

Blessed Memory
Elder Paisios of Mount Athos
Words
Volume VI
On Prayer

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The Venerable Paisius wanted to publish a book that would be useful to everyone—laypeople, monks, and clergy—but he did not have time to do so, having devoted all his time and energy to prayer and to conversing with those who came to him. After the Reverend's passing, his letters, notes from his teachings, and conversations were organized for ease of use in daily life, for the elder himself said: "The goal is for you to work and put what you have heard into practice." The Reverend Paisius leads us into the realm of praise, beginning with the simplest and most essential things: how to understand that prayer is a vital necessity for us, how to approach it and maintain focus, and how to combat laziness and despondency. By equipping us with such spiritual weapons as the Psalter, prostrations, and prayer with prayer beads, the elder teaches us to pray unceasingly and to give thanks for everything.

From the Editors

We present to our readers a new book from the series "Elder Paisios of Mount Athos: Words." This volume is devoted to prayer. Prayer is the life of the human soul, its air and nourishment. Prayer is God's gift to humanity, an opportunity granted to us by our Creator to turn to Him at any time and in every need, knowing

without a doubt that He will hear us. The necessary prerequisites for pure prayer are love, a heart free from malice, a focused mind, sincerity, and consistency. Through prayer, a person partakes of Divine grace and is enlightened by the Light. Prayer is an art that requires effort, self-discipline, patience, and perseverance. Elder Paisios¹ mastered this art to perfection. This book compiles fragments of the Elder's priceless spiritual experience from preserved excerpts of his conversations with monks and laypeople.

The Athonite Elder Paisios has long been known to the Orthodox people of Russia. It is worth recalling that the future Saint of Mount Athos (whose secular name was Arsenios Eznipedis) was born on July 25, 1924, in Asia Minor, in Cappadocia, in the village of Farasy, into a family that included nine other children. Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia († 924, commemorated November 10) baptized the future monk, named him after himself at baptism, and foretold his tonsure.

In 1924, the Eznépidis family moved from Cappadocia to Greece. In 1945, Arsenius was drafted into the army. At that time, a civil war was raging in Greece (1944–1948). Arsenius always volunteered for the most dangerous missions, never hesitating to risk his life when it came to saving others. Arsenius first visited Mount Athos in 1950, and by 1954 he had received the rhasophore tonsure at the Esfigmen Monastery on Mount Athos; two years later, at the Philotheou Monastery, he was tonsured into the lesser schema and given the name Paisius.

For two years, from 1962 to 1964, Monk Paisios lived as a monk on Mount Sinai before returning to Mount Athos. In 1979, he settled near Karyes, the “capital” of Mount Athos, in the cell of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos, “Panaguda,” where countless people came to visit the Elder. From sunrise until evening, he received visitors, comforted them, dispelled their despondency, and filled their souls with love, faith, and hope; at night, he read letters and prayed to God for those who were suffering.

In 1988, the Elder's health deteriorated sharply; he underwent several surgeries, the last of which—in February 1994—lasted five hours. On July 12, 1994, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Elder Paisios departed to the Lord. His holy remains rest at the St. John the Theologian Monastery in Suroti (near Thessaloniki)—a monastery once founded with the blessing of Elder Paisios, where he himself served as spiritual father to all its nuns. The Elder spoke at length with his spiritual children, offering them support and edification; the transcripts of these conversations form the basis of this publication.

The spiritual children refer to their spiritual father as “geronda,” which translates into Russian as “elder.” In Elder Paisios's teachings, the concept of “lyubochestvie” appears very frequently. This term is not in common use in modern Russian, but it existed in the Old Slavonic language. “Love of God,” as used here by the Holy Mountain monk, encompasses zeal, spiritual nobility, self-sacrifice, straightforwardness, and sincerity toward oneself and toward God—all together and simultaneously. This is discussed in more detail, bit by bit, in the previous volumes of the Elder's “Words.”

The primary goal toward which a person strives is union with God—deification—which the devil, the enemy of the human race, hinders in every possible way. Satan is so vile that the Elder avoids even uttering his name, referring to him as “tangalashka” (from the Turkish dangalak—foolish, uneducated, uncivilized, undeveloped, rude, ill-mannered, ignorant, feeble-minded, dull).

Union with God requires a change of mind, a change in the way of thinking. A spiritual person follows a different logic, one that is often incomprehensible to the people of this world. This is the very “holy madness” that Elder Paisios speaks of and to which he calls us. Union with God is not an external, formal connection; it is a connection without conditions, when a person's soul burns; it is a bond of love, when a person forgets themselves and lives only by the desire and longing for the Beloved. Divine eros—this is how Elder Paisios refers to this state, echoing what was said many centuries before him by such Byzantine mystical theologians as St. Maximus the Confessor and Symeon the New Theologian.

We hope that the long-awaited publication of the sixth volume of Elder Paisios's *Words* in Russian will undoubtedly contribute to the treasury of spiritual wisdom and serve as a source of spiritual benefit to readers, alongside the previous editions of the first five volumes of the Holy Mountain ascetic's wise reflections.

¹ According to the Mount Athos tradition of the Mother House of St. John the Theologian, when referring to Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, the name is always capitalized in their publications, thereby expressing their special regard for him as a spiritual guide and teacher. We preserve this convention in our Russian-language reprints. — Ed.

Troparion to the Venerable Paissios of Mount Athos

Tone 5. Similar to: The Co-eternal Word

Receiving the fire of divine love, / through your surpassing deeds you were wholly devoted to God, / and you were a comfort to many people, / instructing with divine words, / working miracles through your prayers, / Paisios, God-bearer, / and now pray unceasingly // for the whole world, Venerable One.

Kontakion

Tone 8. Similar to: The Chosen One

Having lived on earth like an angel, / you shone with love, Venerable Paisius, / great pillar of the monastic community, / guide of the faithful to a holy life, / and you appeared as the sweetest consolation to the universe; / for this reason we call upon you: // Rejoice, Father of the Whole World.

Preface

In the five previous volumes of Elder Paisios's "Words," the topic of prayer often comes up. Elder Paisios, being a monk "without blemish or reproach," considered prayer to be his primary occupation. In his interactions with various people—both monks and laypeople—he always sought to help them learn to entrust their lives to God through prayer. This sixth volume of the Elder's "Words," which you hold in your hands and which is published with the blessing of our Chief Shepherd, His Eminence Metropolitan Nikodimos of Kassandria, contains the Elder's teachings devoted exclusively to prayer.

According to Elder Paisios, prayer is a great opportunity that God has given us so that we may communicate with Him and ask Him for help. It pained the elder to see people suffering and "relying on their own meager human strength," forgetting that they have the opportunity to ask for help from God, "Who can send not just divine power, but many divine powers, and the help provided will then be not just divine help, but a miracle of God." Therefore, the elder insisted that we must come to see prayer as a necessity, and he strove to help those who had not yet mastered the art of prayer to "make a good start, so that the heart might 'come alive' and begin to function in prayer." As for those who had already acquired a good habit of prayer, the elder encouraged them to pray with greater fervor and warmth. To both groups, he sought to explain that the main prerequisite for communion with God is repentance and humility. "My brother," the elder writes in one of his letters, "ask for nothing else in prayer but repentance... Repentance will give you humility; humility will give you God's grace; and in His grace, God has stored up for you everything necessary for salvation—and, just in case, everything necessary so that you may also help someone else's soul when the opportunity arises." And in another letter, the elder writes: "I try to humble myself before God, laying my sins and ingratitude before Him, humbly asking for His mercy, and giving thanks to Him in praise."

The book consists of seven parts. The first part deals with prayer in general—the prayer that the elder lived by, experiencing it as the soul's need for constant and unceasing communion with God. He said that we must remain in constant contact with God and never turn off our "radio," tuned to God's frequency, in order to feel secure. Prayer is security. If we realize this fact, we will feel the need for unceasing communion with God and attain unceasing prayer.

Elder Paisios takes us by the hand toward genuine and pure prayer, showing us the prerequisites necessary for it and emphasizing that, alongside prayer, the corresponding spiritual struggle must also take place. In other words, to remain in contact with God, we must tune in to the same frequency as Him—the frequency of humility and love. The passions—primarily pride and a lack of spiritual nobility (that is, a lack of self-sacrifice)—are radio interference that hinders our communion with God. Therefore, before we begin to pray—that is, to commune with God while being on the same wavelength as Him—we need preparation similar to that which we undertake before partaking of the Holy Mysteries. Repentance and the humble confession of our sins to God "tears down the wall—or, rather, God Himself opens the door for us, and we receive the grace of communion with Him."

The second part of the volume discusses the obstacles we face in prayer: negligence, despondency, and distraction. The devil, too, tries to tear us away from communion with God by engaging us in his own little conversations. The Elder offers practical advice on how our hearts can be warmed and begin to work in prayer. A brief but "powerful" reading before prayer warms the heart. Singing church hymns helps overcome

despondency and creates the best conditions for willingly engaging in the Jesus Prayer. The Elder calls the prayer beads a “machine gun against the devil” and says that prostrations help “start our spiritual engine.”

The third part of the volume discusses our tender and loving Mother—the Most Holy Theotokos—our guardian angel, as well as the saints—our defenders and intercessors before God. Through her perfect obedience to God and her humility, the Most Holy Theotokos became a participant in the fulfillment of God’s eternal plan for the salvation of humanity. That is why she hears our prayers and presents our petitions to her Son and to God. At the same time, if we live according to God’s will, our guardian angel remains by our side, protecting us and saving us from dangers and misfortunes. And all the saints, when we call upon them with faith and piety, hasten to our aid.

The fourth part is devoted to petitions in prayer. The elder said that it is good to divide prayer into three parts: for oneself, for the world, and for the departed. The final chapter of the fourth part discusses the Psalter and how to pray from it, using the “Circumstances” of the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia. The “Circumstances” themselves and the order that Elder Paisios followed when praying for a particular need while reading the corresponding psalm are presented in the appendix at the end of the volume.

The fifth part contains the elder’s advice on the Jesus Prayer and on sobriety—that is, spiritual vigilance—which is necessary for gathering the mind together. The human mind is like “a teenager left to his own devices, who wants to wander endlessly here and there, run wild, and break the rules.” The elder advises nurturing it spiritually and teaching it “to spend more time at home, in paradise, close to his Father and God.”

Regarding the gathering of the mind in the Jesus Prayer, the elder—without rejecting various technical methods—emphasizes that these methods are merely auxiliary, and that the necessary prerequisites for practicing the Jesus Prayer are repentance and heartfelt sorrow, which will come naturally, without artificial effort, when a person comes to realize how sinful and ungrateful he is toward God’s many blessings, and also when he steps outside the confines of his own “self” and puts himself in the place of those who suffer.

The sixth section discusses the liturgical life of our Church. Here are gathered the elder’s counsels regarding participation in church services and proper preparation for receiving the Holy Mysteries of Christ. The final chapter of this section is devoted to church singing, which is “not only prayer, but in it the heart, as it were, bursts forth, and spiritual, heartfelt emotions overflow.”

The seventh and final part of the volume is devoted to the glorification of God. The Elder advises that after each offering of our petitions, we should “offer heartfelt praise and give thanks with joy.” He also emphasizes that anyone who takes the time to reflect on God’s many blessings will glorify the Lord day and night. And His beloved children praise Him even in sorrows and trials. In constant praise of God, in constant thanksgiving to Him, a person experiences “all the riches of His Goodness.” And the more a person praises and thanks God, the more and more blessings God bestows upon him. The final chapter of the seventh part is devoted to the divine gifts bestowed upon humble and God-loving people—those who cultivate repentance and sacrifice everything for the sake of love for God. The Elder, having himself tasted that great sweetness and ineffable joy which Divine grace bestows upon the soul it visits, spoke of this state as follows: “Then the mind comes to rest in the presence of God. Thoughts vanish, and the soul feels only the sweetness of divine love, divine warmth, and care.” Prayer then ceases, for “the mind has united with God and does not wish to be separated from Him for anything.”

Each section of the volume repeatedly speaks of humility and our awareness of our own sinfulness, as well as of noble conduct and sharing in the suffering of others. All of the above constituted, for Elder Paisios, the fundamental principles of the spiritual life and the necessary prerequisites for prayer from the heart. “As much as possible, cultivate prayer from the heart, united with love and humility,” the elder advises in one of his letters. In addition, the elder often cites examples from his own spiritual struggles or shares with us his experiences of divine states he has undergone. This, too, was a form of “spiritual alms” that he offered us out of his great love, in order to help us.

We sincerely thank everyone who read the manuscript of this volume during its preparation for publication and whose advice helped make it better.

We pray that, with God’s help, we may come to love prayer and work humbly and earnestly to cultivate it within ourselves, so that we may partake of the Kingdom of Christ, glorifying Him as God forever and ever. Amen.

*Friday of Bright Week 2012, the feast day of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos “Life-Giving Spring”
Abbess Philothea of the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, the Apostle and Evangelist, together
with her sisters in Christ.*

Part 1.

On Communion with God

“Blessed are those who have established a connection with the Heavenly Command Center and, revering God, work with Him on the same wavelength.”

Chapter 1.

On the Fact That Prayer Is a Conversation with God

Blessed are those who have established a connection with the Heavenly Command Center

Geronda, what does prayer mean to you personally?

— When I pray, I send out a radio signal and ask for help. I constantly ask for help from Christ, from the Mother of God, from the saints... Both for myself and for others. After all, if you don’t ask, you won’t receive any help.

I remember during the civil war, we were surrounded and blockaded on a ridge by Communist forces—there were 1,600 of them. And we had only 180 fighters. We dug in and held our ground behind the rocks. If they had captured us, they wouldn’t have left a single one of us alive. As the radio operator, I tried to set up the antenna to contact Headquarters. But no such luck: it kept getting knocked down by bullets and shrapnel. The company commander shouted, “Drop that antenna right now, run over here, and help me carry the boxes of grenades!” Whenever the company commander crawled over to the machine gunners to check on them and give orders, I immediately ran back to the radio. While he was giving orders, I tried again and again to set up the antenna, and then ran back to help carry the boxes so the commander wouldn’t yell at me. Finally, with the help of a stick and a sapper shovel, I managed to secure the antenna and establish contact with the command post. I managed to transmit just two words—our coordinates. Thank God those few words were enough to change everything! At dawn, our attack planes flew in and bombed the enemy’s positions. We were saved! Do you think that’s no big deal? One hundred eighty fighters surrounded by one thousand six hundred—and in the end, they survived!

It was then that I realized what a monk’s great calling is: to help through prayer. Worldly people say, “What do these monks do? Why don’t they go out into the world to help society?” But saying that is like scolding a radio operator in the middle of a war: “What are you doing fiddling with that radio? Drop it, grab a rifle, and run out to shoot!...”

Even if we established communication with every radio station in the world, it would be of no use to us if we did not have heavenly communion and contact with God. Communion and contact with Him are necessary in order to ask Him for help. And not only to ask, but also to receive. Blessed are those who have established a connection with the Heavenly Command Center and, in reverence before God, work with Him on the same frequency.

Christ gives us the opportunity to speak with Him

— Geronda, my prayer is a source of sorrow and sadness. I just can’t seem to pray at all. What should I do?

— Just talk to Christ, to the Mother of God, to the angels, and to the saints—casually, sincerely, and without carefully choosing your words. Do this wherever you find yourself, and say whatever comes to mind. For example: “My Christ!” or “Mother of God, You know what state I’m in. Help me!” Talk to Them

constantly like this—simply and humbly—about whatever is troubling you. And afterward, say the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

— Geronda, my prayers are distracted.

— When you pray, think about Who you’re talking to right now. To God Himself! Do you think that’s a trivial matter? When a person speaks to an important official, just look how carefully he chooses each word! They’re careful not to blurt out something foolish; sometimes they stutter, their tongue gets tied up from embarrassment... But if we speak so attentively to a person, how much more focused must we be when speaking to God! Think about it: even a child, wanting to speak with a parent or an older person, feels shy during the conversation. And when a child wants to speak with a teacher—whom they’re also a little afraid of—they feel even shyer. And what about us? We speak with God Himself, with the Mother of God, with the saints—and we don’t realize this?

— Before I came to the monastery, Geronda, I had no doubt that monastic life and prayer were inseparable. But now it’s so hard for me to pray... It seems to me that prayer is the most difficult and exhausting task.

— You’re a philologist by training, aren’t you? You enjoy talking, and you never get tired of conversing with people. Yet with Christ, Who deigns to converse with you, you grow weary of talking, and such a conversation seems difficult to you. Are you out of your mind? That’s like saying, “Oh, what a bother—it’s time to go talk to the king... I don’t feel like it at all, but there’s nothing I can do about it; I’ll have to go.” Christ gives us the opportunity to communicate with Him constantly in prayer, and we... don’t want that? What a strange thing!... And the most surprising thing is that He Himself wants to talk to us, desiring to help us, but we, you see, are too lazy to talk to Him!

— Geronda, I often get caught up in idle chatter, and then I feel guilty about it afterward.

— If you want to talk, it’s better to talk to Christ. When a person talks to Christ, they never regret it. It’s clear that a tendency toward idle chatter is a passion. But if you channel that tendency toward spiritual benefit, it can become a stepping stone to prayer. Can you imagine—there are people who are even too lazy to talk! But there’s some kind of force within you—you’re always eager to talk to someone... If you channel those urges toward spiritual benefit, your soul will be sanctified. Try to speak with people only about what’s necessary and to talk with Christ all the time. As soon as you strike up a humble conversation with Him, you’ll stop noticing what’s going on around you—that’s how interesting and sweet this communion will be. Even spiritual conversations tire me out, but when I pray, I experience extraordinary peace.

Prayer is a conversation with God. I sometimes envy the people who lived in Christ’s time: after all, they saw Him with their own eyes and heard Him with their own ears; they could even speak with Him. But I think we are in a better position than they were, because they could not often disturb Him, whereas we can speak with Him unceasingly in prayer.

The Heartfelt Desire for Prayer

— Geronda, how should one pray?

— Feel as though you are a little child, and God is your Father, and, without losing that feeling, ask Him for everything you need. If you speak to God in this way, there will come a moment when you will no longer want to stray even a step from Him. For it is only in God that a person finds safety, comfort, and inexpressible love, united with divine tenderness.

To pray is to welcome Christ into your heart and to love Him with your whole being.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (²), says Holy Scripture. When a person, having come to love God, is in communion with Him, nothing earthly can tempt him anymore. He becomes as if mad. Play the finest music for a madman—it will not move him. Take him to a museum and show him the paintings of the world’s greatest artists—he will walk right past them as if nothing had happened. Set before him the most exquisite dishes, dress him in the most beautiful and fashionable clothes, fill the air around him with the most delicate fragrances—he won’t bat an eye or even notice the scent. A madman lives in his own world. So does a person who is in communion with the heavenly realm: he is entirely there; he has no desire whatsoever to come down

² Luke 10:27

to earth. Try to tear a child away from his mother when he's hugging her! Just as you cannot tear a person away from prayer once he has understood its meaning. What does a little child feel in his mother's embrace? Only someone who has felt that God is near—very, very near—and that he himself is a child in His embrace can understand this.

I know people who feel like little children while they pray. If someone were to hear them at that moment, they would exclaim, "But they're just little children!..." And if someone were to observe how they behave during prayer, they would say that these people have definitely lost their minds! They become like a child who runs as fast as he can to his father, clings to his sleeve, and pleads: "I don't know how, but you have to do this!... By any means necessary, just do it, please, please!"—it is with just such simplicity and boldness that these people plead with God.

— Geronda, can the desire to pray arise simply from a sentimental need for communion or comfort?

— Well, what's wrong with the desire to pray arising from a good—even if sentimental—need for God? However, it seems that you often lose sight of this and resort to prayer only when something happens to you. Naturally, this is why God allows various kinds of difficulties and hardships to "happen." He does this so that we will turn to Him. But isn't it better for a child to run to his father or mother simply because he loves them, rather than because something has happened to him? Can you imagine a child who knows how deeply his parents love him, but who would have to be forced to run into his mother's or father's arms?

God is our tender and caring Father; He loves us. Therefore, we should eagerly long for the hour of prayer to come as soon as possible, and never grow weary of talking with Him.

Chapter 2.

On the Necessity of Prayer

Let Us Feel the Necessity of Prayer

Elder, I don't have much faith, and I feel weak.

— Do you know what to do? Embrace God and cling to Him! Have you seen a child clinging to his father's neck? Do the same: embrace Him and don't let go, so that He cannot tear you away from Himself. Then you will feel confidence and strength.

— Yes, Geronda, I feel myself that I need to lean on God, but it's so hard...

— Just reach your hands upward, stretch them toward Heaven. The harder you pull, the longer they'll grow. Not right away, of course... But eventually, you'll grab hold of God Himself.

— Geronda, when I'm short on time, I pray in a hurry. Do you think I might be stealing time that I should be devoting to Christ?

— You know, Christ has plenty of everything. Whether you "steal" from Him or not, He will lack nothing. But you yourself gain no benefit from such hurried prayer—that's for sure. Think about it: it's not Christ who needs our prayer, but we ourselves who need His help. And we pray not because Christ needs it, but because, in praying, we commune with God, Who created us. If we do not pray, we will fall into the hands of the devil, and woe to us then. Remember what Abba Isaac the Syrian said: "God will not ask us why we did not pray, but why we did not remain in communion with Him and thus gave the devil the right to torment us."³

— Geronda, how can one come to love prayer?

— You must feel that prayer is necessary. Just as the body needs food to live, so too must the soul be nourished so as not to die. If you leave the soul without nourishment, it will grow weak, and then spiritual death will follow.

— Geronda, what hinders prayer?

— Prayer is difficult only when we do not feel that it is necessary. If a person does not grasp the meaning of prayer, does not experience firsthand that it is necessary for him, then he will regard prayer as a

³ "On that day, God will judge us not for our failure to recite psalms, nor for our neglect of prayer, but for the fact that by neglecting these things, we allow demons to gain entry." See: Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetic Sayings*. Saying 71. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2008. p. 432. — Translator's note.

burdensome duty. Such a person will be like an unwise infant who, turning away from his mother's breast, rejects all the sweetness of her tenderness and care. Such a child grows up weak and unhappy.

Prayer is a sense of security

— Geronda, how can one feel that prayer is necessary?

— Oh, if only you'd been through the war, we'd understand each other!... During the war, we had different radio communication protocols with the command post. There was a constant-communication mode, when we radio operators never left our radios and were always on the air. Oh, that's when we felt secure—we knew for sure that we were protected! If we checked in every two hours, we didn't feel that same sense of security anymore. And if we only contacted the command post twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, we felt our situation was very precarious. It's very much the same with prayer. The more a person prays, the greater their sense of spiritual security. Prayer is a sense of security.

By staying in constant contact—in “constant communication”—with God, we can ward off any evil. Once, a monk was riding on a bus.⁴ He sat there praying with his eyes closed, and all the passengers thought he was asleep. An oncoming truck suddenly crashed into a pole and veered into the oncoming lane. Cars began crashing into one another—it was a terrible accident! But the bus, in some mysterious way, ended up off to the side of the road at a safe distance. It was as if an invisible hand had picked it up and carried it to the shoulder! None of the passengers were injured. They were saved by the monk's prayer.

“Geronda, laypeople often ask how they can train themselves to pray.”

“Listen. In days gone by, some of those who dedicated themselves to monastic life and possessed a strong character would go off and practice asceticism among inaccessible cliffs, in caves, in pagan tombs, or in demonic shrines. There, they faced a whole host of dangers: rocks tumbled from the cliffs onto their heads, demons attacked them, and many other temptations lay in wait for them... Fear compelled these people to cry out constantly: “My Christ!... Mother of God!...” Thus, through fear, these people acquired the good habit of unceasing prayer. Now imagine our times, imagine people who get behind the wheel in the morning after having “fun” the night before at parties and in clubs, with alcohol, drugs, and other “joys” of modern life. Getting behind the wheel after a sleepless and wild night, such people have no control over either themselves or their car. And imagine an ordinary Christian who, knowing how many such “heroes” are on the road, also starts his car in the morning and heads off to work. Can he be sure he'll return home alive? Can he say with certainty that he'll make it home—or will he, maimed after an accident, be taken away in an ambulance? Now tell me: isn't that enough to constantly cry out, “My Christ!... My Lady!”? If laypeople drew spiritual benefit from their fear of these dangers, they would surpass even us monks in prayer... And they would also avoid the very dangers that threaten them.

I remember a man who came to my cell. He was nearly in despair: through carelessness, he had struck a child on the road, but, thank God, the child survived. This man kept repeating, “I am a criminal and deserve punishment.” “And when you struck the child, did you pray?” I asked. “No,” he replied. “You deserve punishment,” I replied, “but not so much for hitting the child. You deserve a greater punishment for not praying.” And I told him about an acquaintance of mine. He was a civil servant, but had attained a high degree of virtue. He constantly recited the Jesus Prayer: at work, on the road, everywhere. His prayer had become spontaneous; tears of praise and joy streamed from his eyes. Even the documents on his desk were wet with tears. That's why he wanted to quit his job and was willing to accept a smaller pension. And so he came to Mount Athos and visited me in my kaliva to ask how he should live from now on. “Don't quit your job,” I told him. “And if your colleagues start asking why you're crying, just say, ‘You know, I was just thinking about my late father.’” So, one day this man was driving his car when, unexpectedly, a child ran out onto the road in front of him. The collision was unavoidable: the impact sent the child flying like a ball. But then it turned out that the child wasn't hurt at all. God had spared him from harm because even while driving, this man never stopped praying.

⁴ It later became clear that this monk was the Venerable Paisius himself. (Hereafter, notes by the Greek editors are given without reference.)

A Call to Prayer

— Geronda, will there be a war?

— Are you praying that there won't be one? From spring through fall, I declare a mobilization for prayer to myself. True, I do this quietly, and besides myself, no one knows about my call to active prayer service. I pray that God will have mercy on us, help us avoid war and a real mobilization, when people go to the front and shed blood. I received this message:⁵ “On Sunday, October 16, the Turks are planning to attack Greece. Pray even harder so that their plans are thwarted.” Thank God, the Most Holy Theotokos has protected us so far. Let us pray, then, that She will continue to protect us.

— Geronda, now that the immediate danger to Greece has passed, should we continue to pray that there will be no war?

— Aren't there enough wars in the world right now? What does “for Greece” or “not for Greece” even mean? Wherever wars are raging right now, people—our brothers—are suffering and dying. Aren't we all brothers and sisters through Adam and Eve? Of course, our family has been divided, and people have scattered to different parts of the Earth. We Greeks are brothers with the Orthodox—both in the flesh and in spirit—but we are also brothers with the non-Orthodox—though, admittedly, only in the flesh. And so, we must pray for the non-Orthodox with even greater compassion, because they are more unfortunate.

— Geronda, Greece is going through difficult times right now. Seeing this, I pray a lot with my rosary every day, asking God to help our homeland. You pray and pray, and then you think: “Does Greece's salvation really hang on your rosary?”

— Don't worry; Greece's salvation does not hang on your rosary. But since you're constantly thinking about the hardships Greece is going through, it means you're pained for your homeland and you're asking God to intervene. And only He can help.

Pray that God will raise up spiritual people, Maccabees.⁶ There is a great need for such courageous people right now. The time has come for the battle between good and evil. After all, lawlessness has been elevated to the status of law today, and sin has become fashionable. However, when you see the multiplying troubles in Greece, when you see the government passing insane laws, when the whole country is shaken by instability, do not be afraid—God will intervene and help.⁷

— Judging by what you're saying, Geronda, we need to put aside all our affairs and devote all our strength to prayer...

— Do you really think this is even up for debate?! Look: the whole world is boiling like a huge cauldron! The Church, the state, tribes, and nations—everything has been turned upside down! And no one knows where this will lead— . May God stretch out His hand! And monks must pray very much now. Tasks and concerns, even urgent ones, must be set aside, and all our strength must be devoted to prayer.

With humility and to the best of your ability, pray for the people in the world. They have given the Evil One great power over themselves and are suffering because of it. Do not forget that we became monks for the sake of our souls' salvation and to help the world through prayer. Let us strive to be good monks. Let us pray with our rosaries and perform prostrations for ourselves and for the world. After all, it is through rosaries and prostrations that a monk helps people.

Chapter 3. On How to Pray So That God Will Hear Us

Passions—Radio Interference That Hinders Our Connection with God

Elder, if passions dwell within me, can my heart begin to work in prayer?

⁵ Delivered in November 1983. The revelation came from God.

⁶ The nickname “Maccabee” (from the ancient Hebrew word for “hammer”) was given to Judas, the leader of the Jewish revolt that took place in 166 B.C. against Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his successors. The Maccabees distinguished themselves in the struggle for the faith of their forefathers and for Israel's national independence. (See 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees.)

⁷ Spoken in 1981

— How can your heart begin to work in prayer if you have passions within you? Try taking a rotten cable and plugging it into a phone jack. Will you be able to make out any sounds through the receiver? Because of constant short circuits, the connection will keep breaking; all you'll hear through the receiver is whistling and crackling. It's the same with a person: when there is "rot" inside them, when passions dwell within them, then "short circuits" occur in their spiritual life. They spiritually "shut themselves off from themselves." We must guard ourselves against pride, selfishness, willfulness, and licentiousness. After all, if these passions rule over a person, God's grace—which is necessary for prayer—cannot come to him. We must cleanse our inner "wires" of rust so that they conduct the current well and we can establish a connection with God. The more a person purifies himself of passions, the more he will succeed in prayer.

Passions are radio interference that prevents us from establishing a connection with God. If this interference does not disappear, how can a person speak with God in prayer? I remember that on the front lines, when a radio operator heard interference, he would reply to whoever was calling him: "I can't hear you; signal strength is 'zero' (or 'one'). Check your connection and try again!" Because of the interference, the words were indistinguishable. The signal strength had to be at least "three." A signal strength of "five" was considered very good—the connection was then perfect. Otherwise, the radio operator would shout until he was hoarse, yet he couldn't be heard due to poor tuning. First, the radio operator had to tune both the transmitter and receiver of his radio to a single frequency, and only then could he establish contact with the command post on that frequency.

To "tune in" to God, we must take the same steps. You must tune the transmitter of your spiritual radio station to the frequency of Love, and the receiver to the frequency of Humility. This is necessary so that God can hear us, and we can hear Him. After all, "Love—Humility" is the very "frequency" on which God "operates." A person must make every effort to "catch" this frequency and tune in to it. Then they will establish a connection with God, and their mind will dwell constantly in God. So, I wish for you to establish this Divine connection. Amen.

"I" and "mine" prevent me from establishing a connection with God

— Geronda, you said that I need to charge my battery with spiritual electricity. How do I charge it? — Cultivate spiritual nobility and selflessness within yourself, so that "me" and "mine" disappear from you. "Me" and "mine" hinder prayer because they separate a person from God, as if covering him with a layer of insulation. Do you know what insulating materials are? A person who has separated himself from God prays, and the Lord seems to say to him, "No, my son, I don't understand you!.."

— Geronda, is it possible for a monk to diligently follow his rule, yet lack self-sacrifice and love for his brothers?

— Well, of course he can. If a monk thinks only of himself, he can recite prayers, perform considerable feats of asceticism, fast, and prostrate himself... However, by performing all these feats, he merely inflates his own self-importance, while remaining indifferent toward others. By acting this way, a monk will always remain a beggar. Even in asceticism, he is preoccupied only with himself—doing whatever he pleases. But he needs to truly focus on himself—on rooting out his passions—otherwise he will not succeed.

— So, Geronda, does that mean I need to be flawless in obedience, with the sisters, and in everything?

— Of course, in everything! To establish a connection with Christ and not lose it, your whole life must bring joy to Christ. And Christ rejoices when we bring joy to our neighbor, when we please him—in the best sense of the word. That is why I emphasize the importance of spiritual nobility and self-sacrifice. After all, if a monk follows the rule and performs prostrations but pays no attention to self-sacrifice, nobility, love for others, and the like, then both his prostrations and his prayers come to nothing.

