tell me that I act frivolously, but I still think I'm acting with simplicity.

— Acting with simplicity doesn't mean behaving foolishly. You're confusing these two things. You speak without thinking and imagine that you're acting with simplicity. You have a bit of natural simplicity, but you lack sound judgment; although you're not a child in intellect, you behave like one. Fortunately, the sisters know you well and aren't put off by it.

— Can a person be truly simple, yet cause others to feel embarrassed by their behavior?

— If a person is truly simple, then even if he says or does something that might seem a bit improper, another person is not embarrassed, since the grace of God dwells in a simple person, and his actions do not offend others. Whereas someone who lacks simplicity, even if they speak politely in a worldly manner, their politeness is worse for you than a bitter radish.

¹⁷² The word “χάρις” has two meanings in Greek: “grace” and “beauty,” so the phrase can also be rendered as “grace in simplicity.”
— *Translator's note*

Be like children¹⁷³

— Geronda, what exactly is natural simplicity?

— Natural simplicity is the simplicity possessed by a small child. When a child misbehaves, you scold him, and he cries. If you then give him a toy car, he forgets everything. He doesn't reason about why he was scolded at first and then given a toy car, because a child perceives everything with the heart, while an adult perceives everything with the mind.

— Geronda, there are also adults who are simple by nature. Is such simplicity a virtue?

— Yes, but natural simplicity, like all other natural virtues, needs to be purified. A person who is simple by nature possesses good-naturedness and kindness, yet there is also a childlike cunning within them. They may, for example, not wish harm upon their neighbor, but if they are required to choose between something bad and something good, they will take the good for themselves and leave the bad for the other person. Such a person is like gold that contains a small amount of various impurities. For the gold to become pure, it must be remelted in a crucible. That is, his heart must be purified of all cunning, greed, and the like; then he will attain a state of perfect simplicity.

In true Christ-like love—which is a state of simplicity and purity—a childlike simplicity develops, the pursuit of which Christ demands of us. “Be like children,” He says. But in our time, the more worldly politeness people possess, the less simplicity remains in them, and the less genuine joy and natural smiles are found.

I remember there was an elder at the Iversky Skete—Pachomius. No matter what sorrow overwhelmed you, just looking at him was enough for the sorrow to vanish on its own. Upon seeing him, you immediately forgot everything—all your problems—and everything passed. An elder, yet he looked like a baby. He had rosy cheeks, and he laughed like a child! No matter what was happening, he laughed. Eternal joy! He couldn't read or write, nor could he sing—except for “Christ is Risen” at Easter. When he came to the skete's kyriakon on feast days—¹⁷⁴—he never sat in the stasidia; he always stood, even during the All-Night Vigil, and recited the Jesus Prayer. He was a courageous man with a great love for God. If someone asked him, “Father Pachomius, what are they singing now?”—he would reply, “The Psalter; the fathers are reading the Psalter.” He called everything the Psalter.

He was a very simple elder and very grace-filled. He was free from passions; he was like a harmless child. If a person does not rid himself of childish selfishness, childish pride, and stubbornness from an early age and remains in such an infantile state, then in old age he will have the same complaints as a small child. That is why the Apostle Paul says: “Do not be children in your thinking, but be infants in your innocence.”¹⁷⁵

A simple person always has good intentions

— A simple person is free from malice and guile. He turns what is bad and ugly into something good. He always has good thoughts about others. He is not naive; he is simply convinced that others reason just as he does.

— Geronda, can you give us an example?

— Haven't I told you about Father Charalampios, who once lived at the Kutlumush Monastery?¹⁷⁶ He was the librarian, but he was removed from that position because he never locked the library doors. “Why do you need all these locks and keys?” he would say. “Let people read the

¹⁷³ Cf. Matt. 18:3

¹⁷⁴ The main church of the skete, where services are held for the skete's residents on Sundays and major holidays. — *Compiler's note*

¹⁷⁵ 1 Cor. 14:20

¹⁷⁶ See Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Fathers of Mount Athos and Athos Writings*. Thessaloniki, 2005. pp. 10–11.

books freely.” He possessed such simplicity and purity of soul that it never even occurred to him that there were people who stole books.

A simple man, since he thinks well of everyone, sees everyone as good. I remember another elder, Father Theoktist from the Dionysiat Monastery—what a simple man he was! Once, he stayed overnight with another monk at the monastery’s guesthouse in Karyes. In the middle of the night, someone knocked on the door, and Father Theoktist ran to open it. “Come on,” said the monk, “don’t open it—it’s late, it’s time to rest.”—“How do you know, Father, who it is? Maybe it’s Christ! We have to open it.” And he went to open it. You see, a simple person always has good thoughts, and he always expects only good things.

When you’re simple, you feel at ease

— Geronda, I think simplicity is when a person acts according to how they feel. Is that right?

— It depends on where he lives. To act simply, a person must find the right environment. In the world—especially in today’s world—you have to act carefully. But in a monastery or within a family, you must live simply. It’s very exhausting when there’s no simplicity or trust in relationships between people! Then, to say anything to someone, you need a prologue, an epilogue, and explanations... That’s how life turns into torment. But when there is simplicity, you can tell someone, “Sit down”—and they’ll sit down, or “I don’t need you right now; go”—and they’ll leave, and you won’t be afraid that they’ll misunderstand you. When there is simplicity, you feel at ease; when there isn’t, you feel weighed down.

— Geronda, what does it mean to “gain freedom in your life in order to be freed from the storm”?¹⁷⁷

— Cultivate simplicity in your interactions with others so that you are not overwhelmed by thoughts and confusion does not arise in your mind. When a person simply expresses what they feel, they themselves feel free and make life easier for others.

Once I was driving to Athens in a friend’s car; there was one other person with us. I don’t handle car rides well, so the driver rolled down the window. It was cool. “Aren’t you cold?” I asked the others. “No, no,” they replied. But after a while, I noticed that my companion was shivering from the cold and buttoning up his jacket. So I said, “If you don’t want any of you to get sick, speak up when you’re cold, and I’ll let you know if I suddenly start feeling unwell.” And so none of us felt self-conscious. But if I had felt unwell and kept quiet, or if someone else had been freezing and also kept quiet, one of us would certainly have arrived in Athens sick. You, too, should communicate with one another simply. Otherwise, you’ll constantly worry about whether you’ve offended or upset someone else. When that happens, a person is constantly anxious, feels restless, and begins to act unnaturally.

— Geronda, I can’t even do the simplest things in front of others. Is this shyness or pride?

— Sometimes God gives a person increased shyness as a brake, so that nothing bad happens to them. After all, who knows—if a person didn’t have this shyness, how far might they stray from the right path! You, however, need to be a little more careful and submit yourself in everything to God’s will. You shouldn’t hold back and torment yourself, because there’s a certain amount of selfishness in this human reserve. Look at me—I behave naturally, without making any effort. Sometimes I act like a grandfather, sometimes like a father, sometimes like an older brother, and sometimes like a child. Isn’t that right?

— I’m constantly worried about how people will react to what I say, and I’m afraid they might misunderstand me.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted from: *The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Moscow, 1993. p. 279.

— You become withdrawn because you lack simplicity. Try to cultivate simplicity of heart so that you may experience spiritual growth. Simply accept the feedback you receive and strive to improve, asking for God’s help. For example, someone might tell you that you acted rashly. The next time, in a similar situation, you should think: “Last time, I was told I acted imprudently; now I need to try to act with prudence.” In this way, you will gradually gain experience, correct your ways, grow, and prosper spiritually. In this way, the other person receives guidance, as do you, and you feel peace in your soul.

Simplicity, combined with the virtue of love and trust in God, brings inner peace and joy, and the soul is filled with hope and comfort.

Through holy simplicity, a person comes to know the mysteries of God

— Geronda, do reading books and knowledge help us come to know God?