When I came to the monastery,⁸ as a novice, I was assigned to assist in the refectory. At that time, an elderly monk in his eighties, quite frail, asked that I occasionally bring him some soup to his cell. So, as I was finishing my duty, I poured some soup into a bowl and carried it to him. One time, a brother saw this and started lecturing me: "Listen, don't go getting him used to being treated well!... Otherwise, once you get him used to it, he'll start asking for this and that and won't give you a moment's peace. You'll be so busy with this old man that you won't even be able to follow the rules!" Oh, you have no idea how he tormented me with his

⁸ At the Esfigmen Monastery, in 1953.

requests! I helped him once when he caught a cold, and after that he wouldn't leave me alone at all! Every so often he'd knock on the wall: 'Show some love, make me some tea!' Then: 'Show some love, help me roll over onto my other side!' A few minutes later, knock-knock again, and: "Show some love—put a hot brick on my lower back!..."⁹ "Pour me some tea—give me a brick!..." "Pour me some tea—give me a brick!..." "But I have a rule! When am I supposed to follow it?! That old man drove me to the brink of madness!..."

Can you imagine what's going on? It's a terrible situation! An old man behind the wall is suffering, groaning, begging for help, but the monk refuses to go so as not to break the rules!... This is a sign of a completely cold, heartless state of mind. And what doubt could there be: for God, a brick and a cup of tea would mean far more than any number of "flawless" bows and rosary beads! After all, standing before Christ with his rosary, that monk was asking Him, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!"—yet at the same time he was snapping at his suffering neighbor: "Just leave me alone!"

— Geronda, how can a person receive God's blessing?

— God blesses a person if that person is dear to Him. Why would God give His blessing to a stranger? So that the stranger might cast His blessing to the ground and trample it underfoot? I've experienced this firsthand. When I lived on Mount Sinai,¹⁰ there was a terrible drought. Not a single drop of rain had fallen for several years, so both the Monastery of St. Catherine and the Bedouins who lived nearby were having a very hard time. The monks prayed for rain, but to no avail. And then the time came to prune the olive trees.¹¹ I came to help. The Bedouins pruned the monastery's trees; the monks kept the thick branches for the monastery and set the thin ones aside. The Bedouins asked if they could have these branches to cook food over a fire and keep warm at night—after all, it gets very cold on Mount Sinai. But the monks wouldn't let them take the branches, and the Bedouins left disappointed. The next day, the Bedouins came to the monastery again with the same request. I tied all the thin branches into bundles and gave them to the Bedouins. Then an elderly Bedouin said to me, "You're a good man. It's going to rain." And indeed, no sooner had I returned to the monastery than it began to rain. It was a heavy and prolonged downpour. Thus, the Bedouin's kind words opened the heavens. But at the time, I didn't tell anyone about it.

God does not hear the prayer of the proud

— Geronda, I behaved absolutely disgracefully the other day... Now I can't shake the thought that my prayer is displeasing to God.

— If this thought stems from genuine humility and you acknowledge that your disgraceful behavior angers God, then you will feel divine consolation. But if, instead of humility, you're merely selfishly distressed and tearing your hair out, exclaiming, "Oh... Have I really come to this?! How could I have done this?!"—then you will receive no comfort, for

God resists the proud.¹² God does not hear the prayer of the proud, because pride is a wall between man and God. For our prayer to be heard, it must come from

a contrite and humble heart.¹³ If we say with deep humility, "Lord, can someone like me even be heard?..."—then the Good God hears us immediately.

— Geronda, why is it that sometimes, when I'm struggling with some temptation, I can't pray?

— If temptation is overwhelming you and you cannot pray, it means that there is selfishness and vanity within you. The temptation remains until a person comes to detest his own inner "self." As soon as the inner "self" becomes repulsive to a person, Christ comes to the rescue and the temptation passes.

— Geronda, I ask God to help me free myself from being presumptuous in my dealings with the sisters, but I see no results.

— When a person strives and prays but sees no results, it means that either selfishness and pride already dwell within them, or they have a predisposition toward pride. Selfishness and pride prevent Divine grace

⁹ In the past, heated bricks were used instead of hot water bottles.

¹⁰ From October 1962 to April 1964.

¹¹ In February 1963.

¹² James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5; see Proverbs 3:34.

¹³ See Ps. 50:19.

from coming in response to prayer. The Good God grants us what we ask for in prayer—if we have humility and an awareness of our own sinfulness.

— Geronda, I earnestly ask God to deliver me from a specific weakness; I’m struggling, trying to root it out... But because of my pride, God isn’t helping me. What should I do?

— First and foremost, ask God for forgiveness. Say: “My God, pride dwells within me; I myself am preventing Your help from coming. But I beg You: enlighten me, help me understand exactly what I need to do, how I can overcome my weakness.” As soon as you acknowledge that you have pride and that this is precisely why this passion won’t leave you, God will immediately reveal to you the cause, the root of your weakness, and how to fight to eradicate it.

— Geronda, what should my attitude be during prayer?

— A humble attitude. Then God will help you. A humble person has no will of his own; he is obedient to God’s will and keeps His commandments. That is why God hears his prayer and bestows heavenly blessings upon him. To the extent that a person listens to God, to that extent does the Good God listen to him.

Prayer requires perseverance and patience

— Geronda, sometimes I turn to God with a specific request. But nothing happens, and I ask myself, “Does God even hear my prayer?”

— That “Does He hear?” means you’re doubting God’s love. And by doubting His love, you’re offering Him a request with one hand, only to take it right back with the other. Well, by acting this way, you lose your right to “skip the line.”

— Geronda, when I ask God for something and don’t receive it right away, should I keep asking persistently?

— Yes, you should. Be persistent. After all, when we go to some government office and make a request to a bureaucrat, we sometimes have to be persistent to get what we want. “Please help me,” we say, “otherwise I won’t leave here.” Persistence is required in prayer as well: do you remember how persistently the Canaanite woman pleaded with Christ?¹⁴ And the widow in the Gospel who pleaded with the unjust judge was also persistent.¹⁵

— However, Geronda, if time passes and my request remains unanswered, I get discouraged.

— When we ask for something in prayer, we must wait patiently. Once, my eye swelled up and began to ache severely. I approached the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos three times and asked Her to heal me so that I could read the Psalter at night. I anointed my sore eye with oil from the lamp in front of the icon, but the eye continued to hurt. A few days later, it got even worse: the eye hurt and swelled up more and more. Two weeks passed like this. Then, feeling very embarrassed, I approached the icon of the Most Holy Mother of God again and said: “Mother of God, forgive me, but I must trouble You once more.” I anointed my eye again with oil from the lamp, and the pain went away immediately. Do you think the Most Holy Mother of God could not have healed me right away, as soon as I asked Her for it the first time? Of course She could have. But, knowing something I did not, She allowed me to suffer for a while. So you, too, should ask with humility and wait patiently. A prayer offered with faith, pain, persistence, and patience is heard—provided, of course, that what is asked for is for our own good.

Chapter 4.

On How to Prepare for Communion with God

A Humble Confession to Christ

Elder, what preparation is necessary before prayer?

— It is similar to the preparation for Holy Communion. After all, the Holy Mysteries of Christ are a divine reception, whereas prayer is divine communion. When we receive Communion, we take Christ into

¹⁴ See Matt. 15:21–28, Mark 7:25–30.

¹⁵ See Luke 18:2–8.

ourselves, and divine grace comes to us. And in prayer, we commune ceaselessly with Christ and also receive Divine grace—in a different way. Is it not enough to commune with Christ and receive Divine grace? In Communion, we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, and in prayer, we commune with God. Before receiving Communion, one must confess to a spiritual father. Likewise, before beginning prayer—in other words, before beginning communion with God—a humble confession to Christ is necessary. Before beginning to pray, a person must humbly confess: “Lord, my deeds are utterly wicked... I am full of sins and passions... I am not even worthy of You turning Your gaze upon me, but still I ask You: help me.” From such a humble confession to Christ, Divine grace comes to a person, and he begins to commune with God.

If a person does not repent and humbly confess his sins to God, he will remain in a state of disorder. And his disorder will become a wall preventing him from communing with God. The door will remain closed, and the soul will find no peace. But if a person says, “I have sinned, O my God,” then the wall will crumble—or, rather, God Himself will open the door, and the person will receive the grace of communion with Him.

— Geronda, I read in **The Ladder** that, when rising for prayer, one must be clothed in the garments a person wears when preparing to appear before a king.¹⁶

— What kind of clothes are these?

— Humbling oneself before God and humbly asking for forgiveness of sins—these are the garments. Say: “My God, I am ungrateful; I have sinned so greatly against You; I have grieved You... Forgive me!” But do not utter these words mechanically; say them with heartfelt contrition. Do you understand now what “garments” you should put on when you speak with God? If you lack these garments—this contrition—then when you rise to pray, it’s as if you’re saying to God: “Hi, how’s it going? What’s new in the world?” After all, we must even ask for forgiveness from a person to whom we are at fault! How much more important, then, is it to ask God for forgiveness for our daily transgressions!

— So, Geronda, should I reflect on the sins I commit every day?

— First, ask God for forgiveness for the specific sins you committed during the day. And then reflect on just how sinful you are in general. By doing this, you humble yourself, and afterward you begin to ask God for what you need. When I rise to pray, I begin with the words of the tax collector in the Gospel: “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”¹⁷ I whisper these words several times, and then I say the Jesus Prayer.

Once I asked God to teach me how to pray. And I had a vision: a young man, about seventeen years old, praying. Oh, he brought me to utter contrition!... How he wept, how he prayed!... I was amazed and shaken. He began his prayer with a confession: “How ungrateful I am, how incorrigible...”—and then continued: “My God! I am such a sinner!... How can I be set right if You do not help me?!”—and began to ask God for what he needed.

— Geronda, often during prayer my mind wanders to specific sins, and I can’t concentrate.

— We agreed: you should examine yourself and confess your sins before you begin praying, not during it. Recalling during prayer exactly where and how you slipped up is no longer self-examination, but idle chatter with the devil. Before prayer, you need to reflect on what’s wrong with us, set a goal, direct the tools of your mind toward it, and command yourself: “Fire!”

“Be at peace first”

— Geronda, what if I sin not on purpose but out of carelessness, and don’t even notice it myself? After all, in that case, I won’t be able to realize that I’ve upset a sister and need to ask her for forgiveness. Won’t my prayerful connection with God be interrupted in that case?

— To avoid losing your connection with God and to find peace, watch over yourself. Remain in a state of constant vigilance. This is necessary so that you can keep track of your mistakes, repent, and ask for forgiveness. If you don’t do this, then... yes, you may feel a certain joy in prayer—but that joy will not be spiritual. Your soul will not be able to spread its spiritual wings and soar into Heaven. Only those who are in communion with God soar into Heaven.

— Sometimes, Geronda, before I pray, I feel a kind of restlessness, anxiety...

¹⁶ See: John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Word 28, para. 3.

¹⁷ Luke 18:13.

— If you feel inner restlessness or bitterness in your heart, know that you have upset one of the sisters. That is why you feel guilty. Ask the sister for forgiveness, and the restlessness will go away.

— Geronda, can't I just drive away this restlessness through prayer? Is asking for forgiveness really necessary?

— Well, if you've upset a sister, you won't be able to resolve everything with prayer alone. You need to go to your sister, bow to her, and ask for forgiveness. If you don't make a single bow to your sister, even three hundred bows in your cell won't help. If you don't show humility toward the person you've upset and don't admit your guilt to her, it will be of no use.

“First be reconciled to your brother¹⁸,” says the Gospel. Only then

bring your gift. The exception is when you have repented of a transgression against a sister and have decided to ask her for forgiveness, but cannot find her. If you have firmly resolved to ask your sister for forgiveness at the first opportunity, your prayer is accepted by God.

— Geronda, sometimes I get into a quarrel with a sister, and then, when I return to my cell, I calm down—I can even pray. But then that sister crosses my path, and my heart—whoa!—becomes so bitter toward her!... I even go out of my way to avoid running into her.

— I can't understand that. You quarrel with a sister, and then, as if nothing had happened, you go to your cell and “calm down”? How can you calm down, how can you pray, if you don't first bow before her and ask for forgiveness? But let's say that after your private prayer, you truly felt God's peace. Then your heart would have softened. And if it had softened, you wouldn't be trying to avoid running into your sister; instead, you'd go out of your way to meet her, seeking that blessing from God—the opportunity to ask your sister for forgiveness.

— Or maybe, Geronda, I simply think I'm in the right, and that's why I can pray?

— Think for yourself: what kind of prayer would that be? Only if a person accuses himself and says to his neighbor, “Forgive me and bless me,” will God's grace come upon him, and he will be able to be in communion with God.

Prayer is “a judgment before the Last Judgment”

— Geronda, St. John Climacus says that prayer is “a judgment before the Last Judgment.”¹⁹

— That is exactly so. When a person prays correctly, then his prayer is “a judgment before the Last Judgment.” If a spiritually healthy person, upon beginning to pray, feels bitterness in his heart, he will begin to search for the cause. He will ask himself: “Why do I feel this way? ‘Perhaps I have hurt a brother with my behavior? Or have I judged someone, or, out of carelessness, failed to reject a thought of judgment? Maybe I've indulged in a thought of pride? Or is there self-will living within me, preventing me from being in communion with God?’”

— But what if, Geronda, he asks himself these questions, asks and asks, but still finds nothing within himself?..

— That cannot be. Something like that must have happened to him! If he digs a little deeper into his archives, conducts an investigation of himself, he will find evidence and understand where he is at fault.

— Geronda, what do you mean by “internal investigation”? Isn't it enough simply to confess one's sins to God?

— What is there to confess if he doesn't even know what he's done wrong? Of course, first you need to “investigate” yourself: questioning, examining the crime scene, forensic analysis... Well, and if he still can't find anything, then let him make two or three prostrations, get down on his knees, and say: “My God, I must have sinned in some way. Enlighten me—in what exactly?” As soon as he says this, humility will immediately dispel the fog of temptation, and he will see the reason for what is happening. What I mean is that when God sees a person's humility, He sends him His grace. And a person enlightened by grace clearly sees where he has sinned and is given the opportunity to make amends.

— Geronda, what helps us maintain a constant connection with God?

¹⁸ Matt. 5:24.

¹⁹ “Prayer for the one who prays in truth is a court, a tribunal, and the throne of the Judge before the Last Judgment.” See: John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Word 28, para. 1. Moscow, 2002. p. 283. — Translator's note.

— Peace of mind helps a great deal. When the soul is at peace, prayer flows naturally. That is why it is impermissible to harbor ill will toward anyone. If, however, you have harbored an unkind thought toward someone, confess it to the Mother Superior. Drive away all other unkind thoughts as well, replacing them with good ones. After all, good thoughts clear the way for prayer—and then prayer flows easily forward.

Part 2.

The Struggle for Prayer

“The heart of a person who has experienced God’s great blessings grows stronger, is warmed, and can even attain unceasing prayer.”

Chapter 1.

On the Difficulties of Prayer

Despondency²⁰ renders a person useless

Elder, what is the difference between despondency and sloth?

— Despondency is spiritual depression, whereas sloth pertains to the soul and the body. May God grant that there be neither one nor the other. Sometimes the afflictions of despondency and sloth strike people who have a serious predisposition toward the spiritual life—people who are sensitive and earnest.

The evil one does not cause as much harm to a thick-skinned person. But if temptation has deeply upset a sensitive person, then he falls into despondency. To find the strength within himself to restart his spiritual engine, he must identify the cause of his distress and deal with it spiritually. Look, you can’t leave wounds like these untreated! Otherwise, you’ll keep stumbling and falling all along the way.

Emotional breakdown eventually leads to physical breakdown and renders a person completely useless. At the same time, medicine cannot understand the cause of the illness. And how could it find it? You cannot see this cause under a microscope; spiritual microbes are to blame here. Do you know how many loving and sensitive people have been rendered useless!

— Geronda, I feel so exhausted that I can’t follow my cell rule at all.²¹ Is this because of fatigue or because of my own negligence?

— Do you remember: “My body is weak because of my many sins, and my soul is weak as well”?²² You’re not suffering from physical exhaustion, but from emotional breakdown. Yet it’s more dangerous than physical exhaustion. A person who is spiritually broken “falls apart,” “falls into disarray,” and becomes like a car whose body is in good condition but whose engine has broken down.

— Geronda, I used to love praying, prostrating myself, and reading spiritual books so much!... But now?... I can’t even move a finger.

— Why is that? Do you really have no strength? I can see that you have plenty of strength. A few years ago, when the monastery was being built, you worked on the construction site all day long!... And do you remember how much you prayed back then, how many prostrations you made?

— Maybe, Geronda, it’s because I gave myself entirely to my work?

²⁰ Despondency (Greek: ἀκηδία—literally, “lack of diligence”) is usually associated in modern Russian with sadness, depression, and boredom. However, in ascetic patristic literature, this passion differs from the passion of sorrow, and can more accurately be described as indolence, a lack of courage, a cowardly abandonment of the spiritual struggle, a desire for entertainment, and spiritual laxity. Outwardly, despondency can manifest not only as inactivity but also as very persistent and active external activity accompanied by the same inner numbness. “In prayer it is weak, but in bodily service it is strong as iron, and in manual labor it is tireless” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Word 13, para. 2). — Translator’s note.

²¹ The cell rule refers to prayer with prayer beads, prostrations, and edifying reading.

²² A stichera following the prayer canon to the Most Holy Theotokos.

— It's more likely that you allowed yourself to become lax. Come on, toughen yourself up—learn to love asceticism! I'm living with half a lung—they removed the rest.²³ But do you know how many prostrations I do? Oh, no, I won't tell you—it's a military secret! But I'll tell you this in confidence: every day I pray with my rosary, bowing all the way to the ground, and when my right hand gets tired, I make the sign of the cross with my left. I'm not bragging; I'm telling you this out of love. Do you know how people who are a thousand times weaker than you struggle? And you?.. With your health, the paratroopers would gladly take you on! How did you end up so slack? I'll pray for you, but you have to make an effort yourself! Do you understand? Devote yourself entirely to spiritual work, and then you'll see results in your obedience as well.

— Geronda, sometimes I'm overcome by despondency in my cell.

— And what do you do in your cell? Do you pray, read the Holy Fathers? Or do you just laze around? Do your very best to ensure that your time isn't wasted. If you can't pray, read the Holy Fathers—their writings are especially helpful to you in this state. And if you give up, the devil may take advantage of your weak state and “bring you to nothing.”

Let's not cut the cord

— Geronda, how many people do you see each day!... By evening, you're so exhausted you're barely recognizable, but in the morning, you'd never guess how worn out you were. You just radiate! How do you manage that?

— Well, how?.. I just “don't cut the cord,” that's all.²⁴

— Sometimes, Geronda, because of my duties, I miss Vespers at the church. I make my way back to my cell, completely exhausted, and say, “Oh, I'll just lie down... It's okay, I'll lie down and pray with my rosary.” But all my “rosary sessions while lying down” end with me falling asleep and not praying at all.

— No, blessed soul, no matter how tired you are, you must not go to sleep without praying. At least read the Trisagion and Psalm 50, venerate the icons of Christ and the Most Holy Theotokos, make the sign of the cross over your pillow, and only then lie down. And don't forget to set your alarm so you can get up an hour before Midnight Office begins for your private prayer rule! You must compel yourself to pray. But this compulsion must come from the heart—the heart must feel that there is no other way without it.

For God loves a cheerful giver.²⁵

— But what if, Geronda, I have absolutely no strength or desire at all?

— Compel yourself anyway. Even if only a little at a time, do some kind of spiritual work. Try to devote at least a little time each day to spiritual practices: read a spiritual book for a little while, pray for a little while. After all, reading the Holy Fathers, prayer, and church singing are the nourishment the soul needs every day.

We must not allow our day to pass entirely without prayer. During the war, it was like this: sitting in the trenches for several days without any attacks, we would fire a few shots toward the enemy from time to time—so that they wouldn't think we were asleep and try to catch us off guard. We must behave exactly the same way in the spiritual battle. If at times our strength runs out and we cannot fully observe our monastic rule, let us not “cut the line” entirely; let us try to stay in touch with God. A few bows, a little prayer with the rosary... Let's fire at least a couple of bursts from our automatic weapons at our spiritual enemy—the tangalashki. After all, if we don't fire at all, he'll take us captive. And as soon as we feel we've taken a short breather, we'll start fighting again with full force.

By neglecting his monastic rule—failing to make even a few bows, and not praying with his rosary at all—a monk becomes embittered and wild. He may be able to do non-spiritual work, such as carrying stones or even writing books. But he cannot pray. I see how some monks work constantly, while completely neglecting edifying reading and prayer. “I'll do this too,” they say, “and then that as well.” They cannot stop; they cease praying altogether and, in the end, become hardened and wild, turning into worldly people. Have

²³ In November 1966, the venerable elder underwent surgery to remove the upper lobe and part of the lower lobe of his left lung due to bronchiectasis. — Translator's note.

²⁴ The Reverend Elder means that he does not interrupt his communion with God or his prayer.

²⁵ 2 Cor. 9:7.

you seen hard workers in the secular world? They can hew stones from morning till night under the scorching sun; they can chop down trees day after day... But try dragging them into a church! They can't even stand there for half an hour—even if you promise them triple their salary. They come out of the church and stand there smoking. I've seen this myself more than once.

Without prayer, a person drifts away from God and becomes like an ox: he works, then eats, then sleeps, eats again, works again... And the further he drifts from God, the harder it is for him to return. The heart grows cold, and there comes a moment when it is completely unable to pray. For such a person to come to their senses, their heart must soften, turn to repentance, and be filled with contrition.

Prepare yourself to begin

— Geronda, where does this sloth come from within me?

— Apathy? Probably, it arises because you simply aren't joyful in the spiritual life! You don't rejoice in the spiritual because you haven't yet experienced how sweet the spiritual life is.

— Geronda, let's say this period of apathy is coming to an end. What's the right way to return to a normal spiritual life—all at once or gradually? Is it possible to rebuild my spiritual discipline little by little: the first day—just a little bit of the Jesus Prayer, the second—a little more, and then—add a little more each time?..

— First, you need to want to make a start. And then you need to push yourself a little and put that desire into action. Even if a person is exhausted, by pushing themselves just a little, they feel strength returning and are able to continue their spiritual work. This small act of self-discipline carries immense weight in God's eyes. When God sees our good will, He Himself intervenes. And when He intervenes, it is precisely that—Divine intervention—that saves us.

— Geronda, sometimes I have some free time, but I don't feel like doing anything spiritual.

— That happens, too. It's called "losing one's appetite." That's exactly when you need to push yourself a little toward spiritual practice. After all, when a person falls ill, they usually lose their appetite. But the sick person forces themselves to eat anyway. Whether you have an appetite or not, you still have to force yourself. Start with something light, because your stomach is too weak for heavy food, then move on to something a little more substantial... That way, your appetite gradually returns. After all, if you don't eat anything at all, you'll never get back on your feet. So it is with you—don't let yourself go spiritually! If you give up on yourself and stop nourishing yourself entirely, you'll destroy yourself. Feed yourself light spiritual food, spoonful by spoonful, until you gradually come to your senses. To get started, you need to make an effort—just a tiny bit.

— That's true, Geronda, that's exactly where my difficulty lies—I just can't seem to get started! I can't bring myself to stick to a routine.

— Yes... The oil in your engine has thickened. But start small: a few prostrations, a little reading of the Holy Fathers, a little prayer with your rosary. That way, your heart will slowly warm up. Tell yourself: "Well, I'll do at least five prostrations today." You'll see for yourself: once your engine starts up and picks up speed, you'll want to keep going—you won't be able to stop.

Let's give the soul the food it craves

— Geronda, where should I start if I have no "appetite" for spiritual food?

— Start with the spiritual food that seems most appealing to you—that will awaken your appetite for the rest. Set the spiritual table, arrange a variety of spiritual dishes, sit down, and look at them: what will awaken your spiritual appetite? Would you like to read a few pages from the Holy Fathers? Say a few prayers with your rosary? Sing a prayer canon? Read the Psalter or make a few prostrations? What, you don't feel like doing anything at all? How about a tap on the forehead with a wooden spoon?

— Could I start with some needlework, Geronda?

— You may. But don't forget to recite the Jesus Prayer while you're working.

— Geronda, isn't there another danger here: by doing what I like, am I following my own will?

— I'll explain. In spiritual practice, you need to nourish the soul with what is pleasing to it and what it craves. That way, the soul is delighted, nourished, and inspired to greater spiritual effort. After all, when we're sick and our body craves something, we listen to it. As a child, when I had anemia, I constantly asked

my parents for lemons. But my parents didn't know if it was okay for me to eat that many, so they didn't give them to me, waiting for the doctor's advice. And what happened? The doctor came, examined me, and suddenly said, "Give the child more lemons!" You see: my body was lacking the vitamins found in lemons, and it was asking for them on its own.

— Geronda, when I was struggling with spiritual apathy, I drew up a spiritual schedule to overcome it and tried to follow it.

— A schedule is a good thing. But first, you must prepare your heart. Then you can draw up schedules.

— Maybe, Geronda, could you write a spiritual routine for me yourself?

— Why not? Here, take this: "Engage in whatever spiritual practice you yourself enjoy." Don't force yourself into a rigid framework out of anxiety or guilt. Listen to yourself: what specific nourishment does your soul need? Then feed it with that. If you feel like singing—sing. If you feel like reading, sit down and read. If you feel drawn to the Jesus Prayer, pray. You can also engage in any other soul-nourishing activity; the main thing is not to box yourself in. I hope you understand what I mean. But everything we're talking about now applies primarily to the beginning of the spiritual path, before your soul has tasted the sweetness of the spiritual life. Then you'll get on the spiritual tracks, and they'll guide you to your destination on their own. So don't worry. By God's grace, your inner engine will start up, and the spiritual locomotive will race forward.

Prayer must spring from love

— Geronda, you're so tired... Where do you still find the strength to pray?

— I don't waste my strength in prayer; on the contrary, I gain strength from it. I've even come to realize this: a person truly gains strength only through prayer. When prayer comes from the heart, it drives away fatigue, sleep, and hunger. The soul is warmed, and you no longer feel the need to sleep or eat. You live in a supernatural state and are nourished in a different way—you are nourished by the spiritual.

— Geronda, but I just don't have a love for prayer.

— Your heart hasn't warmed up yet. You pray not because you want to, but because "you have to." The starting point for your actions is discipline, which is why everything feels so dry. Tell me, how do you usually begin your prayer?

— Well, what do you mean, Geronda?.. With the thought that I need to pray for myself, that I need to pray for others...

— You really are an amazing person!... You do everything because "you have to." Praying—"you have to," bowing—"you have to," reading Scripture—"you have to" too... With all these "you have to"s, you're driving yourself into a corner. Of course, it's good that you're a disciplined person. But you shouldn't start with that; you should start with a simple, humble thought, with pain. Your heart needs to come alive; it needs to feel pain. Then you won't need to force yourself. You'll feel joy, awe, and rapture.

— Geronda, it feels like something is weighing me down during prayer... My soul doesn't soar toward Heaven.

— Do you ever feel joy during prayer? I ask because it seems to me that you're driving yourself into a corner. You begin your spiritual work out of love, but then selfishness gradually creeps in—and you don't even notice it! You start keeping track: "Today I'll do this many prostrations, this many rosary beads; tomorrow—this many; the day after tomorrow—even more..." And what drives you first and foremost is not love for Christ or for the person who needs your prayerful help. No, you want to feel that you've done a lot; you're in a hurry to get your name in the calendar of saints. You don't say humbly, "Well, since the Lord said:

'Be holy,²⁶ ' then I, too, will strive to the best of my ability." You are driven by cold calculation: "I absolutely must become a saint."

— Geronda, how can I tighten the screws on myself a bit more so that I can pray better?

— What does prayer have to do with tightening the screws, anyway?.. Why shouldn't your prayer simply spring from love?

— But how can we achieve this, Geronda?

²⁶ 1 Peter 1:16, Lev. 11:44.

— We must reflect on God’s blessings and on Him Himself, our Benefactor. Having realized our ingratitude and sinfulness, we must seek His mercy. The heart of a person who has experienced God’s great blessings grows stronger, is warmed, and can even attain unceasing prayer.

We must not distract others—or ourselves—from prayer

— Geronda, sometimes I’m praying in my cell, and I catch myself thinking, “What if some sister were to burst in right now!...” Such thoughts distract me from prayer.

— I’d rather be hit over the head with the back of a hammer than have someone suddenly burst into my cell and catch me in prayer! When you’re suddenly caught in prayer, it’s as if you’re flying, and someone grabs you by the wings and snaps them off! You don’t understand what it means to disturb a person during prayer—because you yourselves have not yet experienced spiritual states of prayer. You don’t know from experience what it means to be in communion with God—I’m talking about a state where a person, so to speak, is lifted off the ground. If you knew, you would respect another person’s prayer. If you had this spiritual sensitivity, you would think: “How can you interrupt someone when they’re praying?” Realizing the immense harm you’re causing by pulling them away from their prayer, you’d be more careful. When I speak of caution, I do not mean anxiety or stiffness, but respect for a sister who is currently communing with God. But you lack spiritual sensitivity... Well then, at least be well-mannered. Make it a rule to knock on someone’s door and say aloud: “Through the prayers of our holy fathers!...”²⁷ — so that the person won’t worry that you’ll burst in on them and won’t be in a constant state of tension. It’s one thing to be spiritually vigilant, and quite another to be constantly on edge and nervous: “Will someone burst into my cell?” The latter is very exhausting and wears a person down.

— But maybe, Geronda, the sister isn’t knocking on the door with malicious intent, but simply out of naivety?

— Simple-mindedness, my foot!... To knock once on the door and, upon not hearing “Amen” in reply, burst into someone else’s cell!... I can’t fathom it—how on earth can anyone behave that way? What if, right now, behind that door, a sister is crying, praying to God, and doesn’t want anyone to see her? When I go to a neighboring cell on Mount Athos and hear the brothers reciting Vespers, I can stand out in the cold for a whole hour, praying with my rosary and waiting until they finish. I do this because I don’t want to disturb or embarrass them, and I don’t want them to rush through the service just for my sake. When I hear hymns coming from the church, would I open the door and walk in as if nothing were wrong, as if I had the right to do so? And who gave me that right? No, the brothers might be happy to grant me such a right, but I myself do not want to claim such a selfish right for myself. It is selfishness to think that I am someone important and to disrespect my neighbors.

We must be spiritually sensitive. Once on Mount Sinai, I was coming down from the cell of Saints Galaktion and Epistimia toward the monastery. Suddenly, I saw two Bedouin children ahead of me: a boy and a girl. The children were standing right on the path. They were holding prayer beads²⁸ and praying. There was no other way around them, so, careful not to disturb them, I turned and stepped back a little. I waited until they finished their prayer, and only then did I continue on my way.

“Geronda, as soon as I start praying, all sorts of tasks I haven’t finished in my duties come to mind.”

“Me too—if I haven’t finished something, I can’t pray in peace. So, if you want to avoid distractions during prayer, first finish whatever you can handle quickly. And then start praying and tell yourself: ‘Well, I’ve finished everything. Now the only thing left unfinished is my soul. It’s time to take care of it.’”

— Geronda, I think that if something difficult were to happen in my life, it would help me in my prayer.

— What kind of nonsense are you talking about? Does a war have to break out for you to seek Christ? When everything around you is calm and peaceful, that’s the best condition for your inner self to be calm and

²⁷ Before entering another monk’s cell, it is customary in monasteries to knock, say, “Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us,” and wait for the reply “Amen.” — Translator’s note.

²⁸ The Venerable Paisius uses the word “κομπολόγια” here, which usually refers not to knotted rosaries but to bead-like prayer strings—such as those used by both Muslims and Catholics. — Translator’s note.

still as well. Prayer requires not being distracted by external things and having the right inner disposition. And in general, not being distracted is very helpful in the spiritual life.

Forward this dream to those who can't fall asleep

— Geronda, why do I feel sleepy during prayer?