— Listen to what I’ll tell you: if a person labors spiritually and attains a sound spiritual state, they will begin to see certain things very clearly, through divine enlightenment, without bookish knowledge. They will see them even more clearly than those who have read a mountain of books. Through their inner purity, they see more clearly, farther, and deeper, because they have left the worldly orbit and are moving in a spiritual orbit, in the realm of the mystery. Those who have attained inner simplicity and purity view even supernatural things very simply, as if they were natural, because in God everything is simple. He Himself is simple and revealed this to us on earth in His Son, in His holy simplicity. He does not need any more power to perform the supernatural; He has one and the same power for both the natural and the supernatural.

— Geronda, how can a person, without reading many books, come to know the mysteries of God?

— If he possesses holy simplicity, he can not only come to know God’s mysteries but also become a partaker in them. Do you remember the story of the very simple monk who was granted the privilege of dining with Christ? Before becoming a monk, he was a shepherd, and the only thing that interested him was how to be saved. One day, a hermit was passing through those parts and said to him, “If you want to be saved, take the straight path.” The shepherd took his words literally. He set out on the road and walked straight ahead for three days until he came to the gates of a monastery. The abbot of the monastery, seeing the shepherd’s zeal for salvation, immediately tonsured him as a monk and assigned him to serve in the church. One day, while he was cleaning the church, the abbot walked by and gave him some instructions regarding his work. After listening to the instructions, the monk asked the abbot, pointing to the image of the crucified Lord: “Father, who is that up there? I’ve been here for so many days, and he hasn’t come down even once to eat or drink water.” The abbot was surprised by his simplicity and said, “I punished him because he wasn’t doing his job properly.” The monk listened without saying a word. That evening, he took his portion of food from the refectory and locked himself in the church. He approached the crucifix and said compassionately, “Come down, brother; let’s eat together.” Then Christ came down and ate with the simple monk. The Lord promised that He would take him into His Father’s house, where he would rejoice forever. Indeed, a few days later, this humble monk peacefully passed away to be with the Lord. You see, he was completely illiterate, yet look what he was granted for his great humility and purity!

For God’s grace to rest upon a person, there must be sincerity and purity within him. God reveals Himself to those who have sanctified their simplicity. When a person possesses simplicity and purity combined with warm faith and piety, he receives divine visitations and comes to know the mysteries of God, without any formal education. For then the Holy Trinity dwells within him. Through divine enlightenment, he easily uncovers the keys to divine meanings and explains the workings of the Holy Spirit very simply, naturally, and without intellectual confusion.

When we purify our deceitful heart, from which all evil springs,¹⁷⁸ we will become pure and humble vessels of Divine Grace, and then the Most Holy Trinity will dwell within us. I will pray for you, and you pray for me; may Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos help purify our hearts, so that we may behold God. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”¹⁷⁹ Amen.

Chapter 2. Faith and Hope in God

All evil today stems from unbelief

— Geronda, I’ve noticed that some people who don’t believe in God have a strong desire to see the world, a passion for travel and entertainment.

— When a person does not believe in another life, he strives to see the world, to enjoy this life to the fullest... but what is the end result? There is a constant emptiness within him. But if he comes to believe in God, comes to know God, then he himself will be known by God,¹⁸⁰ and he will experience a sense of fulfillment.

— If people thought about the fact that this life is fleeting, wouldn’t they change?

— It depends on the person. If, for example, the end of the world were to come—then an unbeliever would become even more defiant than usual, giving himself over to evil and sin. A believer, on the other hand, would restrain himself. “Why should I waste time on trivialities?” he would say. “I’d better take care of my soul, try to live spiritually, and do acts of charity.”

All evil today stems from unbelief. In the past, people believed, and even the most indifferent harbored faith in their hearts, though they were simple folk and didn’t even understand anything they heard in church. Some didn’t even know there were only four Gospels; they thought there were twelve. But what faith people had, what reverence! And what courage the nurses had! How many of them went to war as volunteers! They had faith and self-sacrifice—the way they helped people! And today? Someone told me how a patient was reciting the “Apostles’ Creed,” and when the nurse heard him, she started hitting him—she thought he was trying to jinx her! People don’t even know the Creed! What have we come to! You ask young people, “What do you believe in?”—“I don’t know, I haven’t decided yet,” they reply. “What faith do your mother and father profess?”—“I don’t know; I haven’t asked them.” He didn’t even bother to find out what his parents believe! If a person is so indifferent, how can he be helped?

— Geronda, but in countries where totalitarian regimes existed, the situation is even worse.

— Yes, but how many martyrs will emerge from among those who preserved their faith under a totalitarian regime! A Russian man, living abroad, finally visited Russia, and he told me: “An elderly woman who had known me for a long time came up to me and asked, ‘Do you go to Mount Athos wearing this coat?’—‘Yes, in this one,’ I replied. Tears welled up in her eyes; she took the coat and, poor thing, began kissing it to receive a blessing.” You see, faith—the more it is oppressed, the stronger it becomes. It’s like a spring: the harder it’s compressed, the more forcefully it springs back when released. There comes a time when it becomes too difficult for the oppressor to keep pressing down on the spring; he lets go, and the spring springs back.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Matt. 15:18–19; Mark 7:21–23.

¹⁷⁹ Matt. 5:8

¹⁸⁰ “The person who strives to remain constantly united with God knows God and is known by God,” says St. Anthony the Great. — *Compiler’s note*. Quoted from: *The Love of Goodness*. Vol. I. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1992. p. 92.

When faith wavers

- Geronda, why have so many believers lost their faith?
- If a person is careless about matters of faith and worship, he gradually begins to forget them and may become completely indifferent, to the point where he stops believing in anything at all.
- Some say that their faith wavers when they see good people suffering.
- Even if God were to burn all good people, a person should still not entertain “leftist” thoughts, but should believe that whatever God does, He does out of love. God knows what He is doing. If He has allowed evil to happen, it means that something good will come of it.
- Geronda, even believing children today waver because there are teachers in schools who teach unbelief.
- Why should they waver? Saint Catherine was nineteen years old, and with her knowledge of God and her wisdom, she silenced two hundred philosophers. Even Protestants consider her the patron saint of science.

When it comes to matters of faith and love for one’s homeland, there is no room for compromise; a person must be unyielding and steadfast.

— Geronda, I used to pray with faith, and God granted everything I asked for. Now I don’t have that kind of faith. What is the reason for this?

— It lies in your worldly logic. Worldly logic undermines faith. “If you have faith and do not doubt... whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive,”¹⁸¹ — said the Lord. This is the foundation. In the spiritual life, we are in the realm of miracles.

One plus two will not always equal three; it could be five thousand, or even one million! A good will and love are necessary. After all, if a person lacks a good will, he understands nothing. Even Christ’s crucifixion was described by the prophets in such detail—right down to what would happen to His garments,¹⁸² where the money received for the betrayal would go, that it would be used to buy the potter’s field for the burial of strangers,¹⁸³ —but the Jews still did not understand. “But Judas Iscariot, the lawless one, did not wish to understand.”¹⁸⁴

Distrust and Lack of Faith

— Geronda, why was Moses deprived of the opportunity to enter the Promised Land because of a minor lapse?¹⁸⁵

— It was not a minor lapse; it was distrust. God led the Israelites through the Red Sea,¹⁸⁶ brought water for them from a rock on Mount Sinai,¹⁸⁷ fed them with manna,¹⁸⁸ and performed so many miracles for them, yet when they faced a shortage of water again, they began to grumble. And Moses, when God told him to strike the rock so that water would flow, showed distrust. “Can water flow from this rock?” he said.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, God decreed this punishment for him: “As punishment,” He said, “you will only see the Promised Land from afar.”¹⁹⁰ If God had not miraculously brought water

¹⁸¹ Matthew 21:21–22

¹⁸² See Ps. 21:19

¹⁸³ See Matt. 27:7–9; Jer. 18:2; 39:9.

¹⁸⁴ Words from the 3rd antiphon of the service commemorating the holy and salvific Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ on Good Friday.

¹⁸⁵ See Num. 20:1–13; Deut. 32:48–52.

¹⁸⁶ See Ex. 14:1–31.

¹⁸⁷ See Ex. 15:22–25; 17:1–7.

¹⁸⁸ See Exodus 16:1–36.

¹⁸⁹ See Numbers 20:1–13.

¹⁹⁰ See Numbers 20:1–13.

out of the rock for the people on another occasion, Moses might have had some excuse, but now his unbelief could not be justified, and so God did not allow him to enter the Promised Land.

— Geronda, I believe that I can improve myself through my own efforts, and is that precisely why I am not making progress?

— What can you do on your own? As long as a person relies on themselves, they prevent God's mercy from pouring out upon them; they tread water, making no progress. If you had even a little faith, your life would change almost completely, and if you had even a little humility, you would find God's grace. It's all because you're lacking in faith and humility. God finds Himself bound hand and foot and cannot help you, since He respects your free will. Ask Christ for faith—"increase our faith" ⁽¹⁹¹⁾—and cultivate humility. For even if a person believes but is consumed by pride, that faith remains inactive.

Remember the centurion mentioned in the Gospel. He had no prideful thoughts, and what faith he had! "I am not worthy," he said to Christ, "that You should enter my house, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed." And he did not allow Him to come near his house. That is why Christ said, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁹²

One who believes in God fears nothing

— Geronda, we were told that a time would come when we would have everything, but we wouldn't be able to eat it all. Today, people doubt the quality of most foods.

— What can we do? The environment is polluted. But do not be afraid. Make the sign of the cross and do not be afraid. I know people who turn their lives into a torment because they're afraid of everything—and yet they're Christians, baptized, anointed with holy oil, receiving Communion, reading the Gospel, and knowing various passages from it by heart. Do they really not see the power of God's grace? "If you drink anything deadly, it will not harm you," ¹⁹³ — said Christ, and also: "I give you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and nothing will harm you." ¹⁹⁴

If God's grace dwells within a person, he fears nothing. Therefore, let us always ask for God's grace, making the sign of the cross. Do you remember the story mentioned in the Lavsaik? A monk went to draw water from a well and, upon seeing a viper there, ¹⁹⁵ fled in fear without drawing any water. "We're doomed, Abba," he said to his elder, "there's a snake in our well!" — "All right," the elder said to him, "but if there were snakes in all the wells, what would you do—die of thirst?" The elder went, made the sign of the cross over the well, drew some water, and drank it. "Where the cross is, Satan's malice can do nothing." ¹⁹⁶

— But I feel fear inside me.

— Your fear is a blessing from God, God's Providence, so that you may always turn to Him in prayer. This will help you cling to God. Look, if you don't scare a small child, it's impossible to calm him down. Strive with love, with hope in God, and then you will fear nothing. Do we not sing during Great Vespers: "We will not fear your fear, nor be troubled: for God is with us?" ¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ Luke 17:5

¹⁹² Matthew 8:10

¹⁹³ Compare Mark 16:18

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Luke 10:19

¹⁹⁵ Asp—a venomous snake. — *Compiler's note.*

¹⁹⁶ Quoted from: *Palladius, Bishop of Helenopolis. Lavsaik.* Kolomna, n.d. p. 6.

¹⁹⁷ The Book of Hours. Moscow, 2004. p. 182. See Isa. 8:12.

“I saw the Lord standing before me”¹⁹⁸

— Geronda, what kind of fear did the prophet Daniel feel when he saw the Angel?¹⁹⁹

— It was a kind of awe, a trembling, a holy fear. Daniel fell down to worship the Angel, but the Angel said to him, “Stand up, Daniel, and do not be afraid; God has heard your prayer.”²⁰⁰

The fear of God is great reverence, awe, a kind of spiritual uneasiness that arises from great love for God. Just as a person feels a certain uneasiness in the presence of a respected person, so too does a person who has the fear of God experience the same feeling wherever he may be, because he senses God’s presence everywhere. Is it not written: “Standing in awe before the cherubim?”²⁰¹ Such reverence and fear contain within them peace and joy; they do not cause a person pain. “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice before Him with trembling,”²⁰² — says the psalmist.

— Geronda, is a clear conscience connected to the fear of God?

— If a person has no fear of God, what kind of conscience can he have? Without the fear of God, a person can easily trample on his conscience, and then he ceases to be human.

— Geronda, when I feel gratitude toward a person, I can do anything they ask of me. But I don’t feel the same gratitude toward God for His blessings.

— You do have gratitude toward God, but there is no living response. You feel more gratitude toward a person because you sense their presence. It takes spiritual effort to begin to vividly sense God’s presence. If you sense God’s presence, you will also feel greater gratitude toward God. Now you say the “Our Father” and feel nothing. But if you truly had the sense that God is your Father, you could not remain unmoved by these words.

A person must constantly have a sense of God’s presence. When a person senses the presence of God, the presence of the angels, and the saints—this serves as a powerful restraining force, preventing them from straying off course. “Since I have seen the Lord before me... I will not waver,”²⁰³ — says David. If, when we do anything, we think that God sees us and is watching over us, then we can be confident in what we are doing.

— Geronda, how does an intellectual sense of God become a heartfelt one, so that we may come to know God?

— We must purify our hearts. If the heart is purified, God comes into our hearts, and we come to know Him. Therefore, everything is preceded by a labor of love and a loving approach; only then does the heartfelt sense of God come.

Hope in God and trust in God are the surest guarantee

— Geronda, I still approach everything from a human perspective rather than a spiritual one, and I feel anxious.

— You’re putting your own plans ahead of God’s plans, which is why you’re suffering. Trust in God and humility resolve all problems. Do what you can do yourself, and then surrender yourself to Divine Providence and God’s will. Hope in God is a strengthened, fortified faith; it is the most reliable guarantee for a person.

Is it not a matter of great importance for a person to have God as an ally? I remember, before leaving for the army, I prayed to Saint Barbara, asking for her help—I revered this saint because, since childhood, I had gone to pray at the Church of Saint Barbara. “Let me face danger in the war,

¹⁹⁸ Ps. 15:8

¹⁹⁹ See Dan. 10:8–12

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ From the Triodion, 6th tone. Irmologion. Vol. I. Moscow, 1997. p. 130.

²⁰² Ps. 2:11

²⁰³ Ps. 15:8

as long as I don't have to kill anyone," I pleaded. And how the Good Lord arranged everything! Those who were better educated than I was were sent to the front lines as ordinary privates, while I, with only a basic education, was assigned to the signal corps! People would say to me, "You have powerful patrons."—"What patrons do I have?" I replied. "I don't even have any acquaintances here."—"All right, enough joking. Tell us, who do you have in the General Staff?" Since they kept insisting, I replied, "I have Christ in the General Staff." And so it turned out that I never once picked up a weapon.

— Geronda, how does the endurance of the soul grow?

— Through hope and trust in God. They endow a person with great strength. One must trust God completely and view every trial as a gift sent by God's love. A person who has great trust in God rejoices in everything. Whether he is sick, or hungry, or unjustly wronged, or... or... he always believes that this is permitted by God, hopes in God, and always remains safe, dwelling in the harbor of hope in God.

One who has true faith possesses true love

— Geronda, you told us that faith comes first, and then love for God follows.

— You see, to love God, you must believe in Him. Our love for God is proportional to our faith. Although my mind tells me that for a loving person, love for God precedes faith. It seems rather petty to ask God first to reveal Himself to you so that you can believe in Him, and only then to love Him. I love God with all my heart, and then God acts. And the more I see God's blessings, the more my faith and love for God grow. I love all people, too, since they are made in God's image, and all animals and birds, and all of creation, because it was created by God.

— Geronda, can a person have love without having true faith?