— Because you're sleeping on the go! You've allowed yourself to become lax, and now you have to constantly push yourself. But think about it: can you really fall asleep peacefully when something is truly troubling you? Or, for example, if someone has done us a great favor—in that case, we won't be too lazy and will be able to pray for that person all night long. If we have the strength for that, then why not ask ourselves the following question: "If I'm willing to deprive myself of sleep for the sake of a benefactor, what's stopping me from sacrificing my sleep in gratitude to God, Who took up the Cross and endured crucifixion for my sake?"

— Geronda, could drowsiness be caused by physical weakness?

— It might. Sometimes drowsiness is caused by exhaustion, low blood pressure, or something similar. You need to find the cause and eliminate it if possible.

— Geronda, sometimes a person prays earnestly about something, yet sleep still overcomes him. How can that be?

— If your heart is truly troubled by something, sleep won't take hold. However, you must also make an effort yourself. For example, if you feel sleepy during your private prayer, go wash your face with cold water and refresh yourself.

— But during the All-Night Vigil, sleep just completely overwhelms me. What should I do?

— Fight it off, too. During the service in the church, a person finds inner peace, but their body grows tired. That's when sleep starts to take hold. But if you don't give in to sleep, you fight it off, and it recedes. An hour or two later, sleep starts to overwhelm you again. This wave of sleep is even more persistent, and it's harder to drive it away, but if you make an effort, you can overcome it too. You didn't get pulled onto "Sleep Train No. 1," and "Sleep Train No. 2" left without you—that's all there is to it: the temptation to sleep has retreated from you.

— Geronda, during the All-Night Vigil, drowsiness can overcome me for two hours straight...

— Here's an idea: send sleep where it's needed more—to hospitals, to psychiatric clinics. Pray: "My God, grant sleep to those who cannot fall asleep!... May those who are in pain, those whose nerves are stretched tight as strings, sleep peacefully." Take the sleep that's fighting you, mold it into pills, and send them by prayer mail to those unfortunate souls who are suffering and cannot sleep. And you yourself, day and night, give glory to God.

Chapter 2. On How the Devil Wages War against the person who prays

Don't Engage in Conversation with the Devil

Elder, I feel that I need to "connect" with God, but I still can't pray.

— If you truly feel the need to connect with God, then I don't understand why you can't pray. Perhaps this is a temptation from the evil one. He constantly trips people up and prevents them from praying.

— Geronda, during prayer, thoughts about various monastic matters come to my mind.

— Just tell yourself, "I'll think about that later..."—and keep praying.

— Geronda, the most frustrating thing is that these are usually thoughts about such trivial matters!...

— That's exactly why you need to put them off until later. After all, if you get distracted and, interrupting your prayer, start mulling over these trivialities in your mind, the enemy will start throwing at you not just trivialities, but something more serious—to stop your prayer altogether. You need to keep yourself in check. Do you know how inventive the devil is? He puts all sorts of filth into the minds of worldly people, but that filth is immediately obvious. And so, for spiritual people, he doesn't put filth into their minds, but

some kind of triviality, and they naively let it in. But this is more dangerous than filth! After all, people think they're making progress; they don't see any filthy thoughts within themselves and find no reason for humility. Meanwhile, the mind isn't in prayer but wanders aimlessly, and the heart remains hardened.

— You know, Geronda, sometimes during prayer I have these “bright thoughts”!... I can see very clearly how to solve some complicated problem. But then it turns out that the solution was wrong...

— Do you know how cunning the devil is?... He understands that if he puts a filthy thought into your mind during prayer, you'll cast it aside. So instead of filth, he “helps” you “solve problems.” You'll be overjoyed: “Oh, what a wonderful thought!” And it didn't just come at any old time, but during prayer!... A true divine revelation!” But if the devil truly wanted what's best for you, he'd put these thoughts into your mind at any other time. And yet he doesn't do that! He shows up specifically during prayer and, by distracting you with nonsense, imposes his “mediation services.” So don't pay any attention to his pestering. Say: “Thank you very much, sir, for the package of services you've offered, but we'll manage just fine without you. Get out of here!” See how cunning he is: he wants to lead a spiritual person astray by instilling supposedly spiritual thoughts in him so that, in the words of the prophet David, his prayer might become a sin.²⁹

— Geronda, during prayer, evil thoughts or images come to my mind.

— That's the work of the devil. He wants to confuse you, to throw you off balance. It's easy for him to catch you off guard when you're physically exhausted, especially when you're suffering from lack of sleep. Tangalashka waits for the right moment, and when you're between sleep and wakefulness, he shows you all sorts of filthy images, and then the very next moment he shouts, “Look at the filth in this shameless woman's mind!” Wanting to plunge you into despair, he passes off his own filth as yours. So just ignore him. Pray, “Lord, have mercy,” and to focus on your prayer, think of Christ, the Most Holy Theotokos, and the holy angels. This will be your countermeasure against the devil's schemes.

The devil prevents a person from praying

— Geronda, sometimes I plan to hold an all-night vigil in my cell, but circumstances arise that prevent me from doing so. What is the reason for this?

— Well, if the obstacle comes from God, then He has allowed it for your own good.

— But what if one obstacle follows another?

— Then there's a bit of pride involved.

— I don't understand, Geronda. What do you mean, “there's a bit of pride involved”?

— Look: the task is to set your priorities correctly. If you put your duties first and prayer second, then you yourself are giving the enemy the right to create obstacles for you. And isn't there pride in valuing your duties above prayer? And pride is such a thing: one of its signs is a lack of reverence.

— Geronda, what specific obstacles does the evil one put in the way of prayer?

— Oh, there's nothing he won't do!... After all, he has a thousand and one tricks up his sleeve! As soon as a person starts to pray, he's right there. Sometimes he distracts you with wandering thoughts and daydreams, sometimes with some kind of noise, and sometimes he'll come up with something else ... If only you knew how much I suffered at his hands when I lived at the Stomion Monastery!³⁰ One late evening, I went to the church to pray. The monastery gates were closed, so I entered the church and latched the door behind me. Around midnight, the bell began to rattle against the latch: “ding-ding.” It kept jingling nonstop—it wanted to make me stop praying and go see what was going on. Not wanting to be distracted by the noise, I went into the sanctuary. I had to stand by the Crucifix behind the altar until morning.

The Cross of Christ has great power. When I became a novice, the tangalashkas turned fiercely against me. At night they would constantly knock on my door and shout: “Through the prayers! The Saints! Father!” I would open the door, and although I saw no one, a powerful fear would grip me; it was as if it were pushing me out of the cell—I couldn't stay inside. I felt terrible. I cried and prayed, but nothing helped—I had to leave the cell and go down to the monastery courtyard. And then one day after Vespers, an elderly monk, a member of the Holy Synod, saw me in the courtyard. He asked, “My son, why aren't you going back to your cell? Can't you see that there's no one else from the brotherhood in the courtyard but you? All the fathers are

²⁹ Ps. 108:7.

³⁰ From 1958 to 1962.

praying in their cells right now.” I burst into tears and told him everything. He listened attentively, went up to his cell, brought back a piece of wax containing a particle of the Precious Wood of the Lord’s Cross, and said, “Take this, my son. Go to your cell and fear nothing.” I went up to my cell, and no sooner had I closed the door behind me than I heard a loud knock and the usual cry: “Through the prayers of the saints! Father!” I replied, “Amen.” The door opened, and a police officer entered the cell—in full uniform, except that instead of epaulets, he had diagonal stripes on his sleeves, like on an old police uniform. He walked in and bellowed, “You filthy, disgusting novice! You haven’t even been tonsured as a rasophore yet, and you’ve already started collecting all sorts of splinters?!” He yelled and yelled, then suddenly burst into laughter—I remember, he had such a terrifying laugh... However, even though he was shouting, he couldn’t come near me—after all, I was holding a fragment of the True and Life-Giving Tree in my hands. And as soon as I cried out, “Lord Jesus Christ!”—the demonic “policeman” vanished.

Chapter 3.

How the Heart Is Warmed by Prayer

Holy Icons Help Us Pray

Geronda, where can I find comfort when I’m upset?

— Turn to prayer. Even if you simply rest your forehead reverently against a holy icon, you will feel comfort. Make your cell resemble a small church; hang icons that you particularly venerate on the walls, and you yourself will see how much comfort you find in this.

— Geronda, sometimes during prayer I feel the urge to venerate the icons, and I kiss them. Is it permissible to do this?

— Not only is it allowed, but it is necessary! This is exactly how we should venerate icons: we should kiss them because love for Christ, for the Most Holy Theotokos, and for the saints overflows from our hearts. This love moves us to kneel before the holy images and reverently kiss them.

Once I was standing before the icons of Christ and the Most Holy Mother of God, praying. It was March 26,³¹ the day on which the Church celebrates the Feast of the Archangel Gabriel. Suddenly, I saw that the Lord and the Mother of God were moving as if they were alive! “My Christ,” I began to plead, “bless me!... My Most Holy Mother of God, bless me!...” I began to sink to my knees, and at that moment an extraordinary fragrance filled the cell. I felt as if I were going mad. Even the dusty mat on which I make my prostrations began to give off a fragrance; I knelt and kissed it. It was an unearthly fragrance!

— Geronda, is it helpful to visualize the image of Christ in one’s mind during prayer?

— Look: if you pray before an icon, it helps you. From the icon, your mind ascends to the sacred figure depicted on it.³² But sometimes you pray not before an icon: either you’re sitting on a bench, hunched over, or you’re kneeling, with your eyes closed. In such cases, you must not conjure up images, even the most sacred ones. This is dangerous because the tangalashka can take advantage of your imagination. It will pass off your own fantasies as divine visions in order to lead you into delusion and cause you great harm.

This applies especially to the Jesus Prayer. It is better to recite it with a pure mind, free from thoughts and images—even if they are images of Christ or scenes from Scripture. This is particularly dangerous for people with a vivid imagination and the sin of pride. Visualizing events from Scripture in the mind is permissible only in exceptional cases: when impure thoughts or blasphemy against God arise within us. But even so, the most beneficial image for us is the awareness of our own sinfulness and ingratitude.

The rosary is a machine gun against the devil

— Geronda, why are prayer beads so important to us?

³¹ In 1984.

³² “The veneration of the image is directed toward the original.” See: St. Basil the Great, **On the Holy Spirit**, To St. Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium, Chapter 18. The Seventh Ecumenical Council refers to this formula, which has become a patristic testimony in defense of icon veneration. — Translator’s note.

— The rosary is something we have inherited. It is a blessing from our predecessors—the holy fathers. For this reason alone, its value is immense. After all, it’s just like in the secular world: when a grandfather leaves some object to his grandson as an inheritance—to an outsider it’s a mere trifle, but to the heir himself, it’s a treasure and a blessing. Imagine how much greater significance the rosary must have for monks, since it was left to them as an inheritance by the holy fathers!

In the past, before clocks existed, monks measured the duration of their prayers using prayer beads. In those days, the knots on the beads were very simple. One ascetic fasted very strictly, prayed fervently, and made many prostrations, but a mischievous demon kept interfering with him: every so often, it would untie the knots on his prayer beads. The poor monk kept bowing over and over until he collapsed from exhaustion—for he could not count the number of bows or prayers. And then an angel of the Lord appeared to the monk and taught him to braid the rosary so that each knot would consist of nine crosses. After that, the demon, who trembles before the Cross, could no longer untie the knots. So there you have it—each knot on the rosary consists of nine crosses, and they symbolize the nine orders of angels.

— Geronda, there are rosaries with thirty-three knots, fifty, one hundred, three hundred... Do all these numbers have some spiritual significance?

— Only the number thirty-three has symbolic meaning. It symbolizes the thirty-three years that Christ lived on earth. The other numbers have no symbolic meaning: they simply help us count the number of bows or prayers.

There are certain engines that are started using a rope with a handle at the end. When you want to start the engine, you grab the rope and pull it hard several times—until the congealed oil warms up. The rosary is just like that rope we “pull”—once, twice, five times, ten times... At some point, the “oil warms up” and the spiritual engine of unceasing prayer starts running. After that, the heart works in prayer on its own. But even when the heart “starts up” and begins to function in prayer, you still shouldn’t set the rosary aside—so as not to set a bad example for those whose hearts haven’t yet “started up” or begun to function in the Jesus Prayer.

— Geronda, sometimes people are watching, and I stand there looking important, fingering my rosary, but I’m only reciting the prayer mechanically... Is there a danger of seeking human approval in this?

— If you’re fingering the rosary for show, to please others, it won’t do you any good—even if you were to rub the skin right off your fingers. All that will remain is exhaustion and the false impression that you’re supposedly engaged in deep prayer.

— Geronda, it still feels so strange to hold the rosary in my hands...

— Remember that you’re holding them so you won’t forget the Jesus Prayer, which you must cultivate within—in your heart. Especially when you leave your cell, remember that the enemy is ready to attack you at any moment. Therefore, when you leave your cell, behave like a good soldier who, when climbing out of a trench, never lets go of his weapon. The rosary is a very powerful weapon, a true monastic machine gun. The knots are the bullets. The battle rages, spiritual bullets fly, and the demons fall under their hail as if mowed down.

Spiritual Reading Before Prayer

— Geronda, when it’s time to pray, my heart feels cold; it doesn’t tremble with joy at all. I see that time is passing, yet I sit with my hands folded, and I begin to feel weighed down by melancholy and despondency.

— Do you read any spiritual books before you pray?

— Usually not.

— Why not? Didn’t we agree that before prayer you should sit down and read something spiritual so that your heart might feel its sweetness? You’re depriving yourself of spiritual nourishment, and that’s why you don’t feel how sweet it tastes. But even just a little—say, two or three lines—read from Scripture, or from the “Evergetin,”³³ or from the Paterikon before prayer will warm your heart, let it feel how sweet spiritual nourishment is, and awaken a thirst for the spiritual. Worldly cares will recede, and your mind will soar into

³³ “Evergetin”—a collection of various teachings and narratives of the Holy Fathers, compiled in the 11th century by the monk Paul, founder, benefactor, and abbot of the Monastery of Panagia Evergetida (Our Lady the Benefactor) in Constantinople, from which the collection derives its name. First published in Greek in 1783; Russian translation: Evergetin, or Charity, in four volumes (in two books). Moscow: Brotherhood in the Name of the Holy Trinity, 2011. — Translator’s note.

the realm of the divine. The Paterikon will transport you to Thebaid³⁴ and Nitria,³⁵ and you will feel that the holy fathers are right beside you. “The Spiritual Meadow,” “The History of the God-Lovers,” “Lavsaik,” and “Memorable Tales” are also easy to read. But these are already solid food.

— Geronda, I spend more time reading the books of the Holy Fathers than praying.

— Read a little less. Devote more time to daily self-examination and the Jesus Prayer. Otherwise, by merely reading spiritual books, a person remains barren. He will bear fruit when he begins to labor and ask for Divine intervention, for God’s grace. Reading the works of the Church Fathers is beneficial when it is followed by prayer. Therefore, read exactly as much as you need spiritually—enough to feel a sense of devotion and a desire to pray.

The prayer canons to the Most Holy Theotokos bring immense benefit to the soul

— Geronda, how can one come to love the Most Holy Theotokos?

— Pray the “Theotokarion” every day.³⁶ Do you know how this collection, dedicated to the Most Holy Theotokos, will help you come to love Her? You’ll see for yourself later how She will appreciate it... She’ll send you such comfort!...

— Geronda, the Mother Superior tells me, “It’s time for you to wake up!” What should I focus on to rekindle my zeal for the spiritual life?

— Read one canon from *Theotokaria* every day. You’ll see what a fine person you’ll become! One canon from this beautiful collection every day, as a monastic rule. Is it impossible to read the entire canon? No problem: read the first troparion from each song, and then the stichera found at the end of each canon.

— Geronda, may I set aside a specific time each day to devote myself solely to prayer and nothing else?

— During that time, you can recite the Jesus Prayer and, taking a break, sing the supplicatory canon to the Mother of God or read a canon from *Theotokaria*.

— Geronda, when is it better to read the canons from “Theotokaria”—in the morning or in the evening?

— It’s better in the morning—that way, what you’ve read will remain in your memory throughout the day. But even during the day, when you’re performing your duties, you can also take a short break to read a canon from “Theotokaria.”

The prayer canons from “Theotokaria” are of immense benefit to the soul. The heart of the one praying is warmed and filled with tenderness. I remember that Father Kirill,³⁷ the abbot of the Kutlumush Monastery, could not help but weep when he read “The Theotokarion.” Just a single thought from “The Theotokarion” is capable of transforming the soul.

Church chanting delights and soothes the soul

— Geronda, even though I understand how beneficial the Jesus Prayer is, I still can’t manage to pray it constantly.

— When you find it difficult to pray the Jesus Prayer, quietly sing church hymns. That, too, is prayer. When you sing something from the Divine Liturgy, it brings tenderness to the heart and soothes it. Moreover, church hymns contain many “spiritual calories” and nourish the soul. This creates favorable conditions for a person to develop a taste for the Jesus Prayer and to pray it willingly. A little spiritual reading (from “powerful” books), the Jesus Prayer, prostrations, and church singing—these, in my opinion, are the true oars for the boat of spiritual life.

³⁴ The Thebaid—a region in Upper Egypt with Thebes as its capital. Here, in the desert, monasticism began to develop from the earliest centuries of Christianity.

³⁵ Nitria—a valley in Egypt near the Libyan Desert with numerous lakes containing salt and saltpeter. In the early centuries of Christianity, it was one of the largest centers of monasticism.

³⁶ “Theotokarion”—a collection of 62 liturgical canons dedicated to the Most Holy Theotokos, compiled by St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite from manuscripts of Mount Athos and published in 1796. For the Slavonic translation, see: Theotokarion. Canons of the Mother of God for Every Day. Moscow: Orthodox St. Tikhon’s University for the Humanities, 2006. — Translator’s note.

³⁷ See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 126–129. — Translator’s note.

— Geronda, I do needlework in a quiet place, and no one disturbs me. But I still don't practice the Jesus Prayer...

— Then try, as much as possible, to make the Jesus Prayer and quiet church singing your spiritual needlework as well, and now engage in both forms of needlework at the same time! Try this: for one-third of the time set aside for your needlework, recite the Jesus Prayer while you work, and for the other two-thirds, work while quietly humming various church hymns—the ones that particularly touch your soul. In this way, by reciting the Jesus Prayer and singing something from the liturgy, you will preserve God's grace within yourself.

— Geronda, when I'm upset, I can be so rude to the sisters! And then I get even more upset when I realize how badly I behaved.

— Then sing something from the church. It will help you a lot. Sing some troparia quietly in your cell, or hum them while doing your duties—but only in a way that doesn't disturb others. Church singing soothes the soul. It even tames wild beasts—let alone a human being! Sometimes a lion—or maybe a wolf—when they hear church hymns, becomes as meek as a lamb, sits down, and listens quietly. But don't get me wrong—I'm not implying that you're like a wild beast!... But the devil takes advantage of your troubled state and pushes you to be rude to the sisters. But if you quietly hum a church hymn to yourself, you'll feel sweetness in your heart. And then you'll start to look at the sisters differently—with love.

— Geronda, sometimes my thoughts just overwhelm me, and I can't read or pray.

— Well, can you sing a hymn? Imagine a farmer standing at the edge of a field of unharvested wheat. The heat is unbearable, the ears of wheat are already bending toward the ground, and all sorts of thorns are growing all around. But the farmer starts singing his favorite, cheerful song, and off he goes to harvest! The song helps him forget his hardships, and he finishes the harvest in joy and high spirits. A double benefit: first, he has bread, and second, he still has plenty of strength left. A believer who overcomes the weight of temptations by singing a favorite hymn is like that farmer.

— Geronda, from time to time I feel a certain heaviness in my soul. Is this a temptation?

— Here's what you should do: when you feel that heaviness within yourself, don't pay any attention to it, but solemnly proclaim: "Be dismayed, hell! Be dismayed!"³⁸ — and then hum something from the church service. That way, the temptation will fade away. St. John Climacus says: "Psalm singing is the monk's weapon, which drives away sorrow."³⁹ I, too, advise those who are beset by temptations and sorrows to sing various church hymns.

— Geronda, sometimes I'm persistently tempted by a single impure thought. How can I drive it away?

— Just sing "It is truly meet..." You'll see, that little devil will run away right away! After all, by singing something from the church, we show the devil how much we despise him.

Chapter 4.

"Come, let us worship..."

Bowing is more beneficial than any other spiritual practice

Elder, your legs must be hurting, right?

— No, they don't hurt. After all, I'm doing spiritual exercises!

— What do you mean, Geronda?

— I bow to you, blessed soul! Well, what is a person without exercise? In the secular world, it's physical exercise; for us monks, it's bowing. In the secular world, people engage in physical exercise to keep their bodies healthy, while monks, through prostrations, make both body and soul as strong as heroes. Those poor laypeople don't even realize how beneficial prostrations are—not only for spiritual health, but also for

³⁸ See: St. John Chrysostom, Homily for Holy Pascha. In Greece, during the Easter service, while the Sermon of St. John Chrysostom is being read, the congregation repeats in unison after the priest the endings of certain phrases from the "Sermon," for example: "Be dismayed, O hell..." All: "Be dismayed!" — Translator's note.

³⁹ See: The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Word 13, para. 15. — Translator's note.

physical health. After all, prostrations prevent joint diseases from developing, banish flabbiness, eliminate sagging bellies, regulate the nervous system, and generally make a person strong and healthy. Moreover, they enable one to ascend to the spiritual heights of virtue easily and without getting out of breath—just as a trained person climbs mountain peaks.

Bows are necessary for both the young and the elderly, for those who suffer from carnal strife and for those who have already been freed from it. But those who are stronger should perform more bows than the frail—for heavier tasks are entrusted to powerful machines. Prostrations are especially beneficial for young people; they help them subdue the flesh. That is why I always advise the young: “Do as many prostrations as possible—both for yourselves and for those sick and elderly people who are no longer able to perform them.”

Prostrations are a form of prayer. But at the same time, they are an ascetic practice that brings greater benefit than any other spiritual practice. Prostrations not only help us start our spiritual engine, which begins to generate prayer, but they also bring many other benefits. First, by bowing, we worship God Himself and humbly ask for His mercy—and this is the most important thing. Second, prostrations humble our unrestrained flesh. Peace and detachment from carnal desires ensue. And third, prostrations also promote physical health. Thus, a person becomes healthier in both soul and body—that is, doubly strong.

Through prostrations, we ask God for forgiveness and express our gratitude to Him

— Geronda, I find it hard to bow. Oh, how I dislike them...

— When you bow, think about the fact that you are standing before God Himself and worshiping Him. This thought will help you come to love them.

Prostrations for oneself and for one’s neighbor, for one’s fellow human being—this is the most important spiritual practice of all. It is a practice one can labor at endlessly—provided one has the love and willingness to cultivate repentance within oneself. That is why prostrations are called prostrations⁴⁰ — because, in performing them, we humble ourselves and ask God for forgiveness. After all, when we have wronged another person and are repentant, we bow to them and say, “Forgive me and bless me.” Therefore, when we begin to bow, it is helpful to say with humility and repentance, “I have sinned, O Lord; forgive me.”

— Geronda, God has helped me heal my bodily and spiritual passions. How can I now express my gratitude to Him?

— Do you truly have this gratitude within you? If you truly do, then it has already expressed itself in some way. After all, the most important thing is not how you express your gratitude, but that it truly lives in your heart. If it lives there, you can express it however you like: through deeds, bows, or other ways... For example, stray kittens sometimes gather near my kaliva on Mount Athos, and I feed them. And in the evening, when I open the door and walk across the courtyard to get the mail from the mailbox by the gate, these kittens don’t know how to express their gratitude. They do all sorts of things: some run up and rub against my legs, others strut importantly in front of me, and still others climb up and down the trunk of the cypress tree... They somersault, spin around, and crawl under my feet again... Each kitten expresses gratitude and joy in its own way. What, do I really need the kittens’ gratitude? No, of course not—it’s not for me, but for them. Gratitude, if I may put it that way, joyfully “bursts” out of them—even though they are speechless animals. With this example, I want to show that the most important thing is to feel gratitude in your heart. If it’s there, you’ll find a way to express it sincerely.

When a person lives and moves in a space of love and gratitude, their bows aren’t made out of obligation, but out of love—because they’re overflowing with joy, because they love Christ. Then they don’t feel tired, just as children don’t feel tired when they meet their father. Their hearts overflow with love so much that they begin to leap and jump for joy.

Waist and Full Prostrations

— Geronda, when praying for someone with prayer beads, should one make the sign of the cross at each bead and perform a waist bow?

⁴⁰ In Greek, the words “prostration” and “repentance” are homonyms and are both denoted by the word μετάνοια (literally, “change of mind”). — Translator’s note.

— That depends on how much you want to offer to God. An offering that requires more effort is of greater value.

— Geronda, when we pray with a rosary and make waist bows, do we need to touch the ground with our hand?

— Not necessarily. With these bows, we touch our knee with our hand and then straighten up. It's a different matter with the waist bows we make when venerating icons or during the "Most Honorable" hymn at Matins, and in certain other cases. Then it's better to touch the ground with your hand—if you're physically able to do so.

— Geronda, when I pray with a rosary, making the sign of the cross and waist bows, it distracts me from concentrating.

— For me, on the contrary, it's easier to concentrate when, while praying with my rosary, I make the sign of the cross and perform waist bows. I get so absorbed that afterward, when I finish praying, my hand even hurts.

— Geronda, what about prostrations? How should they be done correctly?

— Do it properly. Bow all the way to the ground and straighten up after each bow. That way, you bow "deeper" to God, and your body gets less tired. Also, pay attention to this: don't rest on your open palm—as this can damage your tendons; instead, rest on the knuckles of your fist. And to prevent blisters, place a soft mat in front of you when bowing.

"The one who strives finds ways"

— Geronda, as I get older, my strength is fading, and I can no longer do many prostrations.

— That's natural. In old age, with every passing year, your strength diminishes more and more. But continue to strive faithfully nonetheless. When you don't have the strength for many full prostrations, replace them with waist bows or simply the Jesus Prayer. By the way, you don't have to do all the prostrations at once; you can break them up into parts. Finished a hundred beads? Do five prostrations. That way, after ten sets of beads, you'll have already done fifty prostrations. This method—doing them in parts rather than all at once—is both easier and more beneficial. If you ask someone who is weak to do fifty prostrations all at once, they'll start pleading and trying to convince you that it's beyond their strength. But if you do the prostrations in small increments, little by little, you can easily manage even a large number of them.

— Geronda, for some reason my legs and lower back have been aching so badly these past few days...

— Just do a few prostrations at a time—you'll see how much it helps.

— Even when it hurts, Geronda?

— Try doing them little by little, and you'll realize for yourself what's good for you. When my back hurts, I don't set a specific number of prostrations for myself, but I just keep doing them without counting—until the "traffic light" turns red. Then I stop and give myself a break. Then I continue again, and at some point I notice: ah, the "red light" has come on again... I remember how Father Tikhon,⁴¹ when he became very old and could no longer get back to his feet after a full prostration, tied a thick rope to the ceiling of his cell, and after each full prostration he would pull himself up by holding onto that rope. That's the method he devised so as not to deprive himself of prostrations. Father Tikhon continued to worship God with reverence almost until the very last days of his earthly life. For, as Abba Isaac says, "He who strives finds a way."⁴²

Part 3.

The Most Holy Theotokos, the angels, and the

⁴¹ See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. pp. 13–39. — Translator's note.

⁴² See: Isaac the Syrian, the Venerable. *Words of Asceticism*. Word 70. p. 429. — Translator's note.

saints— intercessors before God and our protectors

“Strive to keep your mind constantly with Christ, with the Mother of God, with the angels, and with the saints in Heaven.”

Chapter 1. On the fact that the Most Holy Mother of God is our tender and caring mother

Veneration of the Most Holy Theotokos

Elder, please tell us something about the Most Holy Theotokos.

— What can I tell you? You’re putting me in an awkward position. After all, to speak of the Mother of God, one must live by Her.

— Geronda, does the name of the Mother of God have spiritual power, just like the name of Christ?

— Yes. Anyone who feels a special reverence for the Most Holy Theotokos is inwardly transformed upon hearing Her name. If such a person sees the name of the Mother of God written, for example, on a scrap of paper, he reverently kisses that scrap of paper, and his heart trembles with joy. He can perform an entire divine service in honor of the Most Holy Theotokos, during which he will do nothing but kiss Her holy name.⁴³ When he venerates Her holy icons, he feels as if his lips are touching not wood and paint, but Her Herself. Out of love for Her, a person’s legs give way and he falls prostrate.

— Geronda, would you tell us about your pilgrimage to the island of Tinos to venerate the miraculous icon of the Most Holy Theotokos there?⁴⁴

— What can I say? Such a small icon, yet it radiates such great grace! I kissed it and couldn’t tear myself away from it for a very long time! I had to step slightly aside so as not to get in the way of other people.

— Geronda, pilgrims leave many charms, coins, and pieces of jewelry on the miraculous icons of the Most Holy Theotokos, but there are people who are tempted by this.

— Let me tell you a story about a very simple and devout man. He came to Mount Athos to venerate the Iveron Icon of the Mother of God. But it was completely covered with gold coins. On his way back, traveling from Iveron to the Stavronikita Monastery, he began to be troubled by these thoughts: “Mother of God,” he said, “I wanted to see You differently: simple, without coins, without gold.” And so he walked on, tormented by these thoughts, when suddenly he felt such intense pain that his vision began to spin!... He even sat down right in the middle of the road and could go no further. And so he began to ask the Mother of God for help: “Mother of God,” he said, “help me! Help me, and I will bring You a gift... two gold coins!” Then the Most Holy Lady Herself appeared to him and said: “You see?... That is how the gold coins appeared on My icon. They were offered to Me as gifts by people just like you—of their own free will. Do you think I need these coins? Do you think I asked for them?” The man’s pain vanished immediately. You see: he had a good disposition and strong faith, and that is why the Mother of God helped him.

Sometimes, in my cell on Mount Athos, I want to pray to the Most Holy Theotokos and think: “How can I go to ask Her for something with empty hands?” Then I gather a few wild mountain flowers, bring them to Her icon, and say: “Mother of God, these are flowers from Your garden; please accept them.” Before becoming a monk on Mount Athos, I had heard it referred to as the Mother of God’s garden, and I imagined that, just like in an ordinary garden, there would be various flower beds and plots, and fruit trees planted

⁴³ The Venerable Paisios himself, feeling a special reverence for the Most Holy Theotokos, would sometimes spend a long time kissing Her name written on a piece of paper.

⁴⁴ The Tinos Icon of the Mother of God, known as Megalochari (meaning “Great Joy”), is an ancient image of the Annunciation measuring approximately 25×35 cm. In the 10th century, the icon was buried under the ruins of a church and rediscovered in 1823. Many miracles are attributed to the icon, and the Church of the Annunciation, built in its honor, welcomes over a million pilgrims a year. — Translator’s note.

there... But when I arrived here, instead of flower beds and flower gardens, I saw only wild chestnut trees and strawberry bushes.⁴⁵ That's when I realized that Mount Athos is a spiritual garden. And as time passed, I sensed the presence of the Mother of God Herself there.

— Geronda, how can I feel the presence of the Mother of God so that my heart may be warmed?

— Since you bear the name of the great Mother of Christ and, by the grace of the Mother of all people,⁴⁶ call upon Her constantly. Say to Her: “My Lady, You have generously agreed that I should bear Your name, so help me to live as You wish. Other people are moved to tears by the mere sound of Your name, yet I bear it myself and do not feel Your presence?” I pray that the Most Holy Mother of God may always be with you and, like a mother bird, shelter you under Her angelic wings.

“Your people bring Your Mother before You in prayer, Christ”⁴⁷

— Geronda, in which of the icons of the Mother of God does She most closely resemble Herself in appearance?

— The Jerusalem Icon. I was once granted the grace to see the Most Holy Mother of God in my kaliva in Panagouda... If I tell you about this, how many people will find out about it afterward?