— A person may think they have love, but in reality, they do not. In Orthodox dogma, a person finds true love. Once, two Catholics came to my cell; one was a journalist, the other a secretary at the Vatican. "Let's first recite the 'Our Father,'" they said. "To recite the 'Our Father,'" I said, "we must agree on dogma, but there is a great chasm between us and you." "So then," said one, "will only the Orthodox be saved? God is with all people." "That's right," I replied, "but can you tell me how many people are with God?" "Let's show love," they said afterward. "And sin has become fashionable," I said. "And that, too, is part of love," they say. — "Everyone talks about love, peace, and harmony," I told them at the end of the conversation, "and everyone lives in discord with themselves and with others—that's why they're making ever-larger bombs."

Many who speak of peace and unity do not themselves abide in unity with God, because they do not love Him and do not possess true love. True love belongs to those who have the true faith and live close to God. Then God is reflected in their face, and others see God in their face.

I pray that God will enlighten all people with whom we are brothers by flesh—from Adam and Eve—so that they may come "to the knowledge of the truth,"²⁰⁴ and thus become our brothers in the Spirit as well. Amen.

Chapter 3. Salvation Through Patience

²⁰⁴ 1 Tim. 2:4

“Blessed is the man who endures temptation”²⁰⁵

— Geronda, how does one endure temptation or a great trial?

— By enduring. Patience is the most powerful remedy that heals severe and long-standing afflictions. Most afflictions pass only through patience. Great patience untangles the most complicated situations and bears divine fruit: where you see no solution, God provides the best solution.

Know that God loves it when a person, while enduring trials, bears them without complaint, glorifying His holy name.

“Blessed is the man who endures temptation,” says the Holy Apostle James. Therefore, let us pray that the Good God will grant us patience, so that we may endure everything without complaint, giving Him glory.

Our life in this world is a constant struggle, and each of us is engaged in our own struggle. Imagine what Christ had to endure during His earthly life! What He had to suffer at the hands of the Jews, and yet He said nothing! And what patience the Apostle Paul showed! Although he had a revelation from God that he was to be in Rome,²⁰⁶ he remained in prison for two years because the governor delayed the trial.²⁰⁷ And what did Saint John the Theologian have to endure! For a slight complaint, he had to survive a shipwreck...²⁰⁸ You see, God allows the saints to endure trials for the slightest reason, so that we may have an example to follow—to accept trials patiently, in prayer, and with joy.

To be patient with another person, you must love them

— How does one acquire patience, Geronda?

— The foundation of patience is love. “Love... bears all things,”²⁰⁹ — says the apostle. To be patient with another person, you must love them and empathize with them. If you do not empathize with another person, they will wear you down.

— Geronda, may I tell you about a difficulty I’m facing, or would it be better to keep quiet?

— If you choose not to speak about your difficulty out of love—so as not to put another person in a difficult position—you will preserve peace in your soul. This difficulty will bring God’s blessing. It is better for it to be difficult for you than for someone else because of you. Once, late at night, I was returning to my cell from a procession at the Kutlumush Monastery. I was tired and not feeling well—at the time, I had problems with my lower back. An eighty-five-year-old elder was waiting for me at the gate of my cell; he wanted to stay the night with me. He had left his suitcase downstairs because he couldn’t carry it up himself. I explained to him that I had nowhere to put him up for the night, hoisted his suitcase onto my shoulders, and took him to a hotel—a half-hour walk uphill—and even gave him five hundred drachmas for expenses. I had to put up with a little inconvenience, but afterward I felt at peace because the other person was comfortable.

— When a sister with whom I work on my assignment behaves unkindly, I feel sorry for her and put up with her. Am I acting out of love in this case?

²⁰⁵ James 1:12

²⁰⁶ See Acts 23:11

²⁰⁷ See Acts 24:27. The Apostle Paul spent two years in chains in Caesarea because the Roman governor Felix kept postponing the trial in the hope of receiving a bribe. Later, Festus, Felix’s successor, sent Paul to stand trial in Rome, since the apostle, guided by a revelation from God, asserted his rights as a Roman citizen and demanded to be tried in Rome. — *Compiler’s note.*

²⁰⁸ When St. John the Theologian was chosen by lot to preach the Gospel in Asia Minor, he succumbed to timidity and grumbled, since the inhabitants of that region were steeped in the darkness of pagan delusion. Because of his grumbling, God allowed him to fall into temptation. On the way to Asia Minor, the ship on which the apostle was sailing was shipwrecked, but John himself was saved after a forty-day struggle against the waves. — *Compiler’s note.*

²⁰⁹ 1 Cor. 13:4–7

— How do you know that you yourself aren't the reason for her unfriendliness? Maybe she's putting up with you? If you think your spiritual state is better than hers and you're putting up with her, then you need to have compassion on yourself. When a person has true love and patience, they excuse the other person and blame only themselves. "My God," he says, "it is my fault; do not take me into account, cast me aside, and help the other person." This is the right attitude, which embodies great humility, and in this case, a person generously receives God's grace. I will pray that you may become a spiritual skinn,²¹⁰ like those bronze lions that hold candlesticks on their shoulders in the church; they do not protest, do not hear, and do not speak, but simply bear the weight on their shoulders. Amen.

Christ founded human salvation on patience

Through a little patience shown in a difficult moment, a person can attain Divine Grace. Christ gave us no other path to salvation except patience. He founded human salvation on patience. "But he who endures to the end will be saved."²¹¹ He did not say, "He who endures until... summer!" It is easy to endure until summer. But until the end?.. Let us be careful not to lose our patience, lest we lose our souls in the end.

"By your patience you will save your souls,"²¹² — as it is written in the Gospel.

I've heard about the patience shown by one woman. In addition to her heavenly reward, God rewarded her a hundredfold for it in this life as well.²¹³ Her husband was a doctor; they had three children. As a doctor, her husband was very good, but as a person, he was not, since, unfortunately, he was consumed by carnal passions. He would take young women into his home, ostensibly to work as nurses. One of these "nurses" drove a wedge between the couple and succeeded in driving the lawful wife and her three children out onto the street, while she herself began living with the doctor in his home. The mother and her three children were forced to return to her parents' home and work to support herself and her children. She prayed a lot and endured everything with patience. The mistress bore the doctor three more children. But what happened then? As soon as the third child was born, the doctor became infatuated with a sixteen-year-old girl, whom he had also hired, and kicked his former common-law wife and her three children out of the house. You see, this is the workings of spiritual laws: in this way, she paid for her transgression and experienced the same pain that the lawful wife had to endure because of her. Soon the doctor fell ill and was confined to bed at home. The young woman stayed with him as long as he had money, but she led a disorderly life. She would invite friends over to the house, making the excuse that she couldn't go out herself because she had to care for the sick man. The doctor was very jealous of her and suffered seeing her wayward lifestyle. Eventually, when the money ran out, she left him. His legal wife, upon learning of her husband's dire situation, came to his aid. She cleaned the house, fed him, and supported him with her own money and that of their children, who by then had grown up and were working themselves. His former common-law wife, whom the doctor had also cast out long ago, not only refused to help him but didn't even want to hear about him. Only his legally wedded wife stood by him in his time of need. Eventually, the doctor decided to go to confession and spent the rest of his life in repentance. The Good Lord, seeing the devotion of this kind woman and wife—how she had endured for so many years, lived a pure life, worked diligently, and supported a husband who had treated her so cruelly and despicably—rewarded her. What happened? A wealthy relative of her husband died in America, and they inherited a large fortune from him. The entire fortune went to the kind wife and mother. She was able to provide a good life for her children, help many poor people, and live out the

²¹⁰ Lion (Glorified). — *Translator's note*

²¹¹ Matt. 10:22; Mark 13:13

²¹² Luke 21:19

²¹³ See Matt. 19:29; Mark 10:30

rest of her days in comfort. Even though she lived in poverty, she was still a rich person, because she possessed spiritual wealth—and that is what matters most.

In winter, we endure in the hope that spring will come

— Geronda, I see that I am not making spiritual progress, and this upsets me.