— No one will find out, Geronda.

— Since no one will find out, then listen... I had a vision: it was as if I were preparing for a very, very long journey. I needed to gather documents for the trip, exchange money, provide various certificates, but my passport wasn't ready... There were a lot of people around, but no one could help me. “What should I do?” I thought. — “Surely there must be at least one person who cares about me?” I was truly terrified. And suddenly the Bride appeared, her face radiant, dressed in gold-embroidered garments. How beautiful She was! She was glowing all over! “Don't worry,” She said, “I'll help you. Do you know who My Son is? The King.” She said this and gently touched my shoulder. Then she took my papers and tucked them into her clothes. Oh, what a graceful and noble gesture that was! Then She said, “Difficult days await you”—and gave Her instructions, including some for me personally.⁴⁸ Later, after much time had passed, I saw the Jerusalem Icon of the Mother of God in a book and recognized the One Who had appeared to me.

— Geronda, someone asked us: “If our salvation is in God's hands, then why, when praying to the Mother of God, do we say, ‘Most Holy Mother of God, save us’?”

— Imagine that a woman has a neighbor. And this neighbor's son is a minister. So the woman asks her neighbor to help find a job for her son. The neighbor agrees to help, but she won't be the one looking for a job for the young man herself. No, she'll ask her son, who, as a minister, is truly able to help. And he will help, because his mother is asking him to. In the same way, we ask the Mother of God to save us, and she, in turn, asks her Son, who has the power to save us. And He mercifully grants His Mother's request, because He loves her very much.

— Geronda, I find it easier to pray to the Most Holy Theotokos than to the Lord. Could this be a sign of irreverence?

— You know, I feel the same way. I have an extraordinary reverence for Christ, and so, when I turn to the Most Holy Theotokos, I feel a greater sense of ease. It's the same with children—even grown men—who speak more openly to their mother than to their father, precisely because they hold him in such high esteem.

People who have true reverence for Christ approach Him with awe, whereas they turn to the Mother of God with greater boldness, because She is human.

— Sometimes, Geronda, while making prostrations, I recite the Canon to the Mother of God or the Akathist to Her from memory. Perhaps I should only say the Jesus Prayer while prostrating?

⁴⁵ The strawberry tree (Latin: *Arbutus*) is a small evergreen tree or shrub of the heath family, with smooth coral-red or fissured, rough brown bark. — Translator's note

⁴⁶ In the Greek Church, laypeople and monks may bear names in honor of the Most Holy Theotokos, such as Mary, Panagia, Panagouda, and even in honor of the Lord—Christ. — Translator's note.

⁴⁷ Octoechos, Tone 1. On Sundays, the Liturgy is “Blessed” and “Theotokos.”

⁴⁸ The Venerable Paisios recounted this in 1984 and gave no further explanation.

— No, do as you feel led. After all, the Mother of God conveys all our requests to Christ one way or another. But She Herself, through Her care and tender love, fills our souls with love and devotion⁴⁹ toward Christ. I ask the Mother of God to take my heart, purify it, and divide it into four parts: to give three parts to the Most Holy Trinity and to keep one for Herself.

— Geronda, when I pray the Jesus Prayer, a long time may pass, and I do not dedicate a single rosary bead to the Most Holy Theotokos, because I cannot leave out the name of Christ.

— Are you afraid that the Mother of God will be offended by you? Blessed soul, haven't we spoken about how our prayers to the Most Holy Theotokos and to any of the saints are ultimately directed toward Christ? Do as your heart prompts you. And the Mother of God and the saints do not take offense.

— Geronda, what is the proper way to perform a private all-night vigil in honor of the Most Holy Theotokos?

— First, meditate on the Most Holy Theotokos. Excerpts from the prayer canon to the Most Holy Theotokos, from the "Theotokaria," or from the Akathist can help with this. Then pray with your rosary and do whatever the "abbot" of your heart "decrees," that is, whatever your own "heart's rule" prescribes.⁵⁰

— Geronda, is the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos a doxology?

— Yes, it is a hymn of praise. You can read it as an expression of gratitude to the Mother of God after She has granted one of your requests. After all, you shouldn't turn to Her only with requests; you must also thank Her. The Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos⁵¹ is a great blessing. And its author has remained unknown. Learn the Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos by heart and read it not only when prescribed by the rule, but also throughout the day.

"You intercede for all, O Good One"

— Geronda, I still haven't received any "treats" from you for my name day. And the sisters were so looking forward to getting something "delicious"⁵² from you as well...

— Yes, you're right... I didn't send any "sweets" this time—so, naturally, you had nothing to treat the sisters with... But I sent you my blessing anyway: just not as usual, but in a different way.

A few days will pass, and when we on Holy Mount Athos also celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of our Mother,⁵³ I will once again ask Her to bestow upon you Her sweet love and tender care, and to grant you many divine gifts.

— Geronda, when I keep falling in my spiritual struggle, I am overcome with sadness.

— Sing "You Intercede for All, O Good One" and "Joy of All Who Sorrow."⁵⁴ Practice this as a monastic rule, and the Mother of God will help you. After all, the Most Holy Theotokos never abandons us. She carries us on Her shoulders; all we need to do is want it ourselves and not kick and scream like disobedient children.

— Geronda, I would like the Mother of God to hold me in Her embrace, just as She holds Christ.

— Hasn't She ever held you in Her arms? Haven't you ever felt like a baby in Her embrace? When I'm near Her, I feel like a child. I feel that She is my Mother. I often press myself against Her icon and say, "Mother of God, nourish me with the milk of Your grace!" I feel like a baby lying carefree in its mother's arms, suckling at her breast, feeling her great love and inexpressible tenderness. That is how I am nourished by grace.

— Geronda, why does the Mother of God sometimes grant my request immediately, and sometimes not?

⁴⁹ Eros (Greek: έρως) — intense, passionate love; delight, consolation. — Translator's note.

⁵⁰ The expression "if the abbot so desires" is taken from monastic statutes and means that certain changes to the statute are left to the abbot's discretion. In saying this, the Venerable Paisios means "act according to the dictates of your heart."

⁵¹ This refers to the Great Akathist, read on Saturday of the fifth week of Great Lent, which served as the prototype for all other akathists. The original Greek text possesses remarkable poetic beauty. — Translator's note.

⁵² This refers to a congratulatory letter, which usually also contained spiritual guidance.

⁵³ The Suroti Monastery follows the New Style calendar, while Mount Athos follows the Old Style; therefore, at Suroti, the Dormition and other fixed church feasts are celebrated 13 days earlier, while Easter and the feasts of the Paschal cycle are celebrated at the same time. — Translator's note.

⁵⁴ Stichera sung at the end of the prayer canon to the Most Holy Theotokos.

— When we are in dire need, She answers our prayer immediately, but when we are not, She postpones Her help for a time so that we may develop steadfastness and courage. When I lived at the Philotheou Monastery,⁵⁵ one time, immediately after the All-Night Vigil on the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God, one of the members of the Holy Synod sent me with a letter to the Iveron Monastery. After delivering the letter, I was to meet an elder at the monastery pier as he disembarked from the ship and escort him back to Philothei—a one-and-a-half-hour walk uphill. The Dormition Fast had just ended, and we had spent the entire night in the church at the vigil. That year, I divided the Dormition Fast into two parts: I ate nothing until the Transfiguration, ate on the day of the Transfiguration itself (), and then ate nothing again until the Dormition. I left the monastery immediately after the All-Night Vigil, without resting or even thinking to take at least a few crackers with me. I arrived at the Iversky Monastery, handed over the letter, and headed to the pier to wait for the ship. It was supposed to arrive around four in the afternoon, but it was running late. I began to feel unwell. There was a pile of logs lying off to the side, and I decided: “I’ll go sit over there out of the way, so no one will see me or start asking how I’m feeling.” When I sat down on the logs, a thought came to me to pray the rosary to the Mother of God, asking Her to send me some food. But I immediately resisted that thought and said to myself: “You wretch—are you going to bother the Most Holy Mother of God over such trifles?” And at that moment, I saw a monk standing right in front of me. He was holding a round loaf of bread, two figs, and a large bunch of grapes. “Take this in honor of the Mother of God,” he said, and... vanished! I was so moved and grateful that I could hardly breathe! I began to cry; I didn’t even feel like eating anymore. Oh Lord! What an extraordinary Mother of God we have! She cares even for our smallest of trifles! Do you understand how much She loves us?!

— Geronda, tell us how the Most Holy Mother of God helps and protects people.

— I’ll tell you about an incident that took place in Russia. In one of the provinces there, two monasteries stood side by side, separated by a railroad track. So the monks from one monastery went to the neighboring monastery for its patronal feast, where they got completely drunk on wine. When they were returning home drunk, unable to move their legs, they lay down right on the tracks and fell asleep snoring. Then the Mother of God appeared to the stationmaster of the nearest station and said to him, “Your train is about to run over My piglets!”—“What nonsense! What piglets are you talking about?” the stationmaster brushed her off. Then the Mother of God appeared to him a second time and sternly repeated, “Hey!... Your train is about to run over My piglets!” — “What kind of piglets are you talking about?” the stationmaster asked, growing concerned. “Did a herd of pigs or something get out onto the tracks?” He went to check, and lo and behold: there really were drunk monks sleeping on the tracks! At the last minute, he managed to wake them up and get them off the tracks; otherwise, disaster would have struck: the passing train would indeed have run them all over. You see, the Most Holy Mother of God, like a kind Mother, protects even Her disobedient children and cares for them.

Hold on as tightly as you can to the hem of our Great Lady, the Mother of God, so that She may help you. I pray that the Most Holy Mother of God, the tender and caring Mother of the whole world, may protect you and the entire world. Amen.

Chapter 2. **About the Guardian Angel**

The Guardian Angel Is Near Us

Geronda, does every person have a guardian angel?

— Yes, in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, God gives every person a guardian angel.

— And do the unbaptized not have a guardian angel?

— God protects the unbaptized, but they do not have a guardian angel; only the baptized do. The guardian angel is assigned to a person at baptism and then accompanies them throughout their life.

— Geronda, is our guardian angel always with us?

⁵⁵ In 1955–1958.

— Always. He watches over our every step.

— And how close is he to us?

— It depends on our spiritual state.

— Geronda, when we sin, does he leave?

— When we sin, he withdraws from us, but he does not completely abandon us. When, through our sinful lives, we give the devil power over us, our guardian angel does not lose hope, but watches us sadly from afar.

— Geronda, but why don't we feel his presence?

— For the very same reason that we do not feel God's presence. Our eyes are veiled by a cloud of darkness. And for this veil to disappear, love and humility are required.

When a person feels God's presence, he simultaneously feels the presence of his guardian angel near him. At the same time, his movements become calm and gentle, attentive but not stiff. This composure and poise do not cause him suffering; on the contrary, they bring him peace and joy. Spiritual freedom is evident in his movements. Reverence and attentiveness sweeten his heart, and he constantly takes care not to lose the sweetness he feels. He lies down on his bed modestly, with his hands crossed over his chest. He sleeps modestly and reverently as well, and rises calmly and quietly. When someone knocks on his door, he does not rush about trying to tidy himself up—he is always perfectly composed as it is. In short, such a person is constantly mindful of not upsetting his guardian angel.

The heavenly guardian angel, being near this earthly, angel-like person, understands him very well and rejoices. If a person lives a spiritual life and behaves like an obedient child, then his angel does not suffer but rejoices in being near him. In the end, filled with joy, the angel will return to God together with the human soul, because the soul has done what pleases the angel—what pleases God. But imagine what it must be like for a guardian angel to struggle for years to save the soul of some person, only to return to God empty-handed! For this reason alone—out of love, out of respect for the labor that the guardian angel takes upon himself—a person must strive not to end up in the underworld.

Our Guardian Angel Protects Us

— Geronda, does the guardian angel always help us?

— It depends on us what kind of help we receive from him. If we try to stand with at least one foot on solid ground, then our guardian angel can stand beside us and, in case of danger, save us. If we do what we're supposed to do, then our guardian angel will do his job. Many miracles have happened thanks to angels. There have been times when young people were miraculously kept from sin at the last moment, and many other things as well.

Do you know what power an angel possesses? He helps a person even through his silence. Once, I found myself in a dead-end situation. My head ached so badly from all the stress that it felt as if someone were striking my skull with a chisel—just a little more, and it would split open. My eyes were literally popping out of their sockets, especially the right one. The pain—unbearable pain! I was rolling around on the floor, writhing in pain. I didn't know what to do—I could only pray and ask God to show me at least some kind of way out. Suddenly, I saw my guardian angel by my right shoulder. He looked like a twelve-year-old boy—with a very beautiful round face and huge eyes. Oh, what a beautiful face it was! It truly radiated light! Just by his presence alone, the pain and all the heaviness vanished—not because of joy, but through the power of Divine grace. Joy does not drive away pain. You can experience pain and rejoice at the same time, but Divine grace—that is something else entirely, a great thing! It is impossible to describe Divine grace. “If that's the case,” I repeated, “then let them strike my head—not even with a chisel, but with a sledgehammer!” It's worth giving up one's head for such a state. And then a way out of the impasse appeared—one that human reasoning could never have found.

“Did he speak to you, Geronda?”

— No, he just looked at me.

— Geronda, when a person sees an angel, he sees its image. But what is the true nature of angels? Do human eyes see something material before them?

— Something very, very subtle...

We must never forget that our guardian angel is always invisibly by our side. He watches over and protects us. But we ourselves must also keep our lives on the right path and avoid sin.

Chapter 3. On the Fact That Saints Are God's Beloved Children

“To venerate a saint is to imitate him”

Geronda, I read that on the day the Church commemorates them, the saints give gifts to those who pray to them. Is that really true?

— Well, how could it be otherwise? On their feast days, the saints treat people to spiritual pastries! If we delight the saints with our lives, then they, in turn, offer us spiritual sweets.

— Geronda, how can I come to love a specific saint?

— Which saint do you want to love?

— Saints Joachim and Anne, the Holy Parents.

— Let's make a deal: you pray to the Holy Parents for me, asking them to help me, and I'll pray that you come to love them. And, if you have the opportunity, read the life of the saint whose feast day the Church is celebrating every day. By doing this, you'll be spiritually united with all the saints.

Reading the life of the saint whose feast day is celebrated today—and reading the lives of saints in general—is immensely beneficial. After all, such reading warms the soul and inspires a person to imitate the saints. Then a person stops whining about his “endlessly bitter fate” and moves forward courageously. The lives of the saints strengthen the soul's courage; they can even increase one's readiness for martyrdom.

— Geronda, why do saints who share the same name sometimes endure the same sufferings?

— What is your name?

— Maria.

— And in honor of which Saint Mary?

— In honor of Saint Mary of Egypt, Geronda.

— You're lucky that Saint Mary of Egypt wasn't subjected to torture. But seriously, Saint Mary performed the highest ascetic feats, so follow her example, and then after your passing, your lives will be similar to hers. Blessed soul, the saints you ask about revered their namesakes, strove to imitate them—and thus performed feats just like theirs.

— Geronda, how can a person become friends with a saint?

— You must become kindred to him. “Veneration of a saint is imitation of a saint,”⁵⁶ — says St. Basil the Great.

— Geronda, my conscience reproaches me because I bear the name of a great saint, yet I do not live up to her example.

— Then try to imitate your saint. Saint Syncletica knew everything in the world, and now she helps people all over the world, transcending distances. And you? Are you friends with her or not? Do you remember to ask her to purify your mind, to refine it, so that you might grasp the depths of divine meanings? You see, sister, that's how it is: some names come with greater responsibility. In any case, know that your saint loves you. Ask her to help you; insist on this in your prayers.

I've gotten quite lazy lately... I live solely on the alms the saints give me—all I do is ask them for this constantly, like a beggar... And in general, —I ask not only the saints but all people to pray for me. And the saints, out of their great love, give me alms—from their heavenly bread and heavenly honey.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ “For it is certain that one who praises outstanding men will not fail to imitate them himself in similar circumstances.” See: St. Basil the Great. Works. Vol. 1. Discourse 19. On the Feast of the Forty Martyrs. Moscow: Sibirskaya Blagozvonitsa, 2012. p. 1028. — Translator's note.

⁵⁷ The Reverend is referring to Divine grace, which nourishes and delights a person.

The Fragrance of the Holy Relics

— Geronda, you know, the holy head of Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia gave off such a strong fragrance on his feast day!

— Well, why shouldn't it give off a fragrance? Can't a saint prepare a spiritual feast for his guests on his feast day?

— Geronda, but why then don't the holy relics emit a fragrance constantly?

— There can't be a single rule that applies to every situation. For example, a great sinner may venerate the relics, and they begin to emit a fragrance—in order to help him turn to God and repent. Or, conversely, a virtuous person may venerate the relics, and they do not emit a fragrance—so as not to give him a reason to fall into pride. And sometimes they may even emit a fragrance in the presence of a virtuous person—as a spiritual gift from the saint. Every case is unique.

— Geronda, some people doubt that relics give off a fragrance.

— That's due to a rationalistic approach. The relics of the saints possess Divine grace. On Mount Athos, it's not even the relics themselves, but simply a spot near Panaguda that emits a fragrance—even in winter. And in Katunaki, where I lived, near St. Basil's cell—⁵⁸—a fragrance emanated from a single spot. There isn't even a cell there anymore; only ruins remain. Probably, a great many holy relics are hidden near those ruins! And who knows when God will reveal these relics to people?

Let us turn to the saints with reverence

— Geronda, if I may, I would like you to explain one passage from Isaac to me.

— What do you mean, “a place from Isaac”?! Which Isaac? Father Isaac of Kapsala? “From Saint Abba Isaac”—that's how you should say it! Even when we're talking about Father Isaac of Kapsala, we call him “Father Isaac.” And are we supposed to call the saints simply by their first names? That's completely unacceptable. You can't pray, for example, to Saint George the Great Martyr and say, “Listen, George, do such-and-such for me.” That's a sign of insolence. I remember giving a layperson a small particle of the holy relics of Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia,⁵⁹ and he later referred to the saint simply as “Arsenius.” But there has to be some measure!

— Perhaps, Geronda, he called Saint Arsenius that out of simplicity of heart?

“Simplicity, my foot!... You can't even address someone who's simply older than us that way. Even if the Venerable Arsenius were his own father, you still couldn't speak that way.” He shouldn't have called him just by his first name, even if the reverend had been only a couple of years older than him—after all, Saint Arsenius was a priest. All the more so now that he's a saint! Yet in conversations not only with me but with others as well, he referred to the reverend simply by his first name. There's no basic respect!

— Geronda, but still: could it be that a person addresses a saint without the proper titles not out of insolence, but out of pure, genuine simplicity?

— In order to have the right to address the saints in this way, one must attain a considerable spiritual height—that holy boldness which comes from great piety and simplicity. Indeed, there are such simple souls who, like little children, can say to God with childlike simplicity and innocence: “My God, You must give me this! Why don't You give it to me?” Do you remember that I wrote in **The Holy Mountain Fathers—** about a certain monk who possessed childlike simplicity? When the well in his cell ran dry, he took an icon of Saint Nicholas off the wall of the church, tied a rope to its copper ring, lowered the icon into the well, and with great simplicity said to the saint: “Holy Father Nicholas! Do you want me to light a lamp before your holy icon? Then come up out of the well along with the water! You see for yourself—so many people come to our cell, and we don't even have a sip of cool water for them.” Water immediately began to flow in slowly, and the icon of Saint Nicholas floated to the surface. He took it, reverently kissed it, and carried it to the church.⁶⁰ But

⁵⁸ In 1967–1968,

⁵⁹ The Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia (†1924) was a fellow countryman and relative of the Venerable Paisius. Saint Arsenius, being a hieromonk, baptized him himself, giving the newborn his own name. This loving shepherd, miracle-worker, and ascetic was canonized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1986. His holy head is kept at the Suroti Monastery in the church dedicated to him. The commemoration of the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia is celebrated on October 28 (November 10 according to the Gregorian calendar). — Translator's note.

⁶⁰ See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. pp. 9–10. — Translator's note.

this is a special case. Anyone who boldly turns to God and the saints, even though he himself has not yet attained the appropriate spiritual state, is not displaying holy boldness but foolish audacity, and provokes God's wrath.

— Geronda, on the eve of the feast days of the saints, especially those I venerate, I celebrate the All-Night Vigil on my own in my cell in their honor. What will help me, as you say, to “live like these saints”?

— First, read his life story. Then read all the troparia of the canon to the saint from the Menaion; they also describe his life. Troparia are, for the most part, not so much prayers as songs of praise in honor of the saint. The prayer here is the refrain “Holy One of God, pray to God for us”⁶¹ before each troparion of the canon. Then ask the saint for help with whatever you specifically need, bow in reverence, pray with your rosary—do whatever you can and whatever feels right to you. The main thing is that you pray.

When the soul lives through the saints, it asks them for help with reverence and faith. If a person has reverence for the saints to whom they turn, then reverent prayer arises on its own, naturally. First comes acquaintance, then friendship, and then a sweet conversation—respectful and simple.

The Help of the Saints

— Geronda, what does Saint Arsenius feel now that he has his own church?⁶²

— Joy! After all, he now has a sheepfold where he has gathered his sheep and watches over them.

— Geronda, do people receive more help from a saint after he has been canonized than they did before?

— Of course. When the Church canonizes a saint, he already feels a duty to help us. If I may put it that way, he is compelled to help us more than he did before his canonization. Moreover, God also sends him to help people.

— Geronda, can a saint ask God for people to honor his memory?

— No, the saints do not make such requests to God. They do not say to God, “Lord, let the faithful honor my memory, and You will help them for it,” or, “Help only those who honor my memory.” The saints say this: “Lord, these people honor my memory; reward them for it.”

— Geronda, I feel more reverence for John the Evangelist, the Theologian, than for the saint whose name I bear.

— Don't worry; your saint isn't jealous of you toward the Apostle John just because you love him more. Of course, you should honor him as the patron of Hesychasm, but even if he were not your patron, your saint—like any other saint—rejoices when you are deeply attached in your heart to a particular saint and receive help from him.

Saints are saints, and they are free from human passions and petty concerns. A person receives help through the saint who is particularly close to them. Some ask for help from a great saint and receive it, while others ask a little-known saint—and also receive help, because in both cases it is the same power of God at work.

— Geronda, if a person feels a special reverence for a particular saint, what might have preceded this?

— If a special reverence for a particular saint has arisen, it means that the person's heart has, in one way or another, heard that saint's voice. Any of us, having received help from a saint, may feel a special love for that saint. This help may be in a matter of great importance or in a small matter. Since childhood, I have attended the little church of Saint Barbara in Konica, and that is why I have a special devotion to this holy martyr. The saint helped me in the army when I was accepted as a radio operator, even though that required formal training; she also helped me later, in the tuberculosis hospital, after my lung surgery. At that time, the doctors told me that as soon as my lung cleared up, they would remove the drainage tubes and the ventilator.⁶³ Although they usually disconnect all of this after five days, twenty-five days had already passed for me, yet the tubes had not been removed, and I was suffering greatly. On Saturday, December 3, I was waiting for the doctors to relieve me of this torment, but they didn't come. On Sunday morning, the feast day of Saint Barbara,

⁶¹ In the Greek Church, regardless of a saint's status (saint, venerable one, martyr), the same refrain is sung before the troparion of the canon at Matins. For example: “Holy Basil of God, pray to God for us.” — Translator's note.

⁶² The church dedicated to Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia was built with the blessing of the Venerable Paisios at the women's hesychasterion in Suroti in 1974, and following the canonization of Elder Paisios in 2014, a grand consecration of this church took place in honor of the two venerable fathers: Arsenius and Paisios. — Translator's note.

⁶³ For draining fluid after surgery.

I said, “If the saint wanted to help, she would have helped long ago. The doctors have left; today is Sunday; no one will come. Who’s going to take these tubes out of me now?” I uttered a few words and added bitterly, “I’ve lit so many oil lamps in the saint’s little church, brought so many wicks for the lamps, carried so much oil there, cleaned up so many times—and what’s so hard about taking two tubes out of me?” But then I thought: “I must have upset Saint Barbara in some way, which is why she didn’t see to it that they were removed from me.” Suddenly I heard a commotion. “What’s going on?” I asked in surprise. “Has something happened to someone?” “The doctors are coming,” they told me. I don’t know what got into the chief physician, but early in the morning he called my attending doctors and ordered them: “Go and remove the tubes from the monk.” They came in and said, “We’ve been instructed to remove the drains.” Apparently, my bitter words had gotten to Saint Barbara. Sometimes you have to complain a little, but it’s better not to whine. Those who don’t whine behave nobly. You see how it is: the same saint sometimes grants what is asked for immediately, and sometimes—far from immediately. And it also happens this way: in one case, he comes to the aid of the one praying because that person is in a good spiritual state, and in another case—because that person is complaining and crying like a little child.

— Geronda, could a saint turn away from me because of my poor spiritual state?

— No, fortunately for us, the saints do not behave that way. If they did, we would be lost. If they did not help us, we would perish. Think about it: they are now in Heaven, rejoicing, while we are here on earth, suffering. Therefore, when we ask for something, for them not to hear our requests... if I may put it that way, is unfair.

— Geronda, when we pray and ask for help from the angels and all the saints, do they all intercede for us together before God? Do their prayers come together?

— Both collectively and individually, they can help us if necessary—that is, if it is for our benefit.

— Geronda, when I receive help from a saint, can I tell the sisters about it?

— No, tell only the abbess and feel deep gratitude toward the saint. Doesn’t he have the right to give you a gift? If only you knew how the saints take care of everything for you, how many troubles and problems they have already spared you from!

— Geronda, was something revealed to you about this? Why do you say such things?

— I could tell you many things, but what has already been said is more than enough! I’ll just add that the saints have all come together to help us—and they want us to be overcome with joy and gratitude.

The saints bridge the distance

— Geronda, how did Saint George, the Abbot of Sinai, travel from Sinai to Jerusalem and receive Communion there?⁶⁴

— He received Communion and returned in the blink of an eye. He was ecstatic.

— Geronda, was he in Jerusalem and in his cell at the same time?

— He wasn’t in his cell! In a matter of seconds, he visited Jerusalem, received Communion, and returned to Sinai at tremendous speed.

— Did he fly there, Geronda?

— Yes, he filled up with “super” gas, got his spiritual ticket, and flew wherever he needed to go.

— How is it possible, Geronda, for a saint to be in two places at once?

— Only God is omnipresent. But saints are not omnipresent—they move from one place to another, but at such a speed that distances are nullified. For them, there is no “near” or “far.” When I was being treated at the tuberculosis clinic, there was a poor fellow in the bed next to mine; he’d been sick for many years, and his name was Harlampius. He even wanted to marry one of the nurses who worked there, and he got engaged to her. Back then, there was no cure for tuberculosis, and he was facing death. So Harlampius’s mother went to the Monastery of Saint Paraskeva to pray, carrying her grief. At that time, Harlampius was already in intensive care, and no one was allowed to see him—not even his fiancée. Suddenly, his mother called the

⁶⁴ The Venerable George of Sinai (†552) once, on Easter, prayerfully expressed his desire to receive Holy Communion at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. While in his cell on Mount Sinai, he suddenly found himself attending the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (a 12-day walk away) and received Holy Communion from the hands of the Patriarch of Jerusalem. The commemoration of St. George is observed on Wednesday of Bright Week (in the Synaxis of the Saints of Sinai) and on March 11 (24). — Translator’s note.

fiancée and said, “Don’t worry! Saint Paraskeva told me that Harlampius will get better.” And she added, ‘Now it’s time to go to Lamia—there’s another person on the verge of death at the tuberculosis clinic there as well.’⁶⁵ Immediately, Harlampius began to feel better. A nurse called Lamia, and they told her that a patient who had just been in critical condition had miraculously begun to recover. Can you imagine how fast Saint Paraskeva was moving! If a car were speeding along at that rate, it would have shattered into pieces. And Saint Paraskeva saved on both gas and tires!

Unknown Saints Help “in Secret”

— Geronda, do the saints we don’t know help us? After all, we don’t invoke them in our prayers, do we?

— Many unknown saints help us, even though we have no idea they exist. To me, they are the greatest saints. They receive no glory from people at all—only from God. My heart tells me that, out of their great humility, they earnestly asked God to remain unknown, to receive no honors from people, but to continue helping them in secret.⁶⁶ We must especially honor and thank such unknown saints, because, having managed to remain unknown to the world, they silently help us through their prayers and their silent example.

Once, I wanted to write about a certain Mount Athos monk who had already passed away. I recalled all the details of his life that I knew, chose a free evening, and sat down to write. I lit a candle, took a pencil and a notebook, but suddenly realized that I couldn’t remember anything—not even his name—even though I’d been thinking about him a lot these past few days. I began to recall, in order, all the Athonite monasteries, sketes, and kalyvas I had visited. I went through them, starting from the eastern side—perhaps I’d remember something. Nothing. Then from the west—again, nothing. I began to recall them by year, starting from the time I arrived on Athos, going over in my mind the fathers I had met—but I still couldn’t remember anything. It seems that this monk wanted to remain unknown, and God worked His miracle. I only remember that his life made a greater impression on me than the lives of all the other Holy Mountain fathers about whom I have written.⁶⁷ From this I also understood that if God does not will it, then a person can do nothing. And, conversely, it is enough for God to gently breathe His breath upon a person—and that person will become a sage.

Holy “Servants” and Holy “Defenders”

— Geronda, I have a toothache.

— Well, let it hurt a little so you can gain a little benefit! Be patient, pray to Saint Antipas⁶⁸ — say one set of the rosary. He helps with toothaches, and everything will go away.

— Geronda, I prayed to Saint Antipas, but my tooth still hurts just as much as before!

— It seems there’s a reason why the saint isn’t helping you. If you promise him, “From this day forward, I will be more careful in everything,” then the saint will help you right away. Saint Antipas is a great saint; he pleased God.

“Antipas is My faithful witness,”⁶⁹ — as it is written in the Book of Revelation.

— Geronda, the service and canon of Saint Barbara say that she stops the plague.

— What is the plague?

— These are epidemics and diseases, Geronda, that are spread by germs.

— Ah, microbes... Well, then ask Saint Barbara to heal you of the microbe of envy so that you may avoid this epidemic. Make more copies of the canon to Saint Barbara and distribute them to the sisters.

— And also, Geronda, I read that Saint Barbara is the patron saint of artillery!

— That’s no surprise; a saint can have many duties, and he’ll manage to be everywhere.

⁶⁵ The distance from Thessaloniki, where the Venerable Paisios was treated, to the city of Lamia is approximately 270 km. — Translator’s note.

⁶⁶ Matt. 6:4.

⁶⁷ See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. — Translator’s note.

⁶⁸ The Holy Martyr Antipas, Bishop of Pergamum (†c. 68), suffered martyrdom in a copper bull heated over a fire. His feast day is April 11 (24). — Translator’s note.

⁶⁹ Rev. 2:13.

— Geronda, is Saint Irene the patroness of the police?

— Yes, so when you lack peace in your heart, ask Saint Irene⁷⁰—who commands the entire police force and establishes peace everywhere—to bring peace to your soul as well.

— Geronda, I often lose things, and then I spend a lot of time looking for them.

— Have you forgotten to pray to Saint Mina⁷¹? After all, scatterbrains like you are his “specialty.” Saint Mina finds lost items in no time at all and asks for nothing in return. When I lived in a communal monastery,⁷² I once lost the key to my cell—back then we locked our cells because many strangers passed through the monastery. “No big deal,” I thought, “I’ll go to the carpenter’s shop.” Lo and behold, there was no key to the carpenter’s shop either. I was about to go to the workshop where I made saddles, but there was no key for that either. “Where should I go now?” I wondered. I went and lit a candle for Saint Mina, and immediately found all the keys in a place I would never have thought to look. Just one candle—and everything was fine! After all, the saints rejoice at even a single candle and rush to help.

I didn’t know before that there are icons where Saint Mina is depicted riding a horse. My mother, to whom Saint Mina once appeared and answered one of her questions, told me that he is depicted as a horseman. I argued with her and stood my ground, saying that only Saint Demetrius and Saint George are depicted riding horses. “No,” she said, “the one I saw was riding a bay horse.” “Who are you?” I asked. “Saint George has a white horse, and Saint Demetrius has a chestnut one. Who are you?” “I am Saint Mina,” he said.”

— Geronda, could it be that Saint Spyridon⁷³ himself asked God for his relics to remain incorrupt?

— No, of course not! How could that be? Saints don’t ask for such things. It is God who has ordained that the relics of Saint Spyridon remain incorrupt, so that people may receive help. Look how wisely God has arranged everything! The islands of Corfu, Kefalonia, and Zakynthos are close to Italy, and it would have been easier to lead the people there to Catholicism; that is why He placed holy guardians there—the miracle-worker Saint Spyridon, the Venerable Gerasimos⁷⁴, and Saint Dionysius.⁷⁵

— Geronda, when you’re here at the monastery, I feel very safe. But when you’re not here and I face some temptation, I get scared.

— Don’t be afraid. You have powerful protectors by your side; don’t forget about them, and pester them constantly with your prayers. And if I, a good-for-nothing, am needed to help in any way, whether I’m on Mount Athos or here, I’ll help as best I can. If in worldly life loving brothers care for their sisters, then all the more so do they do so in the spiritual life, which is higher than the worldly one. I deliberately left my treasure here for you—the relics of Saint Arsenius—and, therefore, my heart is here now as well,

for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.⁷⁶ I did tell you, after all, that everything precious that I have, I will leave to your monastery, where the Venerable Arsenius dwells. The saint himself once said to a man:⁷⁷ “I live near Thessalonica.” And since he lives here, ask him to take his staff and deal with those troublemakers as a true master would! If you’re too shy, then ask on my behalf.

After all, this is the very purpose of all the saints—to help and protect us wretched ones from visible and invisible calamities. And our task is to strive to live as Christians, not to grieve the Lord, to light lamps

⁷⁰ The name Irina, translated from Greek, means “peace.” The feast day of the Great Martyr Irina is May 5 (18). — Translator’s note.

⁷¹ The Great Martyr Mina of Egypt (d. ca. 304) renounced his military rank, refusing to persecute Christians. For some time, he lived as a hermit in the mountains, after which he endured severe torments for Christ. Commemorated on November 11 (24). — Translator’s note.

⁷² At the Esfigmen Monastery in 1953–1955.

⁷³ Saint Spyridon of Trimythous (d. ca. 348)—was a bishop on the island of Cyprus and participated in the First Ecumenical Council. He has been venerated since ancient times as a miracle-worker on a par with Saint Nicholas. Commemorated on December 12 (25). — Translator’s note.

⁷⁴ The Venerable Gerasimos of Kefalonia (†1579)—a hieromonk—lived a life of asceticism on Mount Athos, in Jerusalem, and on the island of Kefalonia, where his incorrupt relics rest. His feast days are August 15 (28) and October 20 (November 2). — Translator’s note

⁷⁵ Saint Dionysius of Zakynthos (d. 1622)—the godson of St. Gerasimos of Kefalonia, a learned man who lived as a monk at the Monastery of the Most Holy Theotokos Anafonitria on Zakynthos. — Translator’s note.

⁷⁶ Matt. 6:21.

⁷⁷ The Venerable Paisios does not mention his name here. See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia. Moscow: Holy Mountain, 2010. p. 33. — Translator’s note.

for the saints, and to ask them for help. In this life, we need help so that we may draw closer to Christ. In the life to come, if God deems us worthy to be near Him, we will no longer have to trouble the saints with our requests—and, indeed, there will be no need for it then.

The Miracles of the Saints

- Geronda, I sometimes feel afraid when I’m alone on assignment at a hotel.
- Pray to Hajj Efendi, “⁷⁸,” and if a robber comes, he’ll end up asking you for forgiveness himself.⁷⁹
- Geronda, I’m not afraid of robbers, but of the tangalashki.
- Ask Hajj Efendi to paralyze them too. What, do you think He can’t?
- “Of course he can, Geronda!”

— Do you know that once he “paralyzed” not only a person but also a car? The driver had left his keys in the door, and the car was stolen. But as soon as he prayed to Saint Arsenius—the car came to a screeching halt right in the middle of the road! The thieves had to abandon it and run for their lives.

— Geronda, the doctors said I have a tumor in my head and need surgery.

— Go and press your head firmly against the holy relic of Saint Arsenius. Did you see how he helped that other sister? He performed the surgery without a scalpel, so she didn’t even realize what was happening. Thank God! Don’t doubt it—he can help you, too.⁸⁰

Saint Arsenius helps. One doctor asked me to pray for his sick daughter. I asked Saint Arsenius, and she felt a little better. And you pray that the saint will complete this miracle—may scientists come to know what the power of God is, may His name be glorified. A miracle is a mystery. You can experience it, but you cannot explain it. The human mind cannot comprehend it.

— Geronda, people today don’t believe in saints the way they used to.

— Even in the past, those who called themselves non-believers treated the saints with respect. I remember when the Italian occupiers were in Konitsa, a forest caught fire. A rumor spread that the Italians had set it on fire themselves so they could capture all the residents when they came out to put out the fire. People heard this and scattered in all directions, while the forest continued to burn. The Italians went to the village headman (who was a non-believer) and asked him, “Where is everyone?” “They’re working,” he replied. “Then why aren’t they coming out to put out the fire?” “Well,” replied the village headman, “in case of a fire, we have Saint Nicholas” (the main church in Konitsa was consecrated in honor of Saint Nicholas). And just then, while they were talking, the clear sky became overcast with clouds, and a torrential rain began to fall. When the Italians saw this miracle, they were greatly frightened.

— Geronda, are there saints who do not perform miracles?

— Whether a saint performs miracles or not depends on God. But there are many miracles of the saints that we simply do not know about.

Nothing is difficult for God, just as nothing is difficult for a holy person who has boldness before God. Christ said:

“I will give you the power to perform greater miracles than those I have performed.”⁸¹ These words of Christ speak of His humility and of the abundance of grace He gives us. How amazing is the Lord’s humility—He has given the saints the grace and power even to raise the dead, just as He Himself did!

The Living Presence of the Saints

— Geronda, I would like to see Saint Arsenios with my own eyes.

⁷⁸ This is what the Venerable Arsenius came to be called after he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Hajjefendi—literally, “Mr. Pilgrim,” from Turkish. — Translator’s note.

⁷⁹ The Venerable Paisios is referring to specific miracles performed by Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia (when thieves who broke into his house not only left empty-handed but also asked for forgiveness). See: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia. pp. 94–95, 96, 100–101, 101–103, 104. — Translator’s note.

⁸⁰ This advice does not mean that the Venerable Paisios rejects medical care; by speaking this way, he encourages us to ask the saints for help with faith.

⁸¹ See John 14:12.

— That’s a dangerous desire, because the enemy might deceive you with a vision, and your mind will start telling you that since you’ve been deemed worthy to see a saint, you must be someone important. Then, once you accept this sense of “importance,” the enemy will start constantly playing his little movie in your imagination. Therefore, revere Saint Arsenius, but do not strive to see him. Whether he appears to you or not is no longer your concern, but his.

— Geronda, when a saint appears to someone, do other people see him too?

— There’s no general rule here. Sometimes they see him, sometimes they only hear his voice, and sometimes—nothing at all. It always happens differently; there is no general rule, nor can there be.

The presence of the saints is real, alive! Sometimes we cannot find them, and they find us themselves. When I moved from the Cell of the Holy Cross to Panaguda, the cell was abandoned. I managed to tidy up one room so I’d have a place to live. I brought all my belongings with me. The Menaion volumes were still in boxes. It was time for Vespers. But how could I find the right volume of the Menaion? I picked up the calendar to see which saint’s feast day was tomorrow. But my glasses had gone missing, the print in the calendar was small, and I couldn’t make out the name of tomorrow’s saint to say Vespers using my rosary. I searched for forty-five minutes; nothing. “All this time will pass while I’m searching; I’d better pray like this: ‘Saints of the day, pray to God for us,’” I thought. I recited the prayers to Christ and the Mother of God on my rosary, and then began to pray: “Saints of the day, pray to God for us!” That night, while celebrating Matins, I prayed the same way: “Holy Days, pray to God for us!” Suddenly, I saw before me a radiant warrior who radiated love and fatherly kindness. He came closer, and I felt an indescribable joy in my heart. Seeing how kind he was, I gathered my courage and asked, “Please tell me, where did you serve, and what is your name?” And he replied, “I am Saint Lukillian.”⁸² I didn’t catch it and asked again, “Saint Longinus?” “No,” he replied, “Saint Lukillian.” The name struck me as strange, and I asked again, “Saint Lucian?” “No,” he repeated for the third time, “Saint Lu-ki-l-li-an.” Then I suddenly said, “I also have wounds from the war.” Standing next to the saint was a young doctor in a white coat—it was the Great Martyr Panteleimon—and Saint Lucillian asked him to examine me. Saint Panteleimon examined me, and then I heard him say to Saint Lukillian, “All his wounds have healed; they just need to be recorded in his military service record.” For a long time afterward, I felt great joy and an extraordinary surge of strength. When I found my glasses and looked at the calendar, I saw that it was the feast day of the Holy Martyr Lucillian. That evening, I went to visit some priest friends and read the life of this saint at their home.

To this day, this saint fills me with his love and delights my soul and body with the heavenly joy he has bestowed upon me.

Part 4.

“Ask, and it will be given to you”

“When you pray for yourself with a deep awareness of your own sinfulness, then even a simple ‘Lord, have mercy’ for others will have great power.”

Chapter 1.

On Praying for Ourselves

Let Us Ask for God’s Mercy for Ourselves and Others

Geronda, sometimes I pray for someone and suddenly feel moved. Then I stop praying for that person and pray for myself instead.

— Why? Has the person you were just praying for stopped needing prayer?

⁸² The Martyr Lucillian of Nicomedia (†275)—his commemoration, along with that of the four youths Claudius, Hypatius, Paul, and Dionysius, and the Holy Virgin Paula, is observed on June 3 (16).

— I haven't stopped, Geronda. But I want to use this favorable time to pray for myself as well, because I don't know when I'll feel this sense of tenderness again.

— Wonderful! So you're going to enjoy yourself, while saying about your neighbor, "It's okay, he can wait"? Oh, you... At the very least, when you pray, don't say "have mercy on me," but "have mercy on us." That "us" includes both you and everyone else. When I pray, I say: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us. Have mercy on everyone—and on me, a wretch."

It is very helpful to divide prayer into three parts: the first is a prayer for oneself, the second is for the living, and the third is for the departed. But even in this case, we pray more for ourselves than for everyone else, because I am alone, while the living and the departed are countless.

— Geronda, I feel that a whole lifetime won't be enough for me to ask for God's mercy.

— God will have mercy on you. Just pray, simply and constantly, humbly asking for His mercy for yourself and for all people. When we ask for God's mercy and strive without straining ourselves, humbly and with love, then God will grant both us and others everything we need.

— But perhaps, Geronda, besides God's mercy, should we ask for something else?

— God's mercy encompasses everything. But if there is a need, you can ask God for something specific as well.

— Geronda, St. Basil the Great says: "In prayer, after you have given thanks, ask only for the Kingdom of Heaven."⁸³ What does he mean by that?

— The Saint means that we must first and foremost ask for the Kingdom of Heaven. After that, everything else, according to the Lord's word, will be added to us.⁸⁴ We must not get distracted by secondary and numerous requests, forgetting what is most important.

— Geronda, Scripture tells us to pray to God for our needs.⁸⁵ However, the holy fathers avoided praying for their own needs. How, then, should I pray?

— Pray for everything the soul needs, and pay less attention to the body's needs. In the "Our Father" prayer, when we say, "Give us this day our daily bread,"⁸⁶ we are asking not only for physical food, but also for what we need for spiritual life—a life according to God's will.

Once, when I was living in the cell of the Holy Cross, I began to have stomach problems. Someone from the monastery brought me a bottle—they thought it contained wine, so I could drink it as medicine—but it turned out to be vinegar. I said nothing to the monk who brought it to me, because I thought that this was God's will. About forty days passed. I drank rainwater, and I felt even worse. One day, I felt absolutely terrible. I drank a lot of water and then suffered all night long. The next day, I was tormented by thirst, but I was afraid to drink. When I went into the church to light the lamps, I saw a bottle of wine by the iconostasis, beneath the icon of the Mother of God. The bottle was my own; I recognized it. But who had poured wine into it? No one had visited me during those days, and although I often went to the church, there had been no bottle there by the iconostasis. The wine turned out to be tart—just what I needed for my digestion. And that very same day, they brought me another bottle of wine from the monastery as well.

— Geronda, if I ask God for something with all my heart, will He give it to me?

— If it's for your own good, He will; but if not, why would He give it to you? Do you remember the story of the Israelites who demanded that the Lord give them a king, despite God's warning that they weren't ready for it yet?⁸⁷ The proud Saul became their king, and he imposed heavy taxes on them and tormented them.⁸⁸

We often think that what we ask of God is good and beneficial, when in reality the opposite is true. However, God, who is good by nature, knows what each of us needs. Therefore, let us pray as follows: "My

⁸³ "And when you have fulfilled both parts—glorification and humility—then ask for what you ought to ask for; that is, as I said above, not wealth, not earthly glory, not bodily health... but, as you have been commanded, ask only for the Kingdom of God." See: St. Basil the Great. Works. Vol. 2. Rules for Ascetics. Chapter 1. Moscow: Sibirskaya Blagovonnitsa, 2009. pp. 323–325. — Translator's note.

⁸⁴ Matt. 6:33.

⁸⁵ See Matt. 21:22.

⁸⁶ Matt. 6:11.

⁸⁷ See 1 Kings 8:4–22.

⁸⁸ See 1 Kings 14:24–31, 22:16–21.

God, my mind tells me that this will be good for me. However, You know better than I do what my soul needs. May Your will be done.”⁸⁹ For if we say from the heart:

“May Your will be done,” then it will come to pass—God’s will. What will come to pass is what will truly be beneficial to our soul.

A Prayer for Spiritual Strength

— Geronda, Abba Isaac writes: “How can you love God when you have not yet purified yourself of your passions?”⁹⁰ Does this mean that if a person has not purified himself of his passions but wants to love God, there is shamelessness in that?

— No, why would that be shameless? A person strives to purify themselves from passions and at the same time wants to love God. Both happen simultaneously. Shamelessness lies with those who pay no attention to their passions yet ask in prayer to love God.

— Geronda, I read somewhere that what is asked for in prayer is granted according to one’s faith and the warmth of one’s heart.

— What exactly do you ask of God?

— That He may deliver me from hardness of heart and soften my heart in prayer.

— “Ask, and it will be given to you,”⁹¹ — said Christ. If what you ask for is pure and will be for your good, then you will receive what you ask for. If you ask God for the strength to pray for the forgiveness of your sins and to help your neighbor, that is a good request, and God will grant it. But if you want to receive the charism of prayer in order to derive pleasure from prayer, do you really think He will give it to you?

— Geronda, sometimes I ask God, “Lord, enlighten me!” Is my request correct?

— First, make your own effort, and only then ask God for enlightenment. After all, God wants to see that we are making an effort, and only then does He give us what we ask for. Think, pray, be mindful of yourself, and act with discernment, and the Lord will enlighten you. For example, when you’re asked about something, don’t rush to answer, but ask God to enlighten you. “My God,” pray, “help me know what to say”—and God will give you the right words for that specific situation. A hasty answer comes from the mind, but an answer that comes through prayer comes from God.

— Geronda, I’m an inattentive person and often miss the opportunities God gives me. That’s why I’m afraid to ask Him for help at all, lest I mess everything up again and fall under condemnation.

— Ask for God’s help, and at the same time ask Him to help you become more attentive so that you can take advantage of the favorable opportunity He will provide for you.

— Geronda, is it right to ask God to let me go to heaven?

— I don’t know... For example, I don’t ask God to let me go to heaven, but rather that He help me not to grieve Him with my life. However, if I end up in hell, wouldn’t that upset God? And wouldn’t the Lord save from hell a person who asks for His help so as not to grieve Him in any way?

Prayer During Illness

— Geronda, I’ve been having heart problems lately, and I’m afraid something might happen.

— Don’t be afraid. Each of us must have some kind of problem, because if we do, then we sit at Christ’s feet and ask Him for help.

— Geronda, please pray that I may get better.

— It’s not in your best interest for me to pray like that. If you endure with faith in God, you’ll receive a pension from the Heavenly Insurance Fund, which is greater than the pension from a rural insurance company.⁹² I read somewhere that a sick man asked Saint Panteleimon to heal him. The saint did not heal him, but the sick man continued to pray and eventually recovered. When the time came and this man died, he saw

⁸⁹ Matt. 6:10.

⁹⁰ “It is impossible for a person to acquire love for God while loving the world.” See: Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetic Sayings*. Saying 35. p. 190. — Translator’s note.

⁹¹ Matt. 7:7.

⁹² Many monks in Greece receive a pension from the OGA (‘Οργανισμός Γεωργικών Ασφαλίσεων)—the Agricultural Insurance Organization. — Translator’s note.

that because of his healing, he had lost many crowns. Then he said to Saint Panteleimon, “Oh, why did you heal me if you knew I would lose my crowns?”

— Geronda, to what extent should I rely on God when it comes to health?

— First, trust in God. And after God, trust in a human being—a doctor.

— Geronda, what is the right attitude toward a serious illness?

— Seeking medical help should be preceded by prayer and vigil, so that God may help and enlighten the doctors. And don’t forget to take a little oil from Saint Arsenius’s lamp, don’t forget to drink holy water, and read the Psalter...

— Geronda, because of my illness, I am unable to follow the monastic rule, and this saddens me.

— Even if you do nothing while you’re sick—neither pray with prayer beads nor bow—but simply say, “Glory to You, O God!”—that is enough.⁹³

— Geronda, when I’m sick, the pain makes it impossible for me to concentrate on prayer.

— Such prayer involves both effort and suffering; it is a feat of faith, which is why it is heard more clearly than the prayer of a healthy person.

One must also love pain, at least a little. Illness is a great blessing for a person. When a person understands this, they will accept pain with joy and joyfully sing:

I will bless the Lord at all times.⁹⁴ I remember how the poor Elder Gabriel⁹⁵ on Karoula suffered so much, suffered so much... And during his bouts of pain, he would sing. He was bedridden and would wonder: “They tell me, ‘This is your cross’—but where are the nails? And without nails, what kind of cross is it?”

— And how long did this last, Geronda?

— A long time, a year or two. He lived all alone. The floor in his cell had rotted through, and in the winter, the cold blew through those holes terribly! Yet even in the cold, the sick elder sang and glorified God.

In sickness, psalm-singing is medicine. Even when a person is seriously ill and suffering greatly, the sounds of church singing soothe the pain. If he can sing a little himself, then that’s even better. Just tonight, when I was in pain, I sang at the top of my lungs. I poured all my energy into singing. And do you know how much strength that singing gave me?!⁹⁶

Chapter 2. On Praying for Others

Praying for Peace with an Awareness of One’s Own Sinfulness

Elder, sometimes, when I see how people are suffering, I can’t bring myself to pray for myself.

— After all, we don’t pray for ourselves just for our own sake. Praying for ourselves is necessary as preparation to stand before God in proper attire. To feel the pain of others, you need to get yourself in order. And when you pray for yourself with a deep awareness of your own sinfulness, even a simple “Lord, have mercy” for others will have great power, because that prayer will be said with great humility, which draws down God’s great mercy.

— Geronda, I feel the need to pray a lot for myself and forget to pray for others.

— Look: in order for the old man to be cast off, you need to pray for yourself. But when divine compassion is kindled, then a person forgets himself and prays for others. After you pray a little for yourself, remember the suffering world as a whole and those who have strayed from God. Pray also for those who have squandered the time granted by the Lord and remain without God—now these people are repenting, but it is already too late. Offer this prayer for everyone: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.” By doing so, you are praying for yourself, for those who have asked for your prayers, and for the whole world.

⁹³ The Reverend is addressing a seriously ill and very devout sister here.

⁹⁴ Ps. 33:2.

⁹⁵ See about him: *The New Athos Paterikon*, Vol. 1. Moscow: Orfograf, 2013. pp. 62–89. — Translator’s note.

⁹⁶ Spoken by the Reverend Paissios on June 11, 1994, exactly one month before his passing.

— Geronda, I feel compassion for people, but I don't feel bold enough to ask God to help them. A thought tells me, "Will God even hear you, someone so faithless?"

— Don't listen to that little devil who sneaks up on you "from the right" and, through your "pretended humility," plunges you into despair. Say: "My God, I am of little faith, but hear me, because it would be unjust if others were to suffer because of me." Once, during a severe drought, a monk⁹⁷ on Mount Athos prayed thus: "My God, I beg You, give the people a little rain. Not for our sake: we are monks and have vowed to live a life of asceticism. Have mercy on the poor people in the world who are suffering, and yet

from their own deprivation⁹⁸ set aside something for us as well. If I were in a good spiritual state, You would hear me, and the people would not suffer. I know that I am a great sinner, but is it fair that others should suffer because of me? So help them, then! They have no time left for prayer—so I pray for them as much as I can." An hour and a half later, it began to rain: over all of Macedonia, Thessaly, and Mount Athos!

— Geronda, when I pray for peace, a thought tells me that God is disgusted with me because I'm leaving "my own dead" behind to go bury other people's.⁹⁹

— Didn't you bury "your own dead" when you took your vows? Pray like this: "My God, I, Your servant, am unworthy that You should hear me. But do You not have compassion on the people in the world who are suffering so much? I beg You, help them." When a person prays for his neighbor with love and humility and strives with an awareness of his own sinfulness, then God does not turn away from him, but, on the contrary, helps both him and others. But if a person considers himself holy and prays for others, regarding them as sinners, then he is truly an abomination to God.

Another's pain must become one's own

— Geronda, you once promised us that we would organize a "prayer group." When will that happen?

— It depends on you yourselves... When I come here next time, we'll see what state you're in... If prayer is offered with pain, do you know how powerful it will become? When you pray for the needs of the world, those people who are asking God for help at that very moment and are on the same wavelength as you will receive help from Him. I can sense the souls who are praying; I feel their prayers as strong radio waves. Often I can even tell the exact day and hour when a particular sick person who received help from God was praying.

— Geronda, do the people you pray for sense this?

— Yes, they do; it's as if the ground begins to shake beneath their feet, and they are filled with awe. When prayer is offered with compassion, even strangers sense that someone is praying for them.

— Geronda, when is our prayer for others most pleasing to God?

— When we feel how much the other person needs it. This happens when we put ourselves in the shoes of those for whom we are praying. If we put ourselves in the place of the sick or the departed, it will help us pray with compassion; compassion enters the heart, and our prayer becomes heartfelt.

— Geronda, when I'm bogged down in my own thoughts, I can't pray.

— Why, my dear child, are you so fixated on yourself? Why don't you think even a little bit about the people who are suffering? Do you know how many families are breaking up, how many troubled children are being "raised" by the streets, how many are living in orphanages without a mother's love? Think about how many people are crying out, "Help!" at this very moment—and there's no one nearby who can help them? How many people are drowning at sea, how many are taking their own lives, how many are suffering? There are so many people in the world who need the monks' prayers, yet we waste precious time on empty thoughts or childish whining, and we don't even properly follow the monastic rule. So be mindful: step outside the confines of your "self," and let the pain of others become your own. By doing so, you yourself will find peace, receive a reward from God, and help others.

⁹⁷ It was the Venerable Paisios himself.

⁹⁸ Mark 12:44.

⁹⁹ See Matt. 8:22 and Luke 9:60.

When I lived at the Philotheos Monastery, which at that time was a hermitage,¹⁰⁰ one night I was praying in my cell and sensed that a man in need had come to the monastery. It was a poor wretch, possessed by a demon. The monastery gates closed at sunset and opened the next morning. “What should I do now?” I thought. “I should give him at least something to eat; otherwise, how will he sit there hungry until morning?” Then an idea came to me. I went to the storeroom, took some food,¹⁰¹ put it in a basket, tied a rope to it, and lowered the basket from my window, which faced outward. I was in such a state that I couldn’t calm down afterward. All night long I prayed with compassion: “My God, I did what I could; I am unworthy to ask You to help Your creation. But is it fair that he should suffer because of me?” In the morning, when the monastery gates opened and the man entered, he was well. He went into the church and glorified God. The Good God had taken pity on him and freed him from the demon.

— Geronda, when you pray for someone who is suffering, does the mind of the one praying turn to Christ or to the sufferings of the neighbor?

— Don’t you ask Christ for help for your neighbor? Prayer begins with thoughts of human suffering and then turns to Christ.

— Geronda, when my heart grows hard, I recall the various hardships I’ve had to endure, and I ask God to help those who are going through similar hardships.

— That’s right. Do that if it helps you better understand another person and empathize with them. “My God,” say, “just as You have blessed me so much, so help my brother, who is better than I am.”

— Geronda, when I pray for someone’s salvation and at the same time ask God not to allow them to suffer, could that be wrong?

— No, blessed soul, there is compassion in that as well. God is pleased when a person who prays has love for their neighbor. But in the end, God will do what is best for the soul.

Prayer for Specific Needs and for the Whole World

— Geronda, I get upset when the service ends and I still haven’t been able to pray because I kept feeling sleepy the whole time.

— To ward off sleep, reflect on whatever might stir you spiritually.

— Geronda, is there anything that can stir me more deeply than people’s suffering?

— You’re right. But if you think about human suffering “in general,” it’s not very helpful. It’s better to think of specific people who are going through a very hard time. By doing so, you’ll begin to feel compassion for them, and your prayer will come from the heart. Start with a specific incident that troubles your heart the most, and then think about other sufferers as well. For example, in any war there are many wounded. If you can empathize with all those who have suffered, even without seeing them—that is a great thing. But if you find it difficult to empathize with them from a distance, you can do this: when you see, say, a person who has cut their finger, you begin to reflect: “Look how much it hurts him! What if he hadn’t just cut his finger, but had become disabled, losing an arm or a leg?! And how many such unfortunate people are already living in the world who have no arms or legs!...” You must agree that it’s one thing to simply hear on the news that a train derailed, and quite another to see with your own eyes a train that has gone off the tracks and the many dead and maimed people. Thus, by praying with sorrow for specific sufferings, you yourself receive help, and you help your neighbor.

— Geronda, when the bell rings during the Proskomedie,¹⁰² I do not commemorate specific names, but rather in general terms—for example, widows, orphans, and lonely people... Is this correct?

— I do the same. However, remember them with deep sorrow. And the priest during the Proskomedie should not merely read the names and take out the particles as a formality. No: he must pray for each person with deep sorrow. If he prays in this way, miracles will begin to happen. Once, a man possessed by a demon was brought to a priest and asked to celebrate the Liturgy. The priest, commemorating him during the

¹⁰⁰ An idiorhythmic monastery is a monastic community in which the monks do not elect a common abbot but follow an individual order in their spiritual life and in providing for their own material needs. The last idiorhythmic monastery on the Holy Mountain (Pantokrator) was converted into a communal monastery in 1992. — Translator’s note.

¹⁰¹ The Venerable Paisios served for some time as the cellarer—he was responsible for the storage and distribution of food.

¹⁰² According to the Athos tradition, before the end of the Proskomedie, the priest rings a small bell, and the faithful silently commemorate the names of Orthodox Christians, both living and departed, while he takes out the consecrated particles for them.

Proskomedias, said with deep compassion before taking out the host: “Lord, You see how Your creation is suffering!... Deliver him from the power of the demon. Remember, O Lord, Your servant...” The demon could not bear it and came out of the unfortunate man.

— Geronda, is it better to pray at length for one thing—or, moving from one petition to another, to have such compassion for the whole world?

— Why limit oneself to a single subject? It is better to ask for various things: one thing, another, a third—let one petition follow another... And after these varied petitions, one can reflect on the collective suffering of the whole world and pray. Such prayer moves God to compassion, because there is nobility in it.

— Geronda, what should we ask for in our prayers for all people?

— Let’s ask for “a good paradise” for everyone.¹⁰³ After all, Christ sacrificed Himself so that all people might be saved: both those who are close to Him and those who are far from Him. Let us therefore pray that all may come to know God, love Him, please Him, and be saved—that is, enter paradise. One man¹⁰⁴ prayed thus: “My God, I have already lived in paradise—here on earth. Therefore, after I die, send me to hell instead of my brother, and let him dwell in paradise.” Although if such a person were to end up in hell, I think that because of his great love, that small corner of hell where he finds himself would turn into paradise. For where there is love, Christ Himself is present, and where Christ is—there is paradise.

A Prayer for Those Who Ask for Our Prayers

— Geronda, when people ask us, for example, “Pray for my child who is taking exams,” or “Pray for so-and-so—he’s about to have surgery,” should we ask afterward how things went?

— Why ask about that? So you can later boast, “Glory to You, God, that my prayer worked”? Did you pray? Did you do your part? Nothing else is required of you.

— Geronda, how do you pray for the people you’re asked to pray for?

— Before the surgery¹⁰⁵, I would read the notes they gave me while standing, bowing to the ground from time to time. When I returned from the hospital, I began reading while lying down. Once I felt better, I went back to reading the notes while standing.

— Geronda, when some pilgrims leave us notes for commemoration, and we do not know their needs, how should we pray for them?

— Say: “Lord, have mercy on Your servants, whose needs You Yourself know.”

— And what about when, Geronda, we pray for people and don’t know whether they are alive or dead?

— Say: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Your servants.”

— Geronda, sometimes I forget to pray for those who asked me to pray for a specific matter on a certain day and at a certain time.

— Begin your prayer with them and say: “Remember, Lord, Your servants who have commanded us, the unworthy, to pray for them.”¹⁰⁶ Mention their names two or three times, and then pray for the whole world, saying: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Your servants.”

— Sometimes, Geronda, I forget the names of people who ask me to pray for them.

— If you forget their names, then pray for people with similar needs—for example, the sick, young people who have strayed from the right path, and similar cases. At the beginning of your prayer, say: “My God, help first and foremost those who need help more than others”—and then continue: “Have mercy on Your servants.”

— Geronda, I categorize the names of people who ask for my prayers according to their needs: for health, for enlightenment, and so on. But the list of names keeps growing. How long should I continue to mention these names?

— First, mention the new names, and then add: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on Your servants and on Your whole world,” so that your prayer train doesn’t set out with only a few passengers.

— Geronda, when I’m asked to pray for a particular need, how long should I pray?

¹⁰³ “May you rest in peace” is a common blessing in Greece. — Translator’s note.

¹⁰⁴ This refers to the Most Reverend Paissios himself.

¹⁰⁵ Removal of a malignant tumor of the colon (in February 1994).

¹⁰⁶ See: The Book of Hours. Prayer during the ektenia at the end of the Midnight Office and the Evening Office.

— It depends on the need and on how much compassion you feel for the person. Someone's need may not be all that great, but it pains you to see them suffer, and so you may pray for them for years. Other times, a single rosary is enough.

— So, Geronda, what is the sign that I have prayed enough for someone's request?

— As long as you have a peaceful state of mind, keep praying; there should be no strain in your prayer. And the length of your prayer depends on how much time you have available. However, know this: what matters is not how much a person prays, but how they pray. Someone might think they pray well because they devote a lot of time to it, but their prayer, offered without pain, is not true prayer. Another person may not pray for as long, but their prayer is genuine because it is offered with contrition and humility. And if there is both quantity and quality, then a devout soul receives double grace and blessing from God.

— Geronda, when people with many troubles come to the monastery and leave me notes asking me to pray for them, I empathize with them deeply. But then I don't have enough time to pray for them as their troubles require, and this troubles me.