— Once upon a time, a man planted a grapevine. The vine hadn't even had time to take root properly, yet the man was already waiting for the fruit so he could press wine, drink it, and rejoice. It's the same with you. You planted a single vine and want to drink wine right away. It doesn't work that way. You can't plant grapes today and drink wine tomorrow. In a year, perhaps you'll be able to taste two or three bunches. In two years, you'll gather a basket of grapes, and in five years, you'll be drinking wine. Strive and wait patiently if you want to enjoy spiritual fruits.

— I'm not used to waiting, so I lose my patience very easily.

— You need patience and sound judgment. Often a person waits an hour or two for a meal to be prepared, but then can't wait two minutes for it to cool down, starts eating, and burns their mouth... When I return to Mount Athos, I'll send you an icon of Saint Patience. I was sent three icons—two depicting the Venerables and one of Saint Patience: I gave the ones of the Venerables away as blessings, but kept the one of Saint Patience...

— Geronda, didn't you bring me any "medicinal herbs"²¹⁴ from Mount Athos?

— At this time of year, there are no "medicinal herbs" in the domain of the Mother of God... Spring must come. And for spring to come, you need to be patient for a little while, until winter passes.

Therefore, the best and most effective "medicinal plant" for you right now is patience.

— Geronda, I feel that my heart is in a state of spiritual winter.

— If you want the weather to change, to become clear and sunny, so that you may blossom and bear fruit—the fruit of virtue—then you must rejoice in both the frost and the sunny days, because both are for your good. We patiently wait out the spiritual winter, and patience is born of the hope of a spiritual spring. Then, in the summer, we come to appreciate the blessings of winter, which filled the ponds with water and destroyed all germs with the frost.

The gracious God has arranged everything wisely for our salvation and Himself helps us as a loving Father. All that is required of us is a little patience.

Chapter 4. Spiritual Joy

The Mother of God Brought Joy to the World

— Geronda, could you sing for us the hymn you composed in honor of the Mother of God?²¹⁵

— Let's sing it together. "You have found great favor with God, Mother of the Lord, Full of Grace, truly Full of Grace, as Gabriel proclaimed, Queen of the Angels, protect Your servants." And now listen to this dogma: "The Mother of God—Daughter and Mother, Handmaid and Queen, Queen of the whole world." Can the human mind even comprehend this? The Annunciation is something

²¹⁴ By "medicinal plant," the sister refers to a word of spiritual guidance, alluding to Elder Paisios's letter "Spiritual Medicinal Herbs," which he sent to the monastery on January 13, 1971. (See Gerontos Paisios of Mount Athos. *Letters*. Souroti, Thessaloniki, 2005. pp. 151–162). — *Compiler's note*.

²¹⁵ Elder Paisios wrote this hymn of praise and sent it to the monastery on the name day of a sister named Panagia, so that she might sing it in her cell. — *Compiler's note*.

supernatural, beyond reason. May the Mother of God grant you the joy of the Annunciation, and may the Angel bless you, that you may prosper spiritually. Amen.

— Geronda, one troparion says: “Rejoice, O Joy of Eve, for through Your Nativity her sorrow has ceased, O Pure One.”²¹⁶

— No matter what good things a person might say about the Mother of God, they cannot express Her greatness. Through Her obedience, the Mother of God reopened Paradise for us, which had been closed by Eve’s disobedience. Eve severed the link that connected us to God and brought sorrow and pain into the world.²¹⁷ The Mother of God reconnected that link and brought the joy of paradise into the world. She united us with God, for Christ is both God and man.

The Archangel Gabriel brought the joyful news to the world that, thanks to the Mother of God, people had found “favor with God.” The Most Holy One rejoices because the Word of God became flesh and freed us from sin. We, too, rejoice because She has delivered us from the stain of shame. That is why we sing at Christmas: “The desert offers Christ a manger, and we, the people, offer His Mother, the Mother of God.”²¹⁸

Where Christ is, there is true joy

— Geronda, sometimes I can’t seem to find joy, and then I think that maybe joy isn’t for me.

— What are you saying? Joy isn’t for you? Then who is it for? For a tangalashka? What are you talking about? Joy is for people! God did not bring sorrow; He brought only joy.

— But why, Geronda, don’t I always feel joy in my heart?

— If your mind isn’t on God, how can you feel God’s joy? You forget Christ; your mind is constantly occupied with work and worldly concerns, and that’s why your spiritual engine grinds to a halt. Turn on prayer and quiet hymns, and you’ll soar forward, circling around Christ like a star.

Only in Christ does a person find genuine, true joy, because only Christ gives joy and spiritual comfort. Where Christ is, there is true joy and heavenly exultation. Those who are far from Christ have no true joy. They may indulge in daydreams: “I’ll do this and that, I’ll go here, I’ll go there”; they may be honored; they may indulge in entertainment and thereby experience joy, but this joy will not satisfy their soul. This joy is material, worldly, and worldly joy does not satisfy the soul; a person is left with emptiness in their heart. Do you know what Solomon says? “I built houses, planted vineyards, laid out gardens, gathered gold, acquired everything my heart desired, but in the end I realized that all this is vanity.”²¹⁹

Worldly joy offers something temporary, something that is pleasant only in the moment; it does not provide what spiritual joy provides. Spiritual joy is a heavenly life. Those who have gone through the Cross and been spiritually resurrected live in Paschal joy. “Pascha, the Lord’s Pascha!”²²⁰ And then comes Pentecost! And when a person reaches Pentecost and the tongues of fire—the Holy Spirit—descend upon him, then everything comes to an end...²²¹

Spiritual joy comes as a result of spiritual labor

— Geronda, tell us about heavenly joy.

²¹⁶ Cited from: Lenten Triodion. Vol. I. Moscow, 2002. Folio 196.

²¹⁷ See Gen. 3:16

²¹⁸ See the fourth self-vowel on the eve of the Nativity of Christ. Menaion. December. Moscow, 1997. p. 493.

²¹⁹ See Ecclesiastes 2:4–11

²²⁰ From the irmos of the first ode of the Resurrection canon. — *Compiler’s note.*

²²¹ These words of Elder Paisios express the ultimate goal of every believer’s spiritual struggle, which consists in attaining the Holy Spirit. When a person becomes a partaker of the deifying grace of the Holy Spirit, then he attains the state of deification, which is “infinite perfection.” — *Compiler’s note.*

— There is heavenly joy and heavenly delight even in this life, and a person wonders if there is anything in the next life greater than what he experiences here. This joy cannot be expressed in words; it can only be experienced.

— How can one attain such a state?

— To reach a state where you cannot contain the joy that overwhelms you and cannot express it in words, you need to pay attention to two things: live simply, do not look to others, and pray. If you do this, the time will come when you'll feel such joy that you'll say to me, "Geronda, I've gone mad! Maybe I'm not in my right mind? What is it that I'm feeling?" You'll have such overwhelming joy!

— Geronda, in order for a person to experience spiritual joy, must they be in a good frame of mind?

— When do you think a person experiences spiritual joy? When there's chaos inside them? Inner joy comes after order has been established within. It gives the soul wings. Until the soul is warmed by inner work, it's like a car with a cold engine—you have to push it to get it moving. Inner work—sobriety, mindfulness, instruction, and prayer—warms the soul; the engine starts, and the car races forward. Then a person stops paying attention to the external world and moves forward in their spiritual life in giant strides.

— And then does the unfavorable environment no longer affect a person?

— No, it doesn't, because he lives in another world, outside of this environment. And since he lives in another world, this world does not cause him any distress. The people around him seem to be speaking a different language that he does not know, so he does not understand what they are saying. And it is good that he does not understand, because if he understood anything—even a little—his attention would be distracted by those words. But now he is completely absorbed in the language he knows. This is how inner exaltation begins. Do you know what inner exaltation is? Which angelic order has wings? The Cherubim or the Seraphim? "Six wings,"²²² —which order do the ones the prophet Isaiah speaks of belong to?

— Seraphim, Geronda.