— A person shares their pain with you; you listen to them, and your heart is invisibly shedding blood for them. Even if you don't have enough time to pray for them, that shed blood is worth many hours of prayer. This compassion is heartfelt prayer, and God responds to it. Or, for example, you read the notes people give you, and at the same time you worry that you don't have enough time to do more for these people. But understand this: a name read with heartfelt sorrow is not written on a piece of paper, but directly in Heaven; it ascends to the very throne of God!

Prayer for the Sick

— Geronda, I am sick right now. What rule should I follow during my illness?

— If you can, sing church hymns softly or recite the Jesus Prayer, asking God for health for yourself and for others, whom you, as a frail person, can empathize with better than others. In sickness, you are given all the conditions necessary for prayer. Even your own pain is a very important prerequisite for praying with sorrow for those who suffer, so that your prayer may come from the heart. In fact, such prayer is the monk's primary task. If you understand this, you will not become discouraged, but will pray unceasingly, giving thanks to God.

— Geronda, some people write notes with the names of the sick and send them to various monasteries for commemoration.

— That's good, but it's not enough. People themselves must pray for the sick, and they should also advise the sick not to forget to pray. You shouldn't reassure yourself by thinking that names have been sent to various monasteries for commemoration.

— Geronda, lately I've been having thoughts of asking God to take my brother, who has become disabled and is suffering greatly.

— Don't tell God what to do. Trust Him and let Him resolve the problem Himself. God knows what is best for His children. God is a tender and loving Father, and He will do what is best.

— Geronda, how do you pray when a sick person is facing the threat of death?

— I pray to the best of my ability; I can combine prayer with fasting, prostrations, or something else—and then I entrust everything into the hands of God, Who is good by nature.

— Geronda, but if God already knows—even without our prayers—what is best for each sick person, then why should we pray?

— We must ask God, and if recovery and a prolonged life will lead to the salvation of the soul, then the Good God will help immediately. But if we do not pray for the sick person, the illness will follow the laws of nature.

Divine consolation follows prayer offered in pain

— Geronda, when I hear about people's sorrows, I feel overwhelmed. Could this be a sign of little faith?

— Look: lack of faith is worry about oneself. Worry about another is called compassion. True compassion is accompanied by prayer, and Divine consolation follows. Therefore, pray as much as you can,

and then entrust everything to God's hands and find peace. Think about it: does God care less about His creation than you do? So why should you be worn out?

To a person who is spiritually hurting, who suffers for others, God grants great comfort, because otherwise such a person could not endure it. Do you know how bitter it is for me to read mountains of letters from people with so many misfortunes and problems? Because of this bitterness, I can't eat anything afterward. However, true joy is born from this pain. God rewards you with comfort proportional to your suffering; He comforts you so deeply that you can hardly bear it. And even though just a moment ago you were suffering and weeping as you prayed for your neighbor, now you are rejoicing. The Good God seems to say to you: "Don't worry so much, My child!... I have already heard your request."

Chapter 3. On Prayer for the Departed

"He will pass from death into life"

Elder, are you in pain right now?

— Well, what do you think? If I die before dawn, then a great day will begin for me: there will be neither evening nor morning! By the way, when I die, you can keep the sun for yourselves!¹⁰⁷

— Geronda, when the time comes for a spiritually prepared person to leave this world, how does he feel?

— How should I know?

— Has no one ever told you, Geronda?

— "He has passed from death to life"—¹⁰⁸ —isn't that what Scripture says? So this earthly life is actually death, and death is the transition to true life. Therefore, the spiritually prepared person departs cheerfully, with joy!

— Geronda, many saints have seen souls leaving the body. What do they look like?

— They are like children. After all, in the life to come, everyone will be like angels: there will be neither men nor women, neither old men nor old women, nor infants. Everyone will be of the same gender and the same age. Therefore, when someone sees souls parting from the body, they see them as if they were little children. Each face has its own distinctive features, but it looks like a child's face.

When I lived in the cell of the Holy Cross, I would sometimes visit Elder Filaret.¹⁰⁹ He was a pious elder who lived in the neighboring cell. For fifteen years, until he himself fell ill, he had cared for his novice, Father Bartholomew, who suffered from Parkinson's disease. The last time I visited him in his cell, I found him lying on the floor—he had fallen and could not get up. He hadn't eaten anything for a month, drinking only water. He couldn't lie down; he slept in his shoes, sitting with his back against the wall. His clothes were clinging to his body, and his shoes were completely wet because sores had opened on his feet and were oozing blood. But he behaved as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. "These sufferings," he said, "are also a blessing from God." I helped Father Filaret up from the floor and asked Father Bartholomew to let me stay with them for the night in the hut to help, but he wouldn't allow it; he told me to come back the next day. At midnight, as I was praying with my rosary, I saw Elder Filaret, his face radiant, as youthful as a twelve-year-old boy, ascending to Heaven in the Divine light. I realized that he had departed to the Lord.

— Geronda, is it necessary to pray fervently for the departed during the first forty days after his passing?

"Yes, because the soul of the deceased trembles, not knowing what judgment awaits it."

Here in Suroti, near the hotel, I once met an elderly woman who wanted to receive my blessing. I also kissed her hand because I saw the grace of God upon her soul. A short time later, this woman became a nun. When she passed away, I was here and reverently venerated her remains. Then two incidents occurred to me.

¹⁰⁷ Spoken by the Venerable Paisios on June 28, 1994, two weeks before his repose.

¹⁰⁸ John 5:24.

¹⁰⁹ Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. pp. 89–93. — Translator's note.

One here, in the Hesychastery, and the other at my kaliva. The first took place seven days after her passing. I saw her soul; she was like a little angel, resembling a twelve-year-old girl, and she was glowing all over. The second time, she appeared to me in a dream, bowed deeply in gratitude, and thanked me for my prayers for her. All of this was very moving, and I felt great joy. I opened my calendar to note the date when this happened and saw that exactly forty days had passed since her passing. This nun was known for her great kindness, and even now she does not forget to give thanks.

Let us always pray for the departed

— Geronda, should we light a lamp in the ossuary¹¹⁰ ?

— Yes, after all, it is an offering for the departed. The soul of the departed benefits greatly, even if you simply light a candle for them.

We must remember the departed and always pray for them. Let us not neglect to pray for their souls: may they find rest. Every time there is a Liturgy in my kaliva, at the end I ask the priest to perform a memorial service, during which prayers are offered for all the departed, “whose names we have not mentioned.”¹¹¹ On Mount Athos, in the monasteries, a memorial service with koliva is held for the departed on Friday evening; on Saturday morning, Matins is celebrated in the cathedral church, followed by the Liturgy in the cemetery church. There, in the cemetery, we will all end our journey, and from this “monastery” we will depart for another.

— Geronda, how should we pray for the departed?

— Say in general: “O God, grant rest to the souls of Your departed servants.” If you remember someone who has passed away or learn that someone you know—or don’t know—has died, then commemorate that soul as well in the same prayer.

It is more proper to first commemorate the departed who are in greater need, then those who are in less need, and finally—deceased relatives and loved ones. For example, although I never specifically pray for my relatives, if by chance—due to fatigue or lack of time—I fail to pray for the departed, I later see my parents in my dreams. For when I pray for all the departed in general, my parents also receive help and rejoice; but if I do not pray, then my father and mother are deprived of this comfort. Our prayers are feeble, but even they bring help to the poor departed. Therefore, if we monks do not pray for the departed, we deserve to have our skin flayed while we are still alive and to be sprinkled with salt.

The departed need our prayers

— Geronda, during the service I pray mostly for myself. Even when the “Immaculate Ones” are read at a memorial service—¹¹² —I often continue to pray for myself.

— Well then, do you want all that is good only for yourself? The departed need our prayers, because they can no longer help themselves, but we—we can do something for them.

I remember a layman who lived on Mount Athos—Uncle Yannis. He would go from monastery to monastery and from cell to cell, asking, “Is there any work to be done? Go ahead, what work do you need done?” He was such a good man that the fathers advised him to become a monk. But he would reply, “No, no!... Just pray for me! You can’t even imagine what a scoundrel I was! Do you know how much evil I committed during the war?” Once, while helping me build a lectern, he asked, “Pray for me, Father, because I am a terrible sinner.” Then I lost track of him. Some time later, a monk from a certain monastery came to me and said, “Uncle Yannis has passed away. He appeared to me twice and asked me to convey a request to you: that you remember him in your prayers for the departed.” Here’s what happened. Uncle Yannis went to a monastery to help the monks. When the time came for him to die, he said to the hieromonk who was serving in the crypt: “Brother, I am a terrible sinner. Please serve a memorial service at my grave every day.” And when he died, this hieromonk really did come every evening and serve the liturgy at his grave. But after some

¹¹⁰ According to the tradition of the Greek Church, the remains of the departed are exhumed after several years, washed, and placed in a special repository—an ossuary. — Translator’s note.

¹¹¹ There is no such phrase in the Slavonic version. — Translator’s note.

¹¹² This is the name of Psalm 118, which begins with the words: “Blessed are those whose way is blameless.”

time, this hieromonk was assigned duties in the archondarion,¹¹³ and he sometimes forgot to serve the liturgy. One night, Uncle Yanis appeared to him in a dream and said, “Please don’t forget me! If you can’t perform the litany for me yourself, then go to Father Paissios and tell him that I’ve died. He commemorates me every day, but he commemorates me for my health and prays that I might repent. And now I can no longer repent.”

The departed need prayer more than the living, because the living still have hope for repentance. And God wants there to be people who intercede for the departed, because the Final Judgment has not yet taken place. Once, during the war, a severely wounded soldier asked a priest for water—and the priest refused, brushing him off, even though he had a little water left in his canteen. Soon the wounded man died, and the priest, as soon as he realized his mistake, fell into despair. He constantly prayed for that man’s soul, and one day, when he came to my hermitage, he told me about his misfortune. In truth, this priest was very compassionate and constantly asked himself, “How could I have done such a thing?!” This happened by God’s permission. God briefly withdrew His grace from the priest because that soldier was in great need of prayer. If the priest had given him water, he would soon have forgotten about him. But now his conscience tormented him, and he prayed for that soul constantly.

Relief for the Departed

— Geronda, how do our prayers benefit the departed?

— Let me give you an example. If, for some reason, you came to visit me and found me not here but in a damp basement, you would ask the abbess, “Poor old man! Let’s move him to the upper floor so he can see the sunshine while he’s still alive!” Do you think the abbess would grant that request?

— Of course she would, Geronda.

— Well, there you go. Even if the abbess were to do that, wouldn’t God Himself grant relief to the departed when we ask Him for it? Would it really be so difficult for Him to move them to a cell with better living conditions—or even place them under house arrest?

When I was young, I knew an incredibly stingy old woman. But she wasn’t stingy with me, because she loved me very much. Three years after her death, something strange happened to me. While I was reciting the Jesus Prayer, it was as if a young man took me by the hand and led me to visit that old woman’s grave, explaining that she herself had called me. We arrived at the grave; the young man lifted the tombstone, and I saw that her body had decayed only halfway and was emitting an unbearable stench. She cried out, “Monk, save me! Monk, save me!” I felt so sorry for her that I embraced her tightly and kissed her. Despite the terrible smell, I didn’t want to leave her, and if she hadn’t left on her own, I would have stayed with her. This incident made an indelible impression on me. When you love truly, with pain, neither decaying flesh nor a foul odor evokes revulsion. For example, when I see a worldly woman, fashionably dressed and smelling of perfume, I feel an inner repulsion; but with this elderly woman, despite the stench, I didn’t want to part from her—I felt a special compassion for her. Amazing things happen in the spiritual life! She was in great need of prayer, which is why God showed her to me in that state. Then I began to pray for that soul. Two months later, I saw myself as if I were in some kind of abyss, like a funnel. Unfortunately, there were many people there—horrible-looking, black, and suffering terribly. And above the abyss, on a bright cloud, I saw that old woman. She seemed far away, though in reality she was close. The old woman looked quite young, but it was clear that it was her. An angel was hovering beside her—probably her guardian angel—washing her face. She looked peaceful. I embraced her and felt a joy—one that cannot be put into words!

After all, the departed are the accused—people who have fallen into slavery. Sometimes I recall an old folk song and hum it, thinking of the departed as slaves:

Will, will, grant freedom
to this tormented body,
Will, will, give me a voice,
so that everything within me may sing,
Warm my soul with your fire,
which was dead as a rock,

¹¹³ Archondarik—a reception area for visitors, as well as a monastery guesthouse. — Translator’s note.

I will sing of your joy,
like a spring nightingale.
Let the echo of this song be heard
the slave within the prison walls,
And may it anoint with myrrh the wounds
of hearts in the chains of slavery.

I apply the words of this song to myself as well. Am I not worn out by suffering?¹¹⁴ In this life, I am a slave. And the “slave within the prison walls”—which in the song refers to enslaved Hellas—for me represents the departed who are held captive, and I ask the All-Merciful God to pour the balm of His mercy upon their hearts.

Chapter 4.

On the fact that the Psalter is a bolt of lightning that strikes the devil

The Psalms of David are divinely inspired

Elder, I am amazed at how well children understand the Psalter and how eager they are to read it!

— The Psalter is suitable for any age. Children may even enjoy it more than you and I do. The Psalter is divinely inspired; it was written through divine illumination, which is why it contains such powerful and profound thoughts. Even if you gathered all the theologians and philologists together, they couldn’t write a single psalm with such content. And if they did write something, it would be like a plastic flower. The Prophet David had no formal education, yet with what depth he wrote! It’s clear that he was guided by the Spirit of God.

— Geronda, I don’t have time to read the Psalter.

— It would be good to find a little time for it during the day. And if you don’t have time, it’s better to read half a kathisma,¹¹⁵ focusing on the meaning, than to rush through the entire Psalter. Keep what you’ve read in mind and reflect on it. The Psalter is prayer.

Some people misunderstand the prophet David and say that some of his psalms contain curses. But when David prays:

“Let the sinners vanish from the earth, and the lawless, as if they had never been” (¹¹⁶), he does not mean that sinners should perish, but that they should repent, so that there will be no more sinners on earth.

I find joy in reading the Book of Psalms; it is full of prophecies and comfort. In a difficult situation, if you read the Book of Psalms, you feel relief, liberation, and the certainty that God will help.

“The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord, and He is their refuge in times of trouble,”¹¹⁷ — it says there.

Reading the Psalter According to the “Circumstances” of Saint Arsenius¹¹⁸

— Geronda, how did you come to read the Psalter using Saint Arsenius’s “Circumstances”?

— Saint Arsenius, unable to find appropriate prayers in the Service Book for the various situations people brought to him, used different psalms. In a notebook, he wrote down which psalm to read under which

¹¹⁴ Spoken in December 1993.

¹¹⁵ Kathisma (from the Greek καθίζω—“to sit”)—in the liturgical tradition of the Byzantine Rite, a section of the Psalter. The Psalter, containing 150 psalms, is divided into 20 kathismas so that all kathismas are approximately the same length. During the reading of the Psalter, church regulations permit sitting. — Translator’s note.

¹¹⁶ Ps. 103:35.

¹¹⁷ Ps. 36:39.

¹¹⁸ See the appendix to this edition, pp. 251–268.

circumstances. When this notebook came into my possession, I began to read the Psalter and pray according to these instructions. My heart tells me that Saint Arsenius also greatly helps us in our prayer with the Psalter.

— Geronda, does Saint Arsenius help us more now because he sees that we pray the same way he himself prayed?

— Yes, of course. And there are examples of this!

— Geronda, how should one read the psalms and pray about a specific matter?

— How do you read them?

— First I look at the instructions in “Circumstances,” and then I read the psalm itself.

— No, first you need proper preparation. Saint Arsenius was a saint and had reached such a level that he would read the psalm right away. But surely we won’t fail to read at the beginning

“Have mercy on me, O God...”¹¹⁹ And after the psalm, won’t we recite the doxology? Won’t we make a few prostrations? So, first read the fiftieth psalm and humbly ask for God’s mercy. Then recite the Theotokos’ prayer, “We take refuge in Your mercy, O Mother of God,” and the troparion to Saint Arsenius, to call upon the Most Holy Theotokos and Saint Arsenius for help. Then state what you wish to pray for and recite the corresponding psalm. At the end, recite: “Glory... and now...,” “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, glory to You, O God” (three times), and conclude with the Doxology as a thanksgiving to Christ and “It is truly meet” as a thanksgiving to the Mother of God. Make as many bows as you can.

— Geronda, I’m trying to find a connection between the psalm and the circumstances in which Saint Arsenius used it, but I don’t always see it.

— The instructions for specific needs roughly correspond to the meaning of the psalms. But Saint Arsenius was not so much concerned with the exactness of the correspondence, nor with how closely the content of the psalm literally matched the circumstances—what was important to the reverend was precisely to pray for people.

— Geronda, is it possible to read a few instructions from “Circumstances” first, and then all the corresponding psalms together?

— If you read several instructions together, you’ll forget them. It’s better to read each instruction separately before the psalm, so that the heart begins to work and zeal is awakened. When a person prays about a specific matter, it greatly aids heartfelt prayer.

— Geronda, during the service, I find it hard to pay attention to the reading of the Psalter.¹²⁰

— You can look in the “Circumstances” in your cell for the instructions regarding the psalms that will be read, and then pray for specific needs. And if you forget which needs each instruction pertains to, say this: “My God, help me with the need to which this psalm pertains”—and pray the Jesus Prayer.

Let’s pray for various needs

— Geronda, when I return to my cell after my duties, I usually pray with my rosary for various needs. Perhaps it would be helpful for me to also read certain psalms appropriate for each situation?

— If you’d like, give it a try—it’ll help you. First, read the note explaining the psalm—what need it’s meant for—then pray with prayer beads for that specific need, and only then read the psalm itself. The Psalter is a great help for heartfelt prayer; you’ll come to understand that yourself. After I look at “Circumstances,” I offer a prayer from the heart and pray not for just one specific need, but for many. That is, starting with St. Arsenius’s “Circumstances,” I expand my petition, applying it not only to material needs but also to spiritual ones. For example, for the first psalm, which Saint Arsenius recited while planting trees and vineyards, praying that they would bear fruit, I first say: “Lord, may everything that is planted sprout.” After that, I pray for every good work that is beginning. I ask: “Lord! May the children who are born be sanctified; may they grow and prosper. May every spiritual word that is sown and every spiritual endeavor that begins bear fruit.” When I begin Psalm 105, which is read about divine enlightenment, I pray for the physically blind; and Psalm 122, which is read about the blind, I pray that God may enlighten the whole world. In short, anyone who begins their prayer with Saint Arsenius’s “Circumstances” can see other needs as well and pray for them. So too with

¹¹⁹ In accordance with the liturgical regulations, one kathisma from the Psalter is read at Vespers, and two kathismas at Matins. Thus, the entire Psalter is read in its entirety over the course of a week.

¹²⁰ Ps. 50.

you: if you want to engage in spiritual practice, take all the psalms from the beginning to the end of the Psalter and all of Saint Arsenius's "Circumstances," and, applying them not only to material matters but also to spiritual ones, offer a prayer from the heart. Let's give it a try. Take any instruction from Saint Arsenius's "Circumstances" right now and tell me—what else would you pray for while reading this psalm?

— Well, for example, Geronda, my ears recently started hurting, and I read Psalm 95, which Saint Arsenius recited over the deaf. As I did so, I prayed not only for myself but also for all the deaf, for children to obey their parents, and for novices to obey their elders.

— You see: since you yourself have experienced and suffered through these needs, you can easily understand others who have the same needs. Try to cultivate compassion for all people—even if you haven't personally experienced the difficulties they face. In this way, you will gradually learn to have compassion for all people, near and far, and you will pray for them with a heartfelt prayer; your heart will ache for them, and from this pain, prayer will arise.

— Geronda, when I read the instructions in the psalm and try to think of other similar needs, nothing comes to mind.

— There's no need to rack your brain, wondering, "What else could I pray for?" After all, reasons for prayer spring from the heart in a fraction of a second. It's certainly easier for me in this regard, because I interact with people a lot, and I see their pain and their needs right before my eyes, and I feel compassion for them. Each time, based on the specific circumstances of specific people, I discover ever-new depths in the well-known psalms. When praying according to "Circumstances," I first think of someone I know, and then extend my prayer to all the people I don't know who have the same need. And you must not remain indifferent. Think about how the world is suffering, so that your prayer may come from the heart. The main goal is to engage the heart in this work.

Prayer from the Psalter

— These days, there is a great need for prayer. The only way out now is prayer; without it, expect nothing good. There is immense power in the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms is like lightning striking the devil. How much comfort I find in the Book of Psalms! I have divided it into three parts—¹²¹—and I read one part each day. In three days I read through the entire book, and then I start over. I read Saint Arsenius's "Circumstances" commentary on each psalm and offer a heartfelt prayer for the corresponding need and for all those who are sick in body and soul. Then I read the psalm, and at the end of each psalm I add: "O God, grant rest to Your departed servants!" Those one and a half hours when I read the Psalter are the best way I can help the world. In the winter, I suffered greatly from a hernia, but I read the Psalter while standing. Tears streamed from my eyes due to the unbearable pain. With one hand I held my hernia, and with the other—the Psalter. I felt like an artilleryman on the front lines firing a cannon, only I was firing at the devil. During the day I fired precise psalm-shots; at night I held my ground with the Jesus Prayer. The devil flew into a rage, and this hernia was his revenge. But God also allowed me this infirmity to see how I would conduct myself.

— Geronda, it's hard for me to read the Psalter while standing without leaning on something.

— You need to prop up your temples of the Holy Spirit¹²² with scaffolding, too. I'll make you some walking sticks like the ones I made for myself: I nailed a board to the handle, so it looks like the letter "T." I lean on it when I read the Psalter. I have one walking stick in my cell and one outside.

— Geronda, sometimes, when I'm completely exhausted, I force myself to read the Psalter, even though I don't understand a thing because of my fatigue. But I force myself to stay on my feet—and I feel that I benefit from it. However, a thought tells me that such prayer "is of little value."

— You may not understand what you're reading, but such prayer is still valuable, because despite your fatigue, you force yourself to stand before Christ. Don't forget that effort is a necessary condition for prayer.

¹²¹ The first part consists of Psalms 1 through 54, the second of Psalms 55 through 100, and the third of Psalms 101 through 150.

¹²² The Reverend is referring to the body, which, according to the Apostle Paul, is the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:19).

Part 5.

The Jesus Prayer and Sobriety

“We repeat the sweetest name of Christ many times. We do this not because Christ does not hear us the first time, but so that our mind may be united with Him.”

Chapter 1.

On the Power of the Jesus Prayer

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”

Elder, what is the best way to recite the Jesus Prayer?

— It is best to recite it in full: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” because the Jesus Prayer contains our entire theology.¹²³ But if you find it difficult to recite it in full, then say: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

— Geronda, I’ve read that a prayer should be addressed to all three Persons of the Holy Trinity.¹²⁴ When we say “Lord Jesus Christ,” aren’t we addressing only Christ?

— But didn’t God the Father send Christ, the Son of God, into the world to save it? Wasn’t it Christ who offered Himself as a sacrifice; wasn’t He the One who was crucified for our sake? Isn’t it Christ who will judge the world? Therefore, we address our prayers to Christ, since it is upon Him that God has established the salvation of the world.

— Is it correct, Geronda, to say, “Lord Jesus Christ, enlighten me,” or “forgive me,” or “cover me,” instead of “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me”?

— It is better to say the prayer as is customary, with “have mercy on me” at the end. “Have mercy on me” encompasses everything: “save,” “enlighten,” requests for both physical needs and deliverance from passions... But if at any moment you realize that you need to say, “Lord Jesus Christ, enlighten me” or “forgive me,” then you may do so.

— Geronda, is it always necessary to say “a sinner” after “have mercy on me”?

— At first, you can say it a few times, but later there’s no need to repeat it after every prayer; it’s enough to be aware of your own sinfulness.

— Geronda, it’s easier for me to recite the rosary to the Mother of God or the saints than to pray the Jesus Prayer. Is it normal for this to happen?

— Praying to the Mother of God and the saints is one thing; the Jesus Prayer is another. They are different things. The Jesus Prayer has a different meaning: through it, a person unites with Christ, and the mind unites with God. But the mind must remain in prayer—that is the mystery of the Jesus Prayer. When we recite many rosary beads dedicated to one saint or another, that is also good, but you cannot attain unceasing prayer that way. Get into the habit of practicing the Jesus Prayer more often, so that your mind repeatedly enters into the words “Lord Jesus Christ,” and in this way you will naturally abide in unceasing prayer. As a rule, it is limited to the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”—words that we must utter with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind.¹²⁵ It is another matter when we wish to ask a saint to intercede and help us in our needs. Of course, I am speaking from my own experience, based on what helps me personally. I do not know if this will help others.

¹²³ First and foremost, the words of the Jesus Prayer contain the dogma of the Incarnation of the Word of God: “Lord” indicates Christ’s divine nature, “Jesus” reveals His human nature, and “Christ” signifies both, united in one person. “Son of God” shows that the two natures in Christ remain unmixed even after their union. See: *The Wonderful Words of a Certain Unknown Saint on the Words of the Divine Prayer*. Translated from the Greek by Dobrotolyubiya, vol. 5. Moscow: Metochion of the Panteleimon Monastery on Mount Athos, 1991. p. 5. — Translator’s note.

¹²⁴ See Anonymous Hesychast, *Neptic Theory*, from a manuscript of the Holy Monastery of Xenophon on Mount Athos, published by “Orthodox Kypseli,” Thessaloniki 1979, pp. 97–99.

¹²⁵ See Mark 12:30.

The main thing is to turn to the Jesus Prayer to unite with God. Only this has value, because a person becomes one with the Spirit of God and unites with God in spirit, and this happens in a sacred way, through the Jesus Prayer. We repeat the sweetest name of Christ many times, not because Christ does not hear us the first time, but so that our mind may unite with Him. Because Christ is everything to us, and all our paths lead to Him.

Prayer is a formidable weapon against the devil

— Geronda, I feel powerless in the face of any temptation or difficulty.

— Don't you pray the Jesus Prayer? Just as ships in distress send out an SOS signal, so you must constantly repeat: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"—and you will receive help.¹²⁶

If it weren't for the Jesus Prayer, the enemy would have cast me into the abyss long ago, but the prayer saved me. When I lived at the Stomion Monastery, one evening I went to a cave located in a dangerous spot on the edge of a cliff. It was very small; I could barely fit inside while sitting. I piled stones up in front of the entrance because there was an abyss below. All night long I recited the Jesus Prayer. At dawn, amid the silence, I suddenly heard a shrill crowing and the frantic flapping of wings right next to my ear. I was startled by the surprise and cried out, "Lord Jesus Christ!" I leaped out and barely managed to hold on to the edge of the abyss. Then I realized that this was a demonic temptation. My ears were ringing terribly, but I continued to pray.

— Geronda, when a person recites the Jesus Prayer with just their lips, without engaging the mind, is there any benefit to it?

— There is some benefit even in such a prayer. Of course, such a prayer does not drive the enemy away, but, like bursts of machine-gun fire, it forces him to stay in his trench and not stick his head out.

Prayer has great power; it is a formidable weapon against the devil. When you recite it, it's as if you're firing spiritual bullets at the devil, and he cannot come near you. Once, a novice who lived at the Skete of Saint Anne was reciting the Jesus Prayer, and the devil was taunting him, constantly moaning: "My! My! My-y-y!.." Then the novice heard the devil shout: "To the skete of that Old Woman¹²⁷ the monks won't let me approach in peace."

— Geronda, when I am overcome by wicked or blasphemous thoughts and yet I try to keep praying, might I be bringing God's wrath upon myself?

— No, you do not. Tangalashka, in his malice, sows wicked thoughts, but you should use this as a lesson in unceasing prayer. Tell him, "It is good that you have brought me these thoughts, because I had forgotten God," and continue praying. When the tangalashka sees that this benefits you, he will withdraw on his own—it is not in his interest for such thoughts to become a reason for you to pray. When he retreats and no longer tempts you, then you will have attained unceasing prayer.

In any case, the devil, without meaning to, does a great deal of good, which is why God tolerates him. When I lived at the Iversky Skete,¹²⁸ one night the tangalashki tried to kill me with a piece of rock! In the evening, a poor man came to the kaliva. I gave him all the money I had, and he left. That night I heard a knock on the door. I thought the man had decided I still had more money and had come back. "Who's there?" I asked. Silence. Then I heard a knock on another door. I lit a candle. "Who's there?" I asked again. Silence. Then I heard blows against the ceiling. "Ah, now I get it!" I said. And then such a rumbling began! I fell to my knees and kept repeating the Lord's Prayer over and over. Suddenly, a heavy stone boulder was thrown down from above : boom! A plank in the ceiling broke, and a piece of rock hung directly over my head, its sharp end pointing down. "I see," I said, "we're in for a lively night!" And so our all-night vigil began. I was praying, while the tangalashki pounded on the roof above. Ah, those were some good all-night vigils!

Prayer is a battle against the tangalashka. That means the tangalashka will fight back. The tangalashkas are left defenseless only when a person fights them courageously—but this courage must be filled with humility, not selfish bravado.

¹²⁶ We are talking about the Most Reverend Paisius himself.

¹²⁷ That is, to the Skete of St. Anne.

¹²⁸ In 1964–1967.

To purify the heart, the Jesus Prayer and ascetic struggle are necessary

- Geronda, how is the heart purified?
- Through humility, gentleness, self-sacrifice, selflessness, examining one's thoughts, asceticism, prayers, and above all, the Jesus Prayer—that is how the heart is purified. The Jesus Prayer frees the heart from all impurities.
- Geronda, can the heart be purified by the Jesus Prayer alone?
- No. It is impossible to be purified by the Jesus Prayer alone. It must be accompanied by humility and appropriate spiritual struggle. If you pray but neglect humility and spiritual struggle, then your prayer is in vain. Conversely, if you observe the rest but neglect prayer, then you, too, are laboring in vain. Strive and pray, asking for God's help, and in this way your heart will gradually be purified. Asceticism and prayer must go hand in hand.

Chapter 2. On the Act of Prayer

Aloud, in a whisper, or in the mind?

- Elder, what is the best way to pray: aloud, in a whisper, or in the mind?
- You'll get tired quickly if you pray aloud. Therefore, pray sometimes in a whisper and sometimes in your mind. Praying in your mind is best, but since not everyone can pray constantly in their mind, it's helpful to say it in a whisper at first, as a preparation. You can begin your prayer in a whisper, then continue in your mind, then again in a whisper, and again in your mind. Alternate in this way until the prayer is performed solely in the mind—that is, until it becomes “mental,” as it is called—“mental prayer.” Then a person prays with the mind, while the heart rejoices and is glad; the person attains divine communion and experiences heavenly states.
 - Lately, Geronda, every time I enter my cell, I'm overcome by distraction and blasphemous thoughts. Why is this happening to me?
 - It seems you have forgotten the Jesus Prayer, and that is why temptation has pitched its tents at the threshold of your cell. Try, during your free time when you're in your cell, to say the prayer in a whisper to drive away the distraction and thoughts that the enemy instills. Whispered prayer is very helpful during demonic attacks. At such moments, you must remain vigilant to escape the enemy's hordes.
 - Geronda, should one fight evil or blasphemous thoughts by bringing to mind their opposites—good thoughts?
 - It is better to counter them not with thoughts—even good ones—but with the Jesus Prayer. As much as you can, direct your mind toward conversing with Christ in mental prayer, and do not occupy it with musings about this and that. Cultivate a prayer that will first deliver you from evil thoughts and eventually become one with your breath.