— Do you know what the Seraphim do? They flap their wings in unison... The heart beats exactly the same way when there is inner exaltation. Then life is jubilation. But you are still attached to yourselves; you have not freed yourselves from your "I," so your heart is not free and cannot reach a state where it trembles with joy. Taste this joy first, and then come back—we'll talk!

Divine joy comes when you surrender yourself

— Geronda, does every person who lives according to God experience spiritual joy?

— Of course! For a person to have true, spiritual joy, they must love, and to love, they must believe. People don't believe, which is why they don't love, don't sacrifice themselves, and don't have joy. If they believed, they would love, they would sacrifice themselves for others, and then they would have joy. The greatest joy comes from self-sacrifice.

— Does a person find joy when they love?

— Of course! When they love, they find joy. And when love multiplies, then a person no longer seeks joy for themselves, but wants others to find joy.

— Does that mean joy stems from something, while love exists on its own?

— Yes, that's right. Love exists on its own, while joy stems from love. When you give love, joy follows. A person gives love and receives joy; they are rewarded for their love with the joy they experience. For example, if a person is given something, they take that thing and find joy in that

²²² Isa. 6:2

single thing. Another person gives everything and finds joy not in one thing, but in everything. The joy a person experiences when receiving is human joy. But the joy they experience when giving is holy, divine. Divine joy comes when you give of yourself!

Spiritual joy is a gift from God

— Geronda, how does a person receive the assurance of their reconciliation with God?

— The inner joy, the divine consolation that a person feels, is the sign that they are reconciled with God.

— But is it possible for a person to feel reconciled with God without experiencing joy and divine consolation?

— No, they cannot; they will feel something anyway. Perhaps they once experienced strong consolation, but then the consolation grew weaker, and that is why it seems to them that they do not feel divine consolation.

— Geronda, why is it that sometimes you're in a good spiritual state and feel joy, and then suddenly lose that joy?

— God sends you spiritual joy, and you rejoice. Then He takes it away, and you begin to seek it, exerting greater effort and making greater spiritual progress.

— Geronda, why do I feel such joy? Maybe I'm not aware of my sinfulness?

— No, not at all! It's God cheering you up with a piece of candy. Now it's candy, and later it will be wine, like the kind they drink in paradise. Do you know how sweet the wine is there? Yes! If God sees even the slightest bit of love, even a tiny bit of good will, He generously bestows His grace and intoxicates you with His wine already in this life. The spiritual transformation that a person undergoes, and the joy in the heart that one feels when Divine Grace visits them, cannot be given to a person by any... cardiologist, not even the greatest one. When you feel this joy, try to hold onto it for as long as possible.

— Should we ask God to grant us spiritual joy?

— It is petty to ask for spiritual joy; it comes on its own when the conditions are right. If you want to be constantly joyful, then there is self-love in that desire. Christ came into the world to take up the Cross out of love. He was first crucified, and then He rose again.

God's children do not labor for heavenly reward or for spiritual joy in this life. After all, the Father does not pay His children for their labor, because His entire estate belongs to them. It is another matter entirely with the divine gifts that God, as a Good Father, bestows in this life and in the life to come.

Spiritual pain is spiritual joy

— Geronda, how can a person maintain joy within themselves?

— If they approach everything spiritually. Then even illnesses and trials will not rob them of their joy.

— Doesn't a person, in order to approach trials spiritually, first have to rid himself of passions?

— Even if a person has not rid himself of his passions, he can still feel joy when trials and sorrows befall him. If he thinks of these sorrows as a remedy for his passions, then he will accept them with joy, just as a sick person joyfully takes bitter medicine in the hope that it will cure him of his illness.

— But how can joy and pain be reconciled?

— Something amazing happens in the spiritual life: when a person endures something for the sake of Christ's love—even suffering—his heart is filled with divine joy. The same is true when he

participates in the Lord's Passion. The more deeply he is imbued with the thought that Christ was crucified for our sins, and the more he suffers, the more richly he is rewarded with divine joy. Pain is joy, pain is joy. And the more they suffer, the greater the joy they experience. They feel as if Christ is gently stroking their head and saying, "Do not worry about Me."

One sister said: "I don't need joy; I want to grieve for Christ's sake. Christ was crucified for me—how can I rejoice? Why does Christ give me joy?" She was experiencing spiritual states, and the more she participated in the Passion of Christ and felt loving sorrow, the more joy Christ gave her. Christ deprived her of her reason—in a good way!

The crucifixion always precedes the resurrection and brings victory. The Cross brings glory. Christ, after ascending with the Cross to Golgotha and after being crucified, ascended to the Father. The crucified Christ sweetens people's bitterness, and the crucified person imitates Jesus, the God-man.

The blessed Jesus, along with the sins of the whole world, took upon Himself all its bitterness, while leaving us the joy and exultation felt by those who have cast off their old self and in whom Christ now lives. Such a person experiences a portion of heavenly joy here on earth, according to the words of the Gospel: "The Kingdom of God is within you."²²³

I thank God that He has granted me the privilege of knowing many such people, and I ask Him to help me so that I may cease to grieve Him, even if I myself do not attain such a state.

I wish for you to always have spiritual joy in this life, and in the next, eternal life—to rejoice constantly in the presence of Christ.

Chapter 5. **Discernment—the Crown of Virtues**

Our spiritual state is reflected in our discernment

— Geronda, why do the Holy Fathers say that the virtue of discernment is the "greatest of all virtues"?²²⁴

— Discernment is not merely a virtue; it is the crown, the pinnacle of virtues.

Whatever our spiritual state is, whatever the quality of our virtues is, such is our discernment. If our virtues are made of paper, then the crown of virtues—that is, discernment—will also be made of paper. If our virtues are bronze, then the crown will be bronze as well. If they are gold, then the crown will be gold. If there are diamonds in our virtues, then there will be diamonds on the crown of virtues—discernment.

— Geronda, what is discernment?

— Discernment is spiritual vision. And spiritual vision is possessed by one who has a purified mind; such a person has clarity of spirit and enlightenment from God.

— St. John Climacus says: "With our two eyes we see the physical, but with discernment we see the spiritual."²²⁵

— That is exactly right. You see, if our eyes are healthy, we see well, but if they are afflicted by disease, we see poorly. The sharpness of our vision depends on the health of our eyes. The same

²²³ Luke 17:21

²²⁴ By John of Damascus, one of the Holy Fathers. A Soul-Benefiting and Marvelous Discourse. Philokalia of the Holy Neptic Fathers. Volume II. Athens, 1975. p. 237.

²²⁵ John of Sinai. The Ladder. Athens, 1970. p. 145.

thing happens in the spiritual life. Our spiritual vision—discernment—depends on how spiritually healthy we are.

— Geronda, how are the spiritual eyes opened?

— Did not Christ open the eyes of the blind with dust?²²⁶ But in order for the eyes of our soul to be opened, we must cast off the dust, the filth, and the defilement of sin. Is it not written: “Did He not shake the slime from the eyes of the wise?”²²⁷ If we do not renounce our “self” and free ourselves from our old nature, but self-love, selfishness, and the desire to please others continue to dwell within us, then we will not have clear spiritual vision.

The more a person progresses in the spiritual life, the more widely the eyes of his soul are opened. The mind is purified; a person begins to better recognize his own shortcomings and see God’s many blessings; he humbles himself, is inwardly contrite—and God’s grace and divine enlightenment come naturally, and he gains discernment. Then, in every situation, they clearly see what God’s will is and do not stumble on their spiritual path. For discernment is the steering wheel that guides them safely, preventing them from veering from the straight path—neither to the right nor to the left.

— Geronda, when a person begins to do something good out of a good intention, but then goes to extremes and ends up doing evil, does that mean he lacks discernment?

— The beginning may be good, but if a person is inattentive, selfishness creeps into the matter and he strays from the right course. When our “self,” our ego, is mixed in with what we do, then passions arise, and the devil reaps the rewards. Therefore, strive to live with inner attentiveness and humility, working quietly so that you may receive divine enlightenment. One who lives an inner life humbly overcomes human pettiness, fanaticism, and so on, becoming a zealot—in the best sense of the word.

— Geronda, I find it difficult to discern what is right in each specific case.

— You need purification so that clarity of spiritual perception may arise. Read **Lavsai**, **Limonari**, **Memorable Tales**, and Abba Varsonofius; apply what you read to yourself to develop spiritual intuition. Then you will be able to distinguish between gold and copper, and you will become a true jeweler in spiritual matters.

Every virtue requires discernment

— Geronda, Abba Isaac writes: “God attributes virtue²²⁸ to sound judgment.”

— That is true. Every deed of ours, in order for it to be pleasing to God, and every virtue, in order for it to truly be a virtue, requires discernment. Discernment is the salt of the virtues. That is why Christ says in the Gospel: “Every sacrifice is seasoned with salt.”²²⁹ For example, how much discernment is required when it comes to asceticism! A person must take into account his own strength, his spiritual state, and so on. If he goes too far, he will find himself unable to do anything at all, and this will be to the detriment of his entire spiritual life. That is why the Fathers say: “Whatever is beyond measure comes from the devil.”²³⁰ For Paisios the Great, for example, who could go twenty days without food, it would not have been an extreme to observe three-day fasts regularly. But for a person whose legs tremble from weakness and who can barely endure a three-

²²⁶ See John 9:6

²²⁷ From the irmos of the first ode of the iambic canon of Pentecost. — *Compiler’s note*.

²²⁸ Quoted from: *The Ascetic Sayings of Abba Isaac the Syrian*. Moscow, 1993. p. 423. In the Russian translation, the word “truth” is used instead of “virtue.” — *Translator’s note*.

²²⁹ Mark 9:49

²³⁰ See: *Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 152.

day fast once a year,²³¹ to impose such fasts on oneself constantly would be an extreme, and extremes, as we have said, come from the devil.

— Geronda, I understand that discernment is necessary in asceticism, but I find it hard to understand why it is necessary in other virtues. Could you give us an example?

— Let's take you, for example. You have a mother's heart, and... Shall I go on?

— Go on, Geronda.

— But your manners... are those of a wicked stepmother. You have so much self-sacrifice, so much self-denial, so much kindness, but no discernment. You don't pay attention to who is speaking to you or what they want; you don't think about how you should behave toward them, but instead you start spinning around them like a top. But a person who doesn't see your heart, but only your outward behavior, gets upset.

— What should I do, Geronda?

— Ask God for enlightenment, so that you may approach everything with discernment. Arm yourself with patience and prayer, and you will gradually gain discernment.

And discernment is needed in love as well

— Abba Pimen says: "Find out what your brother wants and set him at ease."²³² What exactly does he mean by that?

— He means that you need to discern the need of your brother, your neighbor, and comfort him accordingly—in a good way. Because even love requires discernment. If, for example, a person is a glutton, you shouldn't feed him delicious meals all the time, because that will harm him. Delicious food should be prepared for someone who suffers from a lack of appetite. If a person has diabetes and you give him sweets, is that really love?

— Geronda, how can a person love everyone equally and yet love with discernment?

— He loves everyone equally, but he expresses his love in different ways. He loves one person from a distance because that person needs to be kept at a distance, and another up close: whatever is best for each person. With some, he doesn't need to speak at all; with others, he needs to say a few words; and with a third, he needs to talk at greater length.

— Is it possible to hurt someone while showing love?

— If a person has a loving nature and you show them great love, they will change for the better and try in every way to repay you. But an insolent person, if you show him great love, becomes even more insolent, because great love makes the loving even more loving, and the insolent even more insolent. So, when you see that your love is not doing any good, you reduce it judiciously, but you do this out of love as well.

— Geronda, could it happen that I make a sacrifice out of pure motives and ultimately end up feeling resentful?

— Yes, that's why self-sacrifice must be done with discernment. Be careful not to go beyond your limits, because physical strength also has its limits. When you go beyond your physical limits, if someone tells you, "You haven't done anything since this morning," you might think, "What an ungrateful person! I've been working nonstop since this morning, and he says I haven't done anything!" And so all your hard work will be for nothing.

— If I feel indignant inside for just a moment, and then immediately realize that it happened because I wasn't acting out of pure motives, do I lose everything in that case as well?

²³¹ Three-Day Fast: the first three days of Great Lent, during which Orthodox Christians abstain from food and water. — *Compiler's note.*

²³² The Gerontikon. Athens, 1981. p. 93.

— In that case, the little rascal pushes you, and you respond with a slap. So the little rascal gets his slap and runs away.

There are no limits or rules in reasoning

— Geronda, is there some kind of specific limit to reasoning?

— No, there is no set measure, no limits, and no rules in discernment. There is “yes,” there is “no,” there is “much,” and there is “little.” A sister who possesses discernment does not need to be told what to do or what to say. She always acts correctly because she always reasons spiritually. She is enlightened by divine illumination and possesses spiritual intuition.

— Geronda, you once told me that I’m narrow-minded. What did you mean by that?

— You look at things narrowly: you’re concerned only with order and aren’t interested in the person herself. During the service, for example, you say, “Such-and-such a sister should stand there and sing such-and-such.” You don’t consider whether she has the strength to stand or whether she can sing it. First, you need to consider where and how to apply this “must” in practice, and only then demand that it be carried out. You lack discernment; that is why you approach everything in a dry, formal manner.

For a person to apply church canons correctly and for the benefit of others, they must be spiritual and possess spiritual discernment. Otherwise, they remain bound by the letter of the law, and the letter of the law “kills.”²³³ Someone tells you, “It’s written this way in **Kormchaya**²³⁴,” and applies it literally just as they see it in the book, when they should be analyzing each case separately. As I have seen in practice, a single case can conceal thousands of other cases. Penance, for example, must be tailored to the person, their condition, the offense they have committed, the repentance they have shown, and take into account many, many other factors. There is no single formula here, no single rule that applies to all situations in life.

In all cases, the most important thing is discernment—divine enlightenment. That is why I always pray that God will send enlightenment to people. “My Christ,” I say, “we have lost our home and the path leading to it. Enlighten us so that we may find our home, our Father. Grant us divine guidance.”

Good Anxiety

“If we do not forget that our purpose on earth is to attain the Kingdom of God, then a good restlessness will take hold of us. Sooner or later, this restlessness will bring our soul into the spiritual realm, where it will find oxygen in abundance, come alive, and soar high.”

Good Restlessness—a wholesome concern for “good deeds”²³⁵

— Geronda, what is a good restlessness?

— A good restlessness is a good concern for a “good spiritual endeavor.” A person strives, watches over himself, discovers what hinders his spiritual progress, reflects, asks for help if

²³³ 2 Cor. 3:6

²³⁴ The Rudder (in Greek, Πηδάλιον—*Translator’s note*)—a collection of canons of the Orthodox Church, which compiles the sacred canons of the Ecumenical Councils, the canons of the Holy Apostles, as well as the canons of the Holy Fathers of the Church, and provides a brief interpretation of them. This collection was compiled in 1793 by St. Nicodemus of Mount Athos and the monk Agapios. — *Compiler’s note*.

²³⁵ See 1 Tim. 6:12

necessary, and takes up spiritual labor. For example, if they see that in a certain situation they behaved with pride, they immediately think: “How is pride overcome? With humility. So, humility is needed.” Chop-chop—they chop away at pride with an axe. In short, a person seeks spiritual progress and engages in spiritual work. Consider a student who finishes first grade in elementary school, then moves on to second grade, graduates from elementary school, advances to middle school, goes on to high school, and so on. If he’s struggling academically, he’ll seek help or take extra lessons if he wants to get into college. Then he studies hard to earn his degree. After that, they may enroll in a master’s program, then in a doctoral program; if they wish to continue their studies, they may go abroad. And they do all this in order to succeed in scholarship. All the more so in the spiritual life—which is a spiritual science—a person must be concerned about their spiritual progress!