Pray the Jesus Prayer everywhere

- Geronda, what should I pay more attention to in my spiritual life?
 - Focus, gather your thoughts, and practice the Jesus Prayer everywhere with your mind and heart, asking for the mercy of the Good God for yourself, for all the living, and for all the departed. And when you grow weary from prayer, sing aloud in a slow, chanting tone, “Lord, have mercy,” or some troparion.
 - Geronda, I usually recite the Jesus Prayer only in church.
 - When a monk is content to recite the Jesus Prayer only in the church, he becomes like worldly people who go to church only on Sundays. Therefore, do not limit yourself to repeating the Jesus Prayer only in the church; recite it while performing your duties, in your cell, and even when you lie down to rest—continue to recite the Jesus Prayer nonetheless. While performing your duties, make sure your movements are calm and deliberate; otherwise, restlessness will distract your mind from prayer.
- Always keep the sweetest name of Jesus on your lips, so that your soul may be sweetened. It is a great thing to spend the whole day with the Jesus Prayer. You begin the day with prayer, then go about your work

while repeating the prayer, and in this way the work you do—and the people who participate in it—are sanctified. For example, when you prepare a meal with the Jesus Prayer, both the food you prepare and the people who eat it are sanctified.

— Geronda, lately I’ve been constantly facing strong temptations.

— Use the temptation as an opportunity to turn to Christ each time, asking for His help, and you will benefit from it; you will acquire unceasing prayer.

Spontaneous Prayer

— Geronda, tell us something about spontaneous prayer.

— A person who has attained spontaneous prayer does not exert effort to recite the Jesus Prayer; rather, without any compulsion on his part, the prayer is performed within him of its own accord. Even in his sleep he prays, and when he wakes up, the prayer continues. That is why the Holy Scriptures, in the Song of Songs, say:

“I sleep, but my heart is awake.”¹²⁹

On Mount Athos there was a worker who labored tirelessly. He worked for two people, and so the fathers paid him double wages. Sometimes he would stop by my cell at the Holy Cross. Once I told him, “When you work, say the Jesus Prayer so that the work of your hands may be sanctified.” He obeyed me like a child and soon got used to saying the prayer. One time he came to me and said, “You know, I sleep and say the prayer even in my sleep. And when I wake up, the prayer continues. I feel such joy in my soul!..” — “A sweet dawn has broken,” I replied. Imagine—a layperson, and yet he has attained such a state!

— Geronda, if a person has attained spontaneous prayer, does that mean he has already been purified of the passions?

— Well, in any case, he has attained a good disposition.

— Geronda, how does one attain spontaneous prayer?

— If a person recognizes his sinfulness and constantly reminds himself that he has done nothing to repay the Lord, then his soul is gripped by remorse, and he humbly asks for God’s mercy. And then he no longer has to make an effort; the Jesus Prayer begins to flow of its own accord—it moves within him on its own.

— Does a person feel the need to pray?

— It is not a necessity, but a good habit. Thanks to the effort a person has made, he develops the good habit of unceasing prayer.

Automatism in Prayer

— Geronda, there are people who constantly whisper the Jesus Prayer...

— One can reach the point of automatism and recite the prayer mechanically, like a clock ticking: “tick-tock, tick-tock”—while the mind is not focused on God.

— Geronda, is there any benefit to such prayer?

— If a person has a little humility and realizes that his mind is not on God and that he is reciting the prayer mechanically, then there is some benefit. But if, because of this “ticking,” he considers himself a successful practitioner of the Jesus Prayer, then instead of benefit, he receives harm.

— Geronda, if a person is accustomed to reciting the Jesus Prayer ceaselessly, does this help him in his spiritual struggle?

— The question is, for what purpose is he reciting it? If a person has come to know himself and feels the need for God’s mercy and constantly seeks it through prayer, then he derives benefit. Or if he has not yet come to know himself, but already understands that he is in the grip of passions and turns to God, then God will help him in his struggle, and, moreover, the person will retain the habit of reciting the Jesus Prayer. However, if he recites the prayer merely mechanically, without realizing his own sins, it does not help him in putting off the old man.

— Geronda, is there a danger in a person setting this goal for himself: “I will learn to recite the Jesus Prayer unceasingly”?

¹²⁹ Song of Songs 5:2.

— Such a desire can be dangerous when a person stops watching over himself and engages in the Jesus Prayer simply because it is “in vogue right now.” He may develop the habit of reciting the prayer ceaselessly, but the old self will continue to live within him, and there is a danger of falling into delusion.

I remember when I was at the tuberculosis clinic; there was another monk being treated there who had developed the habit of reciting the Jesus Prayer. He would close his eyes and constantly repeat: “Lord Jesus Christ... Lord Jesus Christ...” One visitor, upon seeing him, began to cross herself: “What a holy man!” And then one day this monk said to me: “I’ve here denounced one bishop and another church leader; I gave them a few gentle rebukes. I wrote them letters so that they would renounce their false teachings! If they renounce it, they can count on my support.”—“Wait a minute, brother,” I said to him, “what supports you yourself? Three years of schooling and tuberculosis?” And do you know what he replied? “Honestly, if there were just one or two people like me, the world would be saved!” If he’d had mental issues, there wouldn’t have been any questions about him, but the trouble was that his mind was perfectly sound. Because he forced himself to pray constantly, it became second nature to him, and he considered every thought that came to him to be divine inspiration. And so he reached the point where he began to believe that there was no other pillar in the world like him!

Holding One’s Breath to Focus the Mind

— Geronda, how do you combine the Jesus Prayer with your breathing?

— I used to train myself to recite the prayer in its entirety: on the inhale, saying “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” and on the exhale, “have mercy on me, a sinner.” But after my lung surgery, I didn’t have enough air to say the whole prayer, so I began saying “Lord Jesus Christ” as I inhaled and “have mercy on me” as I exhaled.

— Geronda, why do we need to hold our breath when we say the Jesus Prayer?

— Holding your breath helps the mind focus on the prayer—just as an archer holds his breath briefly to hit the target accurately. But this should be done only briefly at the beginning of the prayer, and only when necessary—that is, when the mind is distracted or troubled by thoughts. In such cases, it makes sense to hold your breath briefly, but not constantly; otherwise, it puts pressure on the heart and can cause damage. Some people bow their heads downward and hold their breath, which causes physical pain in the heart that can develop into an illness—and people are then forced to stop praying. God wants a different kind of pain from us: the genuine heartache that comes from a humble and contrite heart, not from physical compression of the heart muscle.

Prayer requires effort

— Geronda, I’d rather not go out to perform my duties but stay in my cell and practice the Jesus Prayer.

— Well, well! Are you seeking nirvana?¹³⁰ The goal of an Orthodox monk is not nirvana. Please understand this. A monk is not an idler who hides from work, merely sitting and repeating the Jesus Prayer like a mantra. If he wants to sit idly all the time, then he’s no different from those who practice yoga for self-concentration. A monk—and especially a young one—should have a fire in his hands; he should be a fine fellow and run as fast as he can to fulfill his duties!

— Geronda, I also find it hard to bow...

— Well, that’s just wonderful: don’t bow, don’t go about your duties, just sit and pray! Do you really think you’ll make much progress that way? Abba Isaac said that prayer done without physical labor is a miscarriage, not prayer.¹³¹

— Geronda, I can’t stand on my feet for long when I pray with my rosary; soon after I start, I drop to my knees and pray that way.

¹³⁰ The Reverend means that the act of prayer requires both physical effort and a struggle against the passions, and has nothing in common with the techniques used by followers of Eastern religions to attain the state of so-called nirvana.

¹³¹ “Any prayer in which the body is not labored and the heart does not grieve is equated with an underdeveloped fetus in the womb, because such a prayer lacks a soul.” See: Isaac the Syrian, the Venerable. *Ascetic Discourses*. Discourse 11. p. 78. — Translator’s note.

— Start with what's harder, and when you get tired, move on to what's easier. If you can't stand, kneel. If you can't kneel, sit down. And if you can't even sit, then pray lying down. The main thing is that your mind be with God. Abba Isaac says this, too.¹³²

— Geronda, why do the fathers say that when you recite the Jesus Prayer, you should sit on a stool?

— Look: you got up at night, completed your rosary, performed all your prostrations, got tired, sat down for a short while, and are now reciting the Jesus Prayer. You sit down so that you'll have the strength to pray throughout the day as well. During services and while performing your duties, you'll spend enough time standing and will get tired. If you stand and pray again in your cell, you'll be completely exhausted. So sit down for a short while and say your prayer. That's what the holy fathers mean. But they don't mean at all that you must sit down to pray. Praying while seated when you are able to stand—I think that is wrong. It is a form of laxity, even if it seems to you that you are experiencing a certain sweetness. Elder Arsenios the Caver¹³³ said: "When I pray while standing, I feel a strong fragrance. When I pray while seated—a faint one."

— Geronda, when I bow or pray with my rosary while standing, it's easier for my mind to focus; that is, the physical effort helps me concentrate.

— The mind is drawn to the task at hand. For example, when you're in pain, your mind is drawn to the pain because it attracts your attention; likewise, when you're bowing, your mind at least focuses on that action. But if your mind were completely directed toward Christ, you wouldn't even remember how many bows you'd made.

Repentance is the surest path to prayer

— Geronda, Saint Ignatius (Bryanchaninov) says that prayers should be recited slowly and prostrations should also be performed slowly.¹³⁴

— Every saint speaks of prayer in the way he himself practiced it. People often draw incorrect conclusions from the Holy Fathers' teachings on mental prayer. The Holy Fathers were in constant communion with God, and this experience of communion with God taught them to pray correctly, following precisely the form of prayer that brought them the greatest benefit. But if one follows what the Fathers write—bowing one's head to one's chest, holding one's breath, and imitating their outward manner of prayer—merely to experience delight and joy, or out of pride, to become a practitioner of spiritual sobriety—then one will not succeed.

— Geronda, are books that discuss specific techniques for mental prayer helpful?

— They are useful, but only to those who possess humility. They are of no use to the proud, to those who set as their goal to be counted among the ranks of the Fathers of "Dobrotolubie" within a few years. Once, several monks came to my cell and said, "We have come so that you may teach us the secrets of the Jesus Prayer. We know that you are one of those who have mastered mental prayer." — "Strike my name from your list," I told them. "I only ask for God's mercy—I do nothing else."

— Geronda, does that mean some of the practical techniques the Fathers speak of are useless?

— All of these are aids for gathering the mind, and they help only if they are preceded by humility, repentance, and contrition. But if I take a bench, bow my head to my chest, and decide to pray as many times as the Pilgrim,¹³⁵ without first making the effort to repent, then I'll get stuck on the external and my practice will become mechanical. At best, I will simply acquire a mechanical habit of reciting the prayer. But if I first cultivate humility and repentance and then use some of the practical advice of the Holy Fathers as an aid, then there will be benefit. Whoever approaches prayer in this way cannot fall into delusion; only outward imitation can lead to delusion.

— Geronda, can a person attain prayer without reading the Holy Fathers¹³⁶ and without following specific methods?

¹³² See: Ibid., Discourse 52, 70. — Translator's note.

¹³³ Elder Arsenius the Cave-Dweller (1886–1983) lived as an ascetic on Mount Athos in the caves of the Small Skete of Saint Anne.

¹³⁴ See: Ignatius (Bryanchaninov), St. Collected Works. Vol. 1. Ascetic Experiences. On the Practice of the Jesus Prayer. p. 291.

¹³⁵ The Venerable Paisius is referring to the book *Confidential Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*.

¹³⁶ The most famous collection of patristic texts devoted to prayer and sobriety is *Dobrotolyubie* (*Love of Goodness*), compiled and published in 1782 by Saints Macarius of Corinth (†1805) and Nicodemus of Mount Athos (†1809).

— Of course they can—if they simply and humbly practice the Jesus Prayer. Some people get bogged down in methods and get stuck on them, unable to move forward. In other words, the method becomes the goal for them, whereas the method is merely a tool.

— Geronda, please tell me, what is immersion in prayer?¹³⁷

— Sweet immersion? One should not approach prayer with that as the goal.

— Yes, Geronda, I understand that I shouldn't, but what spiritual effort must precede it?

— The main thing is that there be no self-interest, but rather nobility and self-sacrifice.

The surest path is to cultivate prayer with nobility—that is, to reflect on how great God's blessings are and how ungrateful we ourselves are toward God. Then the soul humbly withdraws from self-love and, with sorrow, seeks God's mercy. And then a person feels more and more how much he needs God's mercy; his prayer becomes heartfelt, gradually bringing into the soul first the sweetness of divine consolation, and then divine joy and gladness.

Chapter 3. **On Intelligent Action**

The mind is a great gift, but it must be attuned to the Divine frequency

Geronda, Saint Gregory Palamas writes that human virtues, insofar as they are godlike, make a person capable of receiving God, but do not unite him with Him. Prayer, however, brings about union with God.¹³⁸ What does he mean by this?

— Here, the saint is speaking of pure prayer.

— Geronda, what is pure prayer?

— When there is spiritual nobility and self-sacrifice, a person becomes akin to God, has a connection with Him, and his mind is constantly in God. Then he prays—even when he is not praying. His whole life is prayer. He thinks of nothing else: whatever he does, his mind is always in God. Imagine a child who has no father and is raised only by his mother. Suddenly he finds himself far from her, but whatever he does, wherever he is, his mind is constantly with his mother. So it is with a person who is doomed to be an exile on earth, far from his Father—God: when he attains the state of pure prayer, his mind is constantly in God, his Father. That is what pure prayer is.

— Geronda, how is the mind purified?

— For the mind to be purified, it must be constantly in God; it must be united with God. For it to be united with God, it requires attention, self-observation, and unceasing prayer. When the mind is united with God, then a person thinks of nothing but God; the mind is pure because no distractions enter it. Then a person becomes a creation not only in the image but also in the likeness of God.¹³⁹ Remaining only in the image is not enough. The mind is a great gift, but it must be tuned to the Divine frequency.

The great energy of the mind, which moves at a speed faster than the speed of light, must be used and directed entirely toward God, the Creator of light. If this energy is scattered, how can the mind have power? And if a person's mind has no power, then that person is left with nothing but bare reason and, without going beyond the confines of the skull, sadly

the image of God into a computer—a pitiful intellectual machine. And the following happens to some: since they do not apply this power of the mind to the highest, the enemy uses it—or, rather, begins to ride it—directing it downward, first toward the earth, and then even lower, toward sin, plunging them into hell itself. But when the mind succeeds in ascending the mountain, then it sees all things from on high with the eyes of the soul, with the Divine eye, with Divine enlightenment. All this, unfortunately, I know only in theory, and I will strive to work toward this end, even if death overtakes me along the way.

¹³⁷ On immersion in prayer—see p. 245.

¹³⁸ Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, St. On Prayer and Purity of Heart, three chapters // Dobrotolyubie. In 5 vols. Vol. 5. 4th ed. Moscow: Sretensky Monastery Publishing House, 2010. pp. 291–294.

¹³⁹ See Gen. 1:26.

Spiritual Vigilance

— Geronda, what is sobriety?

— Sobriety is your attentiveness: in your thoughts, in your deeds, in your movements. If today you are mindful, observing yourself and analyzing your behavior and actions, then tomorrow you will be more attentive, and so on. The foundation is attentiveness. That is why you see how the holy fathers were mindful of themselves! Why are they called “practitioners of sobriety”? “Sobriety” means being mindful of oneself, being attentive. They were mindful of themselves and engaged in inner work. They observed their thoughts and remained in constant spiritual vigilance.

— Geronda, Abba Isaac says: “Daytime work must be in harmony with nighttime work.”¹⁴⁰ What does he mean by that?

— He means that just as a person prays at night and his mind abides in God, so too during the day he must strive not to lose his focus, so that his mind does not stray from God. If you don’t watch yourself during the day, a lot of clutter builds up, and then try to get rid of it! It’s hard! One inattentive step—and just think of all the difficulties that follow during prayer, when you’re trying to concentrate!

Attention and self-observation are of great importance. A person can pray for hours, but if he is inattentive and doesn’t watch himself, he’ll be stuck in the same place. But when prayer is accompanied by self-observation, then we don’t shoot at random, but directly at the enemy’s strongholds.

— Geronda, why is my mind constantly distracted, and why can’t I gather my thoughts?

— All these years, your mind has been like a horse without a bridle, and even now you cannot control it. Attention is necessary because in one moment your mind can transport you to paradise, and in the next—if you’re not watching—to hell. As much as you can, try to focus your mind on good, holy thoughts that sanctify a person.

Gathering the Mind

— Geronda, my mind wanders here and there.

— When I was little, the kids would catch sparrows, tie a string around their legs, and play this game: they’d let them go, and the sparrows would fly up—thinking, poor things, that they were free—but then the kids would unroll the string and pull the bird back. It’s the same with your mind—it can soar, but if Christ is holding the other end, your mind won’t go anywhere—it will fly and come right back to Christ.

— Geronda, sometimes I concentrate, I focus on prayer, but the moment I get distracted, in a fraction of a second my mind can end up even... in America. How does that happen?

— Tickets to America are expensive these days! And do you find yourself there often? Look here, rein in your mind, or else you’ll ruin yourself and scatter us all to the four winds—I won’t be able to pay off your debts. Say your prayer from the heart, humbly, so that the devil doesn’t rob you by distracting you with your own thoughts. Reflecting on death will help you greatly in this. If you think, “God has given me time to prepare, and then He will call me to Himself,” then no thought will prevail. When it comes to death, the mind gathers itself and does not wander off to who knows where, nor does it drift to the ends of the earth.

— Geronda, it saddens me that my mind wanders during prayer.

— My mind, too, gets distracted by various worries, even though I want it to remain constantly with God. Then I say, “My God, what is a mind like this doing in Your presence? It is presumptuous of me to want it to remain with You!” A single humble thought draws God’s grace, and the mind returns to God. And you should say: “You are right, my God, not to help me focus my mind on You, because I am wretched and pitiful.” When you yourself believe this, God will immediately help you to concentrate.

— Geronda, often when I pray with my prayer beads, even though I’m focused at first, my mind wanders afterward. I try to concentrate, but it wanders again.

— Just think how sad it is if only half or a third of your prayer reaches God’s throne, while the rest is lost along the way! You need perseverance and patience. Does your mind wander? Bring it back! Does it wander again? Bring it back again.

— But why, Geronda, is it so hard for me to concentrate?

¹⁴⁰ Isaac the Syrian, the Venerable. Ascetic Discourses. Discourse 70. p. 78. — Translator’s note.

— Because you are still on the first step of the spiritual struggle, and if it were the other way around, it would contradict the natural order of things, just as if a baby were born five years old. Our mind is like a foal that at first runs after its mother, but soon forgets: it begins to frolic, nibble on grass, play, and runs far away; and when it comes to its senses, it realizes it has lost its mother. It runs, finds her, but soon forgets again. When it grows a little older, they take it and tie it behind its mother, so that it is always by her side. What I mean to say is that at first, it is natural for the mind to wander during prayer. But if one persists, it will become attached to God and will not be separated from Him; it will want to pray constantly. After that, perfect peace sets in: not a single thought intrudes during prayer, and the mind remains free from thoughts.¹⁴¹ The next stage is already contemplation.

Let's give our mind something to do

— Geronda, I'm still living in the world. If possible, please advise me on how to keep myself from becoming distracted and drawn away by the world.

— You will find the answers to this question in the writings of Abba Isaac. Read the first four lines of the first chapter carefully and reflect on them. The saint says: "The fear of God is the beginning of virtue. Such fear, as they say, is born of faith and is sown in the heart of a person when his mind, after parting with worldly distractions and gathering his thoughts that wander here and there, devotes itself to the teaching about the future fate of the soul."¹⁴² It is true that certain prerequisites are needed for such spiritual work, and you do not yet have them. But you can do something similar even now, while you are still in the world. It is difficult for you to pray constantly, because prayer is somewhat tiring at first, since passions still dwell within you. Therefore, when you are not praying and your mind is not occupied with anything, try to give it work to do, so that the devil has no opportunity to sow his seeds. Work for the mind might be this: to gather it together, cultivate your mortal memory well—but you women are always looking for an excuse to give in to despondency and despair!... Therefore, it is better to constantly recall the events of the New Testament and meditate on them. Begin with the Annunciation and end with the Crucifixion, and let your mind constantly revolve around them. When your mind reaches the point where it constantly revolves only around these sacred events, then an inner transformation will take place within you, and this will be your resurrection.

— Geronda, I really love the words of the stichera: "Through Your pierced side, O Life-Giver, You have poured forth streams of life and salvation to all."¹⁴³

— And how could one not like them? As we contemplate the Cross, Christ's pierced side, the nails, the vinegar, the gall, and every detail of the Gospel account of the sufferings the Lord endured for us, the mind is fixed on Golgotha without distraction. Then the soul prays with undivided attention to the crucified Christ—for itself, for all the living, and for the departed—that Christ, Who bore the wounds for all of us, may have mercy on them.

Our mind is like a teenager left to his own devices, endlessly wanting to wander here and there, run wild, and break the rules. However, our life and our salvation depend on the discipline of the mind. If we can subdue and discipline it, it will calm down and become good and obedient. Therefore, as much as possible, do not let the mind wander idly. Train it spiritually; teach it to spend more time at home, in paradise, close to its Father and God.

The Sense of God's Presence

— Geronda, when I'm engaged in some kind of mental work, I can't pray.

— If, while you're working, your mind doesn't stray from God, that's equivalent to the Jesus Prayer. Conversely, if you're praying but your mind isn't focused on God, such prayer is of no use. If a person grows weary of the Jesus Prayer and simply sets his mind before Christ or the Mother of God, that, too, is prayer.

¹⁴¹ This is a spiritual state in which a person, having been purified of passions, no longer has thoughts. As Abba Isaac writes, "the soul attains the stilling of thoughts; from the stilling of thoughts, it ascends to purity of mind, and through purity of mind, a person attains a vision of the mysteries of God... After this, the mind attains to the vision of revelations and signs, as the prophet Ezekiel saw." (See: Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetic Sayings*. Saying 59. p. 386.) — Translator's note.

¹⁴² See: Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetic Discourses*. Discourse 1. p. 19. — Translator's note.

¹⁴³ See: Octoechos, Tone 5. On Saturday evening, stichera at the stichera service. In Russian: "From Your pierced side, O Giver of Life, You have poured forth streams of life and salvation to all."

— Geronda, is it possible for a person to keep the remembrance of God without reciting the Jesus Prayer?

— If he says to himself, “How far I am from God! What must I do to be close to Him?”—and from this comes remembrance of God, then prayer also comes. Try always to feel the presence of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, and behave as if they were right here, beside you. After all, they are truly here, even though we cannot see them with our physical eyes. Direct all your thoughts and feelings toward God and say: “God sees me. Is what I am doing now pleasing to Him? What must I avoid so as not to grieve Him?” Gradually, this will become your inner state. You will think of God and do everything possible to please Him. This is how love for God develops and grows, how the mind and heart find delight, and how you will learn to abide constantly in the Jesus Prayer without effort.

— Geronda, what does the proverb mean: “Remember God—and you see God”?

— To remember God means to have one’s mind on God. A person who remembers God lives in God, and in this way sees God everywhere and in everything. One who has attained this constantly feels God’s presence and is overwhelmed with gratitude toward Him. He sees the seal of God’s blessing on everything. He looks around and realizes that God cares not only for people but also for the whole world, even in the smallest of things. Wherever he looks, he sees God’s greatness. He lifts his gaze to the heavens and is transformed by God’s presence. He looks at the earth, at the birds, at the trees, and behind all of this he sees God, their Creator. This is both prayer and remembrance of God at the same time.

Chapter 4.

On the Cooperation of Mind and Heart

Prayer becomes heartfelt when the mind unites with the heart

Elder, how does the mind descend into the heart?

— When the heart aches, the mind descends into the heart. What does “the heart aches” mean? When a person reflects on God’s blessings and on his own ingratitude, a pain pierces his heart, and the mind is drawn there.

— Geronda, when I have a headache, I can’t pray.

— Imagine that your leg hurts and, at that very moment, you cut your hand with a knife. What happens: you forget about the pain in your leg and shift all your attention to your wounded hand. It’s the same with a headache that prevents you from praying. Think first about your own sins, then about the sufferings of others, and then your heart will begin to ache. The pain in your heart “neutralizes” the headache, and heartfelt prayer begins—for yourself and for the whole world.

— Geronda, what should one do to keep the mind from wandering and becoming distracted?

— It’s hard to rein in a mind that races faster than the speed of light. You need to, like with a child, “take it by the hand” and lead it to the suffering, the sick, the abandoned, and the departed. Then the mind, upon seeing all this, will begin to knock at the door of the heart, and the heart—no matter how hardened it may be—will open, and prayer will become heartfelt, and the person, with tears in their eyes, will begin to ask God for help. But if a person thinks about all this and feels no compassion—if neither human misfortunes, nor the torments of the condemned departed, nor the sufferings of their souls move him—then this means that such a person has become hardened, and carnal reasoning and the old man within him are very strong.

— Geronda, often during the service my mind does not soar toward heaven but focuses on people’s sufferings.

— The two are inextricably linked. The goal is not simply to recite the words of prayer or merely to keep the mind free from thoughts; the “little engine” needs to start running so that the heart can sympathize with what you are praying for.

— Geronda, when I come back to my cell after my duties, I try to gather my thoughts, free myself from thoughts about work and various images, but my head is still spinning.

— You shouldn’t be “gathering your brains together,” but rather your mind. And you’re gathering your brains because you pray with your head. When a person prays with their head, it’s only natural that their

brain strains and then their head starts to ache. You're not the only one with this problem. People engage in activities that are good for the soul—for example, reading a spiritual book, such as —but instead of using their intellect, they try to “overthink” it, which is why they end up with a headache. Those who approach heartfelt prayer mechanically¹⁴⁴ face similar problems, and then their hearts ache. When I want to pray and try to concentrate, my mind must turn to Christ. Then it doesn't wander, but immediately sends a “message” to the heart and connects with it. Working with the intellect is another matter—it is exhausting. Why do I often tell you that you must make another's pain your own? The mind must enter into another person's pain, and only then can you pray. Otherwise, it is not prayer but a report. For example, you might say with your mind that there are sick people and you need to pray for them, but neither your mind nor your heart is truly involved. But if you yourself are in pain, then your mind is constantly focused on it. It's the same thing: if you make another person's pain your own, then your mind will remain steadfastly focused on it.

— Geronda, but in that case, is there any guarantee that the mind won't be distracted?

— There are no such guarantees, and it may be distracted. It depends on how intensely the pain is felt. For example, in a home where there is a patient who has had his appendix removed: family members will sit with him for a while, perhaps sing or dance a little, and then everyone will go about their own business. It's a different matter if a person is seriously ill, say, with cancer: a great tragedy has struck, one that no one in the house can forget for even a moment. Only someone who doesn't understand the full gravity of the situation can lose themselves in distraction. I remember when I was little, my seriously ill sister was brought home one day. She was nearly at death's door, but I took out my harmonica, sat down next to her, and started playing—without realizing that she might die soon.

“Geronda, does that mean the brain is a physical organ, and the mind is a spiritual one?”

“The mind in a person is like the alcohol in wine: the power lies in it, not in the grape juice. Likewise, the mind is the life force of the brain—the best thing there is in a person.”

“So, Geronda, does the heart stop working because the mind isn't working?”

— Of course, blessed soul! All the power lies precisely in it.

— And the brain, Geronda? Does that mean it's of no use at all during prayer?

— It's needed too, but only to a certain extent: reason makes the decision to enter into another person's pain. That's all. And then the mind begins to work. You need to think about the specific hardships and difficulties people are experiencing, feel compassion for them, and begin to pray.

God's love gathers the mind into the heart

— Geronda, sometimes during prayer, so that my mind doesn't wander, I say, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, I love You.”

— You love Jesus Christ, yet your mind wanders away from Him during the Jesus Prayer—is that even possible? Telling Him once or twice that you love Him—that's possible. But if you repeat these words all the time, then it's not true. You cannot have one thing in your heart, another in your mind, and a third on your lips. Then the words of Scripture apply to us: “These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.”¹⁴⁵

— Geronda, why do I pray without warmth?

— Because you are distracted by external things. Your heart is elsewhere; there is no fervor in it, no love for God, and that is why the Jesus Prayer comes out weak. The love of God gathers the mind into the heart, and then a person “loses his mind.”

— Geronda, how can one constantly strive toward God and offer the Jesus Prayer from the heart?

— If a person constantly reminds himself of God's blessings and of the fact that he has done nothing to repay the Lord, then pain pierces the heart, and it begins to work. The heart itself contracts with love, and it is no longer the person chasing after prayer, but prayer chasing after him. Therefore, always have loving and humble thoughts. The Lord dwells in the hearts of the humble—¹⁴⁶—and so God's grace will enter you, your heart will be sweetened, and your prayer will become heartfelt.

¹⁴⁴ For example, holding one's breath.

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 15:8. See also: Isa. 29:13.

¹⁴⁶ See Isa. 66:1–2.

— So, does that mean not even an evil thought can enter at that moment?

— No, it cannot. For an evil thought to enter, you must stop praying. But even if you stop reciting the Jesus Prayer with your mind, and your heart continues to pray it, an evil thought still cannot enter—for the heart is praying!

— Geronda, bless me and advise me on how to gather my mind together.

— Blessed soul, I wish for you that your mind may be gathered into your heart. What do we mean when we say “heart”? After all, the heart is not a container into which the mind must be placed. The heart is the center of our feelings and experiences. Therefore, when we say “for the mind to be gathered into the heart,” we mean for it to be gathered into love, kindness, a reverent longing, and an indescribably sweet exultation... God is Love, and the heart contains love; if the heart has been purified, then we can say that a person has God within them.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”¹⁴⁷ Love Him with your whole being. If the mind tastes that sweetness which comes into the heart through love and goodness, then the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” will fill the whole person with great awe and tenderness.

The entire foundation of the spiritual life lies in a person purifying their heart so as to receive Christ into it and to rein in the mind. One must ensure that the mind finds delight in dwelling in the heart. If the mind finds delight in the heart, it will not want to leave the heart—just as a child would not want to leave a candy store.

Part 6.

Liturgical Life

“The church is the house of God Himself; it sanctifies a person, and there one receives divine grace. The mere thought of this is enough to fill one with awe.”

Chapter 1.

On the Seasons of the Church Year

“Christ Is Born”¹⁴⁸

Elder, will it be okay to take a nap tomorrow after the All-Night Vigil on Christmas?¹⁴⁹

— Well, let’s go ahead and take a nap on Christmas too! My mother used to say, “On Christmas night, only Jews sleep.” On the night Christ was born, the great and powerful of this world slept soundly, while the shepherds kept watch.¹⁵⁰ They watched over their sheep at night and played the flute. Do you see the difference? The shepherds who kept watch were granted the privilege of seeing Christ.

— Geronda, what did that cave look like?

— It was a cave in the rock, and there was nothing in it but a manger for the animals; there was nothing else. Only the poor came there and sheltered their sheep. The Mother of God, together with Joseph, came to this cave,¹⁵¹ because all the inns were full. Inside were a donkey and a calf, which warmed Christ with their breath.

¹⁴⁷ Matt. 22:37.

¹⁴⁸ The irmos of the first ode of the canon for the Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

¹⁴⁹ At the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, the vigil usually begins at 9:00 p.m. and, together with the Liturgy, ends around 4:00 a.m. — Translator’s note.

¹⁵⁰ See Luke 2:8.

¹⁵¹ See Luke 2:7.

“The ox knew him who had acquired him, and the donkey recognized his master’s manger”¹⁵² — is this not what the prophet Isaiah says?

— Geronda, how beautifully it is said in today’s stichera that the Most Holy Theotokos, seeing the newborn Christ, exclaimed, “rejoicing and weeping at the same time: Shall I offer You the breast, O Nourisher of all, or shall I sing to You as my Son and my God? What shall I call You?”¹⁵³

— These are the mysteries of God, the greatest condescension of God, whom we cannot comprehend!...

— Geronda, how can we experience with our hearts and feel this event of Christmas, that Christ “is born today of the Virgin?”¹⁵⁴

— In order for us to experience and feel these divine events, the mind must be focused on divine meanings. Then a person is transformed. “A great and glorious miracle has taken place today,”¹⁵⁵ — we sing. If our minds dwell there, in the “glorious,” in the wondrous, then we will experience with our hearts the great mystery of Christ’s Nativity.

And I will pray that your heart may become the manger of Bethlehem and that the Divine Infant may bestow upon you all His blessings.