A wholesome concern is a surge of enthusiasm and aspiration. It imbues the soul with courage and vigor; it brings not fear or sorrow, but consolation. It is not tension or anxiety, but a zeal for heroic deeds. You sometimes exhibit a certain stagnation. You say, “I am striving like this, I am in this state”—and you remain where you were. But how would a saint behave in such a case? You lack that impulse, that aspiration. There is no inner change within you, because the lever of good restlessness has not yet been set in motion within you to move you forward.

Let us take the question of the salvation of our soul to heart

— In the Life of Elder Haji-George, you write: “An interest in the salvation of the soul humbles the body and puts the passions to death.”²³⁶ I don’t have that interest...

— The main thing is that your mind and heart aren’t occupied with this. The mind and heart must be constantly focused on how to reach the ultimate goal, which is the Kingdom of Heaven. When the heart aches for the salvation of the soul, the mind follows where the heart’s pain leads. It’s all about the pain. When you’re in pain, you don’t want to eat or sleep. Those who have a righteous concern take everything to heart. It seems you haven’t yet set Heaven as your goal; your goal is the earth. You haven’t yet taken the question of your soul’s salvation to heart. But if you don’t take this question to heart, what can you hope for?

We cannot be indifferent to the salvation of our own souls. We must constantly think about how to be saved. If we do not think about this, we will remain attached to earthly things and will constantly be in a state of stagnation. If we do not forget that our goal on earth is to seek the Kingdom of God, then a wholesome restlessness will take hold within us. Sooner or later, this restlessness will carry our soul into the spiritual realm, where it will find an abundance of oxygen, come alive, and soar high.

God endowed man with a mind not so that he might constantly think about how to find the fastest way to travel from one point of light to another, but so that he might, above all, think about what matters most: how to achieve the ultimate goal—to come to God, to reach the true land, paradise.

“Give wine to the wise, and he will become wiser still.”²³⁷

— What might serve as an impetus for an indifferent person to begin living a spiritual life?

— Many things can serve as an impetus, if he himself wants to move forward. But if he doesn’t want to, he’ll simply end up covered in wounds, like an ox that you prod with a goad to make it walk faster, but it won’t move; it gets covered in wounds from the goad, but to no avail.

²³⁶ Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. Elder Hatzis-Georgis the Athonite. Souroti, Thessaloniki, 1986. p. 34.

²³⁷ Prov. 9:9

— Geronda, if a person has a good will and you give him a nudge, won't God help him achieve something?

— Yes, God will help, but he must run from that nudge. Otherwise, even the one who nudges gets tired. When a person keeps treading water because he doesn't want to improve, it's very exhausting for the one trying to help him.

If a person does not feel a healthy sense of urgency that would enable him to begin moving forward and doing spiritual work, he will not make spiritual progress; he will be like a square wheel that needs to be pushed every so often. You push—it lurches, then stops. You push again—it kicks back, and it stops. Is it possible to travel like that? If there's a long road ahead, can you really cover it with just a few pushes? And the spiritual path is long: not a hundred or two hundred meters.

— Geronda, how does a wholesome restlessness arise?

— Let's say I'm reading a book that nourishes the soul and I pause at a passage that makes an impression on me—as if I've found a precious stone and want to see what kind of stone it is, so I examine it. I apply it to myself, then ask whether I've understood it correctly, and strive to put it into practice in my life. Then I ask myself whether I am putting it into practice correctly. In this way, little by little, I learn to walk the right path in the spiritual life. No one had ever told me about Abba Isaac, but one day a grocer wrapped a herring for me in a page from the magazine **Svyatogorskaya Biblioteka**. As I unwrapped it, my eyes fell on some text printed on the paper. It was from St. Isaac. I took the paper, dried it in the sun, read it, and was struck by it. I spent a year with that passage: I read and reread it, and came to love St. Isaac so much. Then I wondered, is there a book by him? I searched for it, yet I was afraid to find it and hold it in my hands. And you read so much—does nothing you read make an impression on you? Write down what particularly sticks in your mind. If you write it down and constantly think about it, you won't be able to forget it easily, and you'll begin to put it into practice.

To some, you say just two or three words, and their eyes immediately begin to shine. They write down what they hear on a scrap of paper, put it into practice, and move forward. Did not Solomon say, "Give wine to the wise, and the wisest will become wiser"?²³⁸ But others, even though they've heard so much and received so much, do nothing because they haven't been moved by a healthy restlessness. They come and simply describe their condition to me, without any healthy restlessness about spiritual progress. It's a very superficial attitude. I don't understand! Is everything really clear to them in their spiritual life? Do they have absolutely no questions?

As soon as a good restlessness arises in a person, they begin to pay attention to what they lack, ask how it can be acquired, and derive spiritual benefit. How can one find out without asking? Once I was traveling with a married couple; they had a small child with them. The little one wouldn't leave his father alone the whole way, asking one thing after another: "Dad, what's this? Dad, why is that?"—"Leave him alone; you're already giving Dad a headache," his mother told him.—"Let him ask," said the father, "how will he learn if he doesn't ask?" The same applies to spiritual matters.

To help you better understand the spiritual progress of one who has a good restlessness, I must tell you what kinds of questions occupy one of the sisters here. I look at her and rejoice. To answer even one of the questions she asks me—out of good restlessness, not idle curiosity—would require filling an entire notebook. She has a great and sincere concern; she perceives many things, strives zealously, and therefore receives great grace. When a person strives to discover his shortcomings and tries to correct them, humbling himself, then God's grace comes, and from that moment on, he walks the straight path.

²³⁸ Prov. 9:9

This good restlessness never ceases

— Geronda, I'm worried that I'm not striving as I should.

— Do you feel fear?

— No, but why do I have this anxiety?

— My dear, there is a calm restlessness and a restless silence. We should always have this good restlessness; otherwise, there would be no fear. If a person is striving correctly, they are never satisfied with themselves; there is always a certain restlessness within them, stemming from their earnest efforts.

— Geronda, does there ever come a time when a person who is striving no longer needs this wholesome restlessness?

— No, because wholesome restlessness never ceases in this life. “Run, that you may attain” (²³⁹)—says the Apostle Paul. A person runs for as long as he lives to find Christ, and never stops. He runs and feels not weariness, but joy.

To make this clear, let me give you an example: a good hunting dog, having caught the scent of a hare, does not stand by the hunter's side, but dashes off, runs, and searches for the hare. It runs, then stops briefly, sniffs the air, and runs again. It cannot stand still. Its mind is focused on finding the hare. It does not look around aimlessly. For her, there is more joy in running than in standing still. Life for her is in running and searching.

This is the kind of clarity we need to have. Our minds must constantly strive toward Christ, because He is our goal. And yet, even though we've picked up the trail, even though we know the way and know where to go to meet Christ, we often stand still and don't move forward. If we didn't know the way, then our standing still would be justified.

I remember that my father had two well-trained greyhounds in Konitsa. One day, Prodromos Kortsinoglu, the cantor at the Church of Saint Arsenius, asked him for a puppy of the same breed to guard his flock. My father gave him one puppy. And Prodromos trained the dog to bark when a wolf approached. A neighbor of Korcinoglu's was an avid hunter, but his dog had fallen ill, and he was deeply distressed that he would be unable to hunt. Prodromos found out about this and said to him, “Don't worry, I'll give you my dog; it's the same breed as Eznépidisa's.”²⁴⁰ The neighbor was delighted, took the dog, and went hunting. He arrived in the forest and waved his hand, as hunters usually do to signal the dog to search, but instead of running off, the dog began circling him, licking his legs and nudging his palms, looking for bread! You see, the dog was a good, purebred dog, but it hadn't been trained to hunt hares, which is why it kept circling the hunter the whole time.

But you, I think, have picked up the trail; you will keep running, seeking Christ, until your heart is so filled with Him that it can hold no more, and you will begin to plead, “My God, enough—I can't take any more.”

²³⁹ 1 Cor. 9:24

²⁴⁰ The last name of Elder Paisios's father. — *Compiler's note.*