Holy Lent—the procession to Golgotha

— Dear sisters, I wish you a blessed Lent and God’s special help during the first three days.¹⁵⁶ I hope that this year, during Lent, you will not be overwhelmed by many worries, and that you will sympathize with the Passion of Christ in your hearts, devoting yourselves more to spiritual labor. With the beginning of the singing of the Lenten Triodion¹⁵⁷, one should begin the procession to Golgotha. And if a person spends this time for spiritual benefit, then after death, his soul, ascending the mountain, will encounter no obstacles on the way to the other world.¹⁵⁸ These holy days come every year, but the problem is that with each passing year, we have less and less time. And how do we use this time? For heavenly benefit, or by squandering it on earthly matters?

Monks begin every Great Lent with three days during which they devote all their energy to the strictest fasting and fervent prayers. Laypeople, too, have their own three special days—not just once a year, but every week: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday—on which they devote all their energy to frenzied entertainment and dubious pleasures. Fortunately, these three days of Lenten abstinence are observed in monasteries and by a few Christian families in the world—and this is what sustains the world. Intensive prayer and fasting during these three days shield the world from many spiritual downfalls that usually befall people during the three days of worldly pleasures.

— Geronda, why such strictness during these first three days of Holy Lent?

— Mainly so that a person can adjust to fasting and abstinence. Starting in the second week, when he begins to eat daily—but only once a day, in the evening—it will be sweeter to him than a royal feast. When I lived in a communal monastery, after the first few days of abstinence, we considered watery soup at four o’clock in the afternoon a true blessing. You haven’t eaten or drunk anything for three days, and now you can have a little soup every day—isn’t that a blessing?

Three days of complete abstinence at the beginning of the fast help one to fast throughout the entire Forty Days. But if someone truly lacks the strength for such a three-day ascetic practice, then let them nibble on a cracker or two in the evening, or at least go without food and water every day until evening. It’s better to be lenient here: after all, if a person faints and is unable to engage in spiritual labor, what good will it do? Once, on a Tuesday during the first week of Great Lent, Elder Barlaam from the kaliva of the Venerables Barlaam and Joasaph went to a cell where two young monks, acquaintances of his, had just settled in. He

¹⁵² Isa. 1:3.

¹⁵³ This stichera is not found in the Slavonic Menaion, but in the Greek Menaion it is the third stichera on “O Lord, I have cried out” at Vespers on December 24. — Translator’s note.

¹⁵⁴ A stichera for the Ninth Hour on the eve of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

¹⁵⁵ The first stichera for the feast of the Nativity of Christ.

¹⁵⁶ According to the Statute, complete abstinence from food and water is required during the first three days of Great Lent.

¹⁵⁷ The Lenten Triodion is sung from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee through Holy Saturday.

¹⁵⁸ See: Gregory the Monk, disciple of St. Basil the New. On the Trials of the Soul at the Hour of Death.

knocked and knocked—but there was silence. He opened the door himself and saw that both brothers were lying motionless. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Are you sick?” “We’re fasting without food or water!” they said. “Come on, get up quickly,” he said. “Make some tea—two spoons of sugar per cup—and eat some crackers. At least then you’ll be able to pray; otherwise, you can’t even hold your rosary beads in your hands. What kind of fast is this? What good does it do?!”

— Geronda, how can I learn to practice stricter abstinence during Great Lent?

— People in the world remember to practice self-restraint at least during Great Lent, whereas we monks must pay close attention to self-restraint all year round. The main thing each of us must pay attention to is the passions of the soul, and then the passions of the body. If a person gives preference to physical asceticism and does not strive to root out the passions of the soul, then he is treading water. Once, at the beginning of Great Lent, a layperson came to a monastery, and a certain monk treated him rudely. However, the poor man had good intentions and did not condemn him. Later, this layperson came to me and said: “I’m not offended by him, Geronda; after all, he’s been on a strict fast for three days!” If that monk had fasted spiritually for three days, he would have felt a certain spiritual sweetness and spoken more politely to others. But he pridefully forced himself to fast strictly for three days, and therefore he expected everyone to owe him something.

— Geronda, what should I think about during fasting?

— Think about the sufferings of Christ, about His sacrifice on the Cross. But by and large, you don’t need to wait for Lent to do this—we monks must relive the Passion of Christ every day, for the church hymns and services help us with this daily.

During Great Lent, we are given more opportunities for spiritual struggle, for a fuller participation in the saving Passion of our Lord—through repentance, prostrations, the curbing of passions, and reducing our food intake out of love for Christ.

Let us, then, derive the greatest benefit from this spiritual endeavor. Right now, we have exceptionally favorable conditions and the best opportunity to draw near to the crucified Lord and receive His help. The more spiritually we observe Lent, the more profoundly we will be transformed and the more joyfully we will celebrate the Holy Resurrection.

I wish you strength and fortitude during Great Lent, so that you may ascend to Christ on Golgotha together with the Most Holy Theotokos and your patron, Saint John the Theologian, and become partakers in the Passion of our Lord. Amen.

“We worship Your Passion, Christ”¹⁵⁹

— Geronda, how can I cultivate reverence for the Passion of Christ?

— First and foremost, we must reflect on the great Sacrifice that Christ made for us, as well as on how ungrateful and sinful we are. Read the Holy Fathers who speak about this—that will help you a little as well. But the Holy Passion itself, the Lord’s Sacrifice itself, will help you far more. Christ did not merely teach us with words—no, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for the human race, suffered, was crucified, and endured so many humiliations and torments.

— And a shameful execution on the Cross, Geronda...

— Yes, the most humiliating of all! It’s terrifying to think about! All the prophets foretold Christ, yet the Jews beat Him, spat on Him, mocked Him, and, in the end, crucified Him! All of this fills a person with great awe when they think about it. Even the most indifferent person, if they possess even a drop of goodwill, will be awakened to spiritual life by these reflections.

— Geronda, on the evening of Holy Thursday, after the Service of the Passion, I don’t stay in the church overnight; I go back to my cell.

— That’s a shame. I thought you had at least a shred of reverence! Do you really not stay in the church on the evening of Holy Thursday? Do you leave the crucified Christ alone and go back to your cells?

— Many sisters, Geronda—the majority, in fact—stay in the church, but I find it hard to concentrate because I get distracted by the slightest rustle—and that’s why I keep vigil in my cell.

¹⁵⁹ Troparion at the Ninth Hour on Good Friday.

— Well, if that’s the case, fine. Let there be an icon of the Crucifixion in your cell, and pray before it: “Glory to Your Holy Crucifixion, O Lord” and “Most Holy Mother of God, we worship the Offspring of Your Son.” At the same time, bow down as many times as you can. You need to live through this day, to feel it deeply. On Good Friday, I lock myself in my cell for this very purpose.

— This year, Geronda, on Good Friday I observed a strict fast, but in the evening, during the service of the burial of the Shroud, I couldn’t stand on my feet. If I had treated the Lord’s Passion with sufficient reverence, would I have allowed myself to sit in the church at such a moment?

— It’s good that you strive so hard at abstinence. And how can one eat on such a day? If it’s too hard, one can stave off hunger with a cracker. In the past, in monasteries on Good Friday, only the elderly and sick monks were allowed to have tea with a cracker in the evening. Some monks on this day, imitating the Lord—to whom the Jews gave vinegar mixed with gall to drink on the Cross—¹⁶⁰ also taste a little wine vinegar. When I came to the Philotheos Monastery, I didn’t eat anything during Holy Week that first year. On Good Friday, upon learning that it was customary for some to drink vinegar, I drank some as well. But the vinegar turned out to be very strong, so I lost consciousness.

— Geronda, why can I go three days without eating during Holy Week, even though it’s hard for me to fast at other times?

— Holy Week is a time of mourning for Christ’s sufferings. If someone close to you were to die, would you be able to think about food? When such a tragedy strikes, you can neither eat nor drink.

— Geronda, this Great Saturday was the first time we sang the “Immaculate” hymns with the doxologies—before, we used to just read them.¹⁶¹

— I heard. But I want you to tell me the truth. When you were singing, were you thinking about Christ, reenacting His burial? And the sister who recited the psalm verses, and you, sisters, who sang the troparia—all of you were acting as if on a stage! What kind of performance did you put on? Did you rehearse a new musical piece? But that’s completely worldly! Is it really so hard to understand? The “Immaculate Ones” of Great Saturday are a lament at the tomb. A lament! In other matters, it’s not so bad to get a little carried away, but here Christ was tortured, beaten, spat upon, then crucified, and now we are burying Him. If even on a day like this you don’t feel that you are singing, then I don’t know how I can help you at all.

— Geronda, according to the Athonite Rule, do the bells ring a funeral toll on Good Friday?

— The bells ring when the Shroud is carried out.

— And are funeral bells rung throughout the day as well?

— Is it really that important where and how they ring? The main thing is that the toll announcing Christ’s burial resounds in my heart.

“The Day of Resurrection”

— Geronda, some pilgrims came here with their children, and the kids were delighted: “Oh, what beautiful red eggs you have here!”

— Don’t let the children get hung up on the pretty things, or they’ll stop at the superficial and won’t seek the deeper meaning. Just tell them that the red egg symbolizes the globe, which was stained with the Blood of Christ, and that the whole world has been redeemed from sin.

— Geronda, I am struck by the boldness of the myrrh-bearing women.

— The Myrrh-Bearers trusted Christ completely; divine love burned within them, which is why they disregarded all dangers. If the fire of divine love had not burned within them, would they have dared to do this? At dawn, in the early hours, when it was still forbidden to be out on the streets, they set out with fragrances in their hands toward the Holy Sepulcher out of love for Christ. That is why they were deemed worthy to hear the joyful news of the Resurrection from the angel.

— Geronda, how can we experience the joy of the Resurrection?

¹⁶⁰ See Matt. 27:34, John 19:28–29.

¹⁶¹ According to ancient church tradition, Psalm 118 (“The Blameless”) is sung on Great Saturday, its verses alternating with the singing of funeral troparia, known as “praises.” — Translator’s note.

— For true joy to come, we must cultivate a joy-filled sorrow within ourselves. If we live through Holy Week with piety and reverence, then we will welcome the Holy Resurrection with spiritual exultation and sacred joy.

— Geronda, for some reason, I can't seem to feel particularly joyful on Easter night...

— That happens—after all, throughout Holy Week we have been experiencing the sorrow of the Passion, especially on the eve of Good Friday. And since the feeling of sorrow runs deeper than the feeling of joy, we cannot overcome this state of mind in a single day. It's not that the soul doesn't rejoice in Christ's Resurrection—no. It simply doesn't rejoice in it to the extent that this joyful day demands. But gradually, over the course of Bright Week—which is like one continuous Easter day—the sorrow of Holy Week fades away, and the soul is filled with Easter joy. By the second day, a person begins to feel the spirit of Easter.

— Why, Geronda, do some monasteries hold a procession on the second and even the third day of Easter?

— To spread the joy of Easter to those around them.

— What, do they ring the bells too, Geronda?

— During Bright Week, the bells ring, and the clappers, hammers, and cymbals¹⁶² joyfully clang, and the heart sings, experiencing “the Day of the Resurrection.”¹⁶³

Christ's heavenly joy
And the ceaseless joy of Easter
With sweet, serene restlessness
May God always grant this to my spiritual sisters!

Chapter 2. On Communal Prayer

The Church—the House of God

Geronda, many people believe that going to church is not necessary.

— People do not understand the profound meaning of attending church, and by neglecting the house of the Lord, they sever with their own hands the cord that connects them to God. Where, then, will they be able to find help? Unfortunately, most Christians do not participate in the sacraments and therefore fall under the influence of demons.

I always tell the laity to go to church—it is the house of God Himself; it sanctifies a person, and there one receives divine grace. The mere thought of this is enough to fill one with awe. In church, Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints look upon us; there we ask them for help and can simply speak with them. By remaining outside the threshold, we miss the opportunity to live by the sacraments. There, in the Lord's church, Christ is offered up as a sacrifice for us and gives us His Body and Blood. Shouldn't this fill us with great awe?

— Geronda, right now I'm not going to church because of my illness. How I miss the church service!

— You need to be patient for a little while. When I served in the army and we took part in an operation in the mountains,¹⁶⁴ —just imagine!—I didn't see a church for seven months. Once I was sent to Nafpaktos to repair some radios, and I had to return right away. I did what I had to do, and on the way back I stopped at a church by the road. It was Great Lent, and they were singing the Akathist to the Most Holy Mother of God inside. I couldn't squeeze in, I couldn't leave the radios unattended either, and I was running out of time. I stood at the church door for just five minutes. Do you know how upset I was? I cried like a child! “My God,”

¹⁶² Bilo— a large wooden suspended panel. Klepalo— a metal suspended panel. Simandr— a portable wooden panel. — Translator's note.

¹⁶³ The irmos of the first ode of the Paschal Canon.

¹⁶⁴ This refers to the Naupactus Mountains in Western Greece.

I lamented, “what have I come to! Ever since I was a child, I used to come to church before the sexton. And now I haven’t been to church in seven months!”

— Geronda, when I come straight to church from my duties in the archondarion, I can’t concentrate on the service.

— From the archondarion, you go to the church. And from the church, go to Heaven, and then go even further—to God.

— Yes, but how do I do that, Geronda? By thinking about the glory of God?

— The church is God’s man-made house here on earth. But God’s unmade house is in paradise, just as our true home is also in paradise.

The Power of Collective Prayer

— Geronda, sometimes I feel the need to stay in my cell instead of attending the service—to pray with my rosary, make prostrations, read the Rule, or read spiritual books...

— Can you reschedule the service? No, you can’t. But you can reschedule your cell activities for another time.

— Yes, but in church, Geronda, I don’t always feel that same grace-filled transformation that I experience when praying in my cell.

— Look, private prayer is a preparation for communal prayer. The quality of your prayer in the church may be lower than that in your cell, because in the church you don’t feel as free as you do in solitude. But communal prayer in the church is much more powerful, because everyone prays together there: one person’s prayer has more energy, another’s more warmth, a third’s something else... That is why, during those two or three hours that the service lasts, you, too, should be in church and pray together with everyone. What did Christ say?

“For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”¹⁶⁵

— Geronda, I feel better spiritually when I pray in my cell—I get too distracted during the service.

— You only think that your “spiritual well-being” is better in your cell. You will have the right spiritual disposition if you strive in prayer at church, concentrate, and practice the Jesus Prayer during the service. Learn to overcome difficulties in the midst of difficulties—otherwise, you will never overcome them. How can a soldier learn to fight if, during all his training exercises, he is given only blank cartridges instead of live ammunition?

— Geronda, I get distracted during the service because I can’t manage to say the Jesus Prayer and follow along with the readings and singing at the same time.

— Why are you torn? Perhaps all this anxiety stems from the fact that you’re telling yourself, “Just wait—I’m going to excel at mental prayer, and I’m going to become so rich!”? But there is hidden selfishness and pride in that. This doesn’t mean you aren’t making an effort; my example is an exaggeration. You have a good disposition, and Christ will help you. Stand before God like a child, and don’t think about anything. Be simpler—and you’ll see what grace Christ and the Mother of God will bestow upon you. When you enter the church, imagine that you’ve boarded a ship; entrust yourself to God’s hands, and let this ship carry you where you need to go.

— Geronda, I nod off during services, so sometimes I can’t concentrate at all. And then a thought tells me: “So what if you were at the service? You didn’t pray anyway!..”

— Maybe you yawn or nod off, but the ship keeps sailing toward its destination. It’s just like on a ship: one person counts, another yawns, a third sleeps, but the ship still approaches its destination. But you’d better stand watch and stay alert.

— Geronda, if the mind isn’t praying during the service, then the service becomes tiresome.

— Yes, because then a person remains unfed. When the mind fails to grasp the sacred meanings, then the service turns into a physical exercise—even if it is for the sake of God’s love. And even the one who nods off during the service but resists sleep has a considerable reward.¹⁶⁶ , the stasidia in the church is not for

¹⁶⁵ Matt. 18:20.

¹⁶⁶ Stasidia—a wooden chair with a high backrest and a reclining seat, in which one can either stand or sit. Stasidia are placed along the walls in Greek churches. — Translator’s note.

sleeping; you have a bed in your cell for that. Once, two laypeople came to Mount Athos and happened to be there for the All-Night Vigil. They slept through the entire vigil at the monastery guesthouse and didn't arrive at the church until just before the Doxology.¹⁶⁷ A monk in the neighboring stasidia kept nodding off, but was trying not to fall asleep. One of the laypeople, seeing this, said to the other, "Look, the monk's snoozing!" To which the other replied, like a wise thief:¹⁶⁸ "Aren't you ashamed? We slept for so many hours and only just arrived. What, do you think he couldn't have gone to his cell to sleep? Of course, not on a feather bed, but at least on some kind of pallet."

— But I, Geronda, don't find joy in the divine service.

— Do we need joy all the time? You're in the church for Christ's sake—and yet you're standing in the stasidia, leaning on the armrests, resting. Think of it this way: "Christ spread His arms on the Cross, and here I am, standing, praying—and even resting while I do it!.." Tell yourself that, and you'll stop feeling down during the service.

— Geronda, is it okay to sit down during the service?

— If it's difficult, you can sit for a little while. But if you can, it's better to pray standing up. You should do this not because "that's the way it's supposed to be," but from the heart. If you tell yourself, "I have to go to church, stand in the stasidia, look at the floor, and stand without moving a muscle," it will all come across as artificial and formulaic.

— Often, Geronda, I can't concentrate in church because my legs start to hurt from standing for so long. What should I do?

— Think of the wooden blocks into which Christ's feet were nailed, and say, "Praise God that I am in pain." Then you will forget your own pain, your heart will be comforted, and your prayer will come from the heart.

Chapter 3.

On Participating in the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist

The sacraments are experienced through personal encounter

Elder, when I was praying during the Liturgy, I was shaken to the core by the realization that Christ was crucified for my sake, and I thought, "Lord, what have I done for You?" Tell me, Elder, what can I do to show my gratitude to Christ?

— It is enough that you feel this way. Christ was crucified; He sacrificed Himself for us and now gives us His Body and Blood. When a person reflects on this, their heart should burn with fervor.

— Geronda, how can one truly experience the mystery of the Divine Eucharist?

— Live by the Divine Eucharist. To be moved by this great sacrament, you must believe that Christ Himself is present here and now. And not just believe it, but live by it.

— Geronda, what will help me stay focused during the Liturgy?

— Holy angels participate in the Divine Liturgy. "By angelic, invisible, and sublime ranks,"¹⁶⁹ — we sing. Think about what is happening at this very moment, listen attentively to the intercessions, and pray from the heart: "Lord, have mercy!" How many precious "Lord, have mercy"s have you let slip away! The entire choir sings a beautiful "Kyrie, eleison," many sisters are delighted by it, yet dozens of hearts remain unmoved. But what good is that? And even if your attention is focused on the Jesus Prayer, but there is no pain or compassion in it—it is all a waste.

— Geronda, I get so exhausted during the All-Night Vigil that by the time the Liturgy begins, I have almost no strength left.

¹⁶⁷ That is, at the very end of the vigil.

¹⁶⁸ This refers to one of the two thieves crucified with Christ, who said to the other: "Do you not fear God, since you yourself are under the same sentence? We are justly condemned, for we are receiving what our deeds deserve, but He has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:40–41).

¹⁶⁹ The Cherubic Hymn. This liturgical hymn calls us to welcome Christ with no less honor than that accorded to a Byzantine emperor who entered the city surrounded by an honor guard of spearmen. — Translator's note.

— That’s not surprising, but you must persevere. If you show patience and discipline yourself, help will come from God, and you’ll feel a surge of strength. Your fatigue will subside, and even after the vigil, you won’t want to sleep—you’ll feel such a disposition toward spiritual pursuits that it will last the whole day.

— Geronda, is it allowed to sit during the Liturgy?

— Usually, people don’t sit during the Liturgy. If it’s too difficult, you can sit while the Epistle is being read. But if a person has serious health issues and cannot stand, then it’s permissible to sit. Although I myself never sit during the Liturgy.

— Geronda, when the priest proclaims, “Thine of Thine...”—how do you pray?

— Since the Holy Spirit descends at that moment, I silently recite “Heavenly King,” “Blessed are You, Christ...”¹⁷⁰ and “When You descended...”¹⁷¹ and pray for divine enlightenment.

Preparation for Holy Communion

— Geronda, how should one prepare for Holy Communion?

— Actually, one should always be prepared... But when you’re about to receive Communion, it’s good to pray more, to read the Scriptures and spiritual books more... It’s very helpful to read the service for Holy Communion on your own in your cell, even though you’ll also be hearing it in church.¹⁷² That way, you’ll better understand the meaning of these prayers and feel your own sinfulness more deeply. You can also sing the first ode of the Great Penitential Canon¹⁷³ and, from the “Theotokaria,” the first ode of the Monday and Wednesday canons of the fifth tone, while making prostrations.

— Geronda, what can I do during the Liturgy if I wasn’t able to prepare for Communion beforehand?

— Are you planning to finish reading your prayer rule after the “Blessed is the Kingdom” acclamation? Understand this: Christ is not a prosecutor; if you truly had no opportunity to prepare, He knows it. Were you prevented from preparing by obstacles you could not avoid—or did you become an obstacle to yourself? It happens that a believer, overwhelmed by a flood of tasks, doesn’t even have time to read the prayer for Communion and approaches the Holy Chalice like a hundred-pound block of wood. In that case, one must have humble thoughts: “God, forgive me, a block of wood like this.” God looks at the heart. Often a person thinks they are ready to receive Communion, but in reality they are not; and at other times they consider themselves unready—and that is precisely when they are ready. The best preparation is a humble attitude, contrition, and a love for God.

Preparation for Communion does not consist in changing clothes and brushing one’s teeth. The main thing is for a person to examine themselves: do they feel a need for the Divine Communion? Are they at peace with their conscience? Perhaps there is something preventing them from receiving Communion that has not yet been confessed? To be imbued with the Holy Body and Blood, there must be favorable conditions. The most important thing is a humble desire to cut off one’s passions, so that Christ does not wish to leave the heart. Otherwise, Christ enters us in Holy Communion, but... immediately leaves, and we feel nothing. But when Christ remains for a long time, a certain change takes place within a person. There are people who constantly feel Christ within themselves—from one Communion to the next, without interruption.

— Geronda, sometimes the priest proclaims: “With the fear of God, faith, and love, come forward,”¹⁷⁴ — and I feel that I am not ready to receive Communion.

— In hospitals, at a certain time, doctors make their rounds, and the nurses announce loudly, “Rounds!” Then all visitors leave the rooms, and the patients settle into their beds and wait for the doctor to tell him how they’re feeling and receive appropriate instructions regarding their treatment. So too, when the priest says, “With the fear of God...”—imagine that the Physician has come, and approach Holy Communion with an awareness of your own sinfulness, humbly asking for God’s mercy.

¹⁷⁰ Troparion of Pentecost.

¹⁷¹ Kontakion of Pentecost.

¹⁷² The Service of Divine Communion is usually read in the church during Matins.

¹⁷³ The Great Canon, composed by St. Andrew of Crete, is sung in parts during the first four days of the First Week of Great Lent at Great Compline, and in its entirety during the Fifth Week at Great Compline on Wednesday and at Matins on Thursday.

¹⁷⁴ In the Russian tradition, this exclamation sounds slightly different: “With the fear of God and faith, approach.” — Translator’s note.

Divine Communion is the most effective medicine

— Geronda, you were very tired during the Liturgy;¹⁷⁵ you didn't need to stay and listen to the prayers of thanksgiving.

— What are you saying? I have partaken of the Holy Mysteries of Christ—am I not even to say “thank you” to God? One may leave early only in case of dire need. And you should never leave; listen to the prayers of thanksgiving and repeat endlessly: “I thank You, my God, I thank You! Glory to You, O God, glory to You, O God!”—and your heart will rejoice.

Once I went to the Liturgy in a certain cell. I was very tired and exhausted, and on top of that I was hungry because I was preparing to receive Communion. There was no stove there, and I stood through the entire service, shivering from the cold. But as soon as I received Communion, I immediately felt warmth spreading through my body. You know how it is with coil heaters—an electric current flows through the coil, and it heats up; I felt the same thing throughout my whole body. Gradually, my whole body began to burn with fire. A sweet fire!

— Burning, but not being consumed, “¹⁷⁶,” Geronda...

— Yes, to burn... With a sweet fire! Afterward, there is neither hunger, nor fatigue, nor cold!..

— How long did this last, Geronda?

— I felt it in the church, right after Communion, and then, after I left, I felt the heat the whole way home!

— Geronda, why do some people, who are physically weak and sickly, tolerate fasting well?

— Their secret lies in a humble and devout effort, accompanied by prayer and partaking of the Most Holy Mysteries. They nourish their souls with the Holy Mysteries of Christ, and they nourish their bodies with them as well. When we receive Communion, we take the most effective medicine: the Body and Blood of Christ.

Chapter 4. “Sing to our God, sing”¹⁷⁷

Church singing is a form of prayer

Geronda, I often go to help in the choir because I feel it is my duty. Am I doing the right thing?

— Church singing is also one of the monastic obediences. That is why the priest prays “for those who sing.”¹⁷⁸ The cantor represents the entire congregation standing in the church. But the people, too, must say in their hearts, “Lord, have mercy,” and not expect to grow spiritually solely from the cantor’s “Lord, have mercy.”

In ancient times, all believers sang together, and according to church rules, that is how it should be. However, among the members of the church community there are people with different abilities; therefore, to avoid pauses and confusion in the singing, the Church began to select from among its members devout people with singing abilities and designated that only they should sing. Since then, the rest of the worshippers have sung not with their lips but with their minds, and, listening to the cantors, they rejoice that people from among them have been set apart for God to glorify Him beautifully.

— Geronda, what does someone who does not sing but simply listens to church singing offer to God?

— When a person listens to the praise of God and gives thanks to Him—is such a person not pleasing to the Lord? This, too, is an offering to God.

¹⁷⁵ Spoken in June 1994, one month before the repose of the Venerable Paissios.

¹⁷⁶ Ex. 3:2.

¹⁷⁷ Ps. 46:7.

¹⁷⁸ One of the petitions in the Litany.

— Geronda, sometimes the All-Night Vigil is held for a specific need.¹⁷⁹ How should I pray for this need if I'm singing in the choir and my attention is focused mainly on the books and the singing?

— Before the vigil begins, you can pray for this need, and then, when your choir is not singing, pray with your rosary. Furthermore, if throughout the entire service your mind and heart are constantly focused on the purpose for which the prayer is being offered, then whether you are singing, reading the Psalter or the canons, or participating in the service in some other way—all of this is prayer for that specific need. You know, when we celebrate the All-Night Vigil for a specific need, only two or three petitions in the Ektenia are dedicated to it. Everything else follows the usual order, yet the entire All-Night Vigil is dedicated to that need.

A Good Spiritual State

— Geronda, I'm not very good at singing. A thought tells me that it's because my diction isn't right.

— But things aren't always in order in your heart either. When there's disorder within, you can't sing well. Singing depends on your inner state; keep an eye on it. If a person with a weak voice is in a good spiritual state, they'll sing like a nightingale, but if they're in a bad one, they'll squeak like a mosquito. Another person may have a trained voice, but if they're not in a good state of mind—instead of singing, they mumble like an old man. When a certain sister sings, you can hear for yourselves what state she's in.¹⁸⁰

— Geronda, when we sing in church, we make sure not to sing off-key.

— Of course, you must be careful, because everything must be done in a proper and orderly manner.¹⁸¹ But first and foremost, we must ensure that our soul is in order, that everything is in order both within ourselves and in our relationship with God. When a person sings without being in a good spiritual state, it is worse than singing off-key. Good singing brings about a change for the better, while bad singing leads to the worse, and people cannot pray. If a person is troubled inside, if they have unrighteous thoughts or pettiness in their soul, what good can they sing? How can they feel the sweetness of paradise to sing from the heart? That is why it is said:

“Is anyone in a good mood? Let him sing.”¹⁸² Ideally, those who sing in the church should have a more sensitive and tender heart and a more sweet and joyful inner disposition than other brothers and sisters. Just think about it: how can a person sing “O Gentle Light” if he himself has no light within him?

It's all a matter of piety

— Geronda, when people tell me I sing poorly, I try to figure out what I need to correct in my singing technique.

— You need to strive to acquire a monastic disposition, reverence, and discernment, rather than thinking about performance skills or perfect technique. Skill without reverence is like makeup: something external, unnatural, and artificial. In the secular world, some singers “put on a show” with their voices out of necessity—so they'll be hired to sing in a cathedral or earn a higher salary. They say, “If I'm assigned to a small parish, how will I make a living?” After all, they have an excuse; they need to feed their families, which is why they sing in a mannered way and shout. But a monk has no excuse; he must sing naturally. Make sure your singing is natural and moving; sing for God, not for the sake of the art of singing. In singing, one must distinguish between what is internal and heartfelt and what is external and artificial.

— Geronda, could it be my voice's fault that I sing in a worldly way?

“It's not your voice that's the problem, but your parish-style singing. You sing with a certain worldly pomposity, the way some choir singers sang before you came to the monastery. Your singing sounds unnatural. Don't strain your vocal cords. Do you know how tiring that is for the listeners? Sing from the heart; do it naturally.”

— Maybe, Geronda, I'd be better off not singing at all for a while?

¹⁷⁹ Vigil services are held not only in honor of feasts but also due to special circumstances—fires, illnesses, in thanksgiving for something, etc.— Translator's note.

¹⁸⁰ Usually on weekdays, the sisters take turns singing the stichera and troparia. — Translator's note.

¹⁸¹ 1 Cor. 14:40.

¹⁸² James 5:13.

— No, sing. Listen to the other sisters, and gradually that worldly manner will fade away. On Mount Athos, too, young monks sing in a worldly style at first. If they don't yet have monastic experience, how are they supposed to sing in a monastic style? In the past, Athos chanters had less contact with secular singers—and sang in a more monastic style. Now that they've started interacting more, they've strayed a bit from the path: after all, even melons lose their flavor if they grow next to a pumpkin.

It all comes down to reverence. Without reverence, church singing is like flat wine; it's like an out-of-tune musical instrument that's nothing but an annoyance. And it makes no difference whether a person sings loudly or softly—the main thing is that they sing with reverence. Then even soft singing sounds humble and sweet, rather than sleepy. And loud singing sounds powerful and heartfelt, not wild. Father Makarios Buzikas¹⁸³ had a thunderous voice, but he sang naturally, reverently, and with tenderness; you could feel his heart trembling—and yours would stop in its tracks. “It turns your whole soul inside out,” an old monk once said of him. Father Makarios lived alone on Kapsala, in a cell at the Stavronikita Monastery. A Romanian lived below him; he wasn't much of a singer, but he was distinguished by his reverence. In the evening, Father Makarios would step out onto the balcony of his cell and begin singing “I Have Opened My Hand to You,”¹⁸⁴ while the Romanian below would continue with the next verse! Oh, what beauty that was!

It's a great thing when a singer has reverence. Do you know how important that is? He himself is transformed inwardly, and since this inner transformation pours out outwardly, the one who listens to him is also transformed for the better. Thus, their joint prayer becomes pleasing to God.

The sacred meanings pierce the heart

— Geronda, I like the Second Tone.

— The second tone is purely Byzantine. It cannot be played on any Western instrument, only on the violin. You see, the Turks took their music from Byzantium—and how touchingly they sing! But what are they singing about in their songs? “I'll drown my sorrows in ouzo, I'll stuff my belly with meat, wah-wah, oh-oh-oh!..” The Turks go into ecstasy when they sing about a glass of ouzo and a piece of meat! And we sing about Christ, Who was crucified, Who sacrificed Himself—and yet we remain indifferent?

“O blessed tree, upon which Christ, King and Lord, was crucified...”¹⁸⁵ As soon as a person thinks about Christ's sufferings, he is moved to tears. Not far from the cell of the Holy Cross, I once found a piece of a beam, about a meter long, and immediately thought of the Cross of Christ. I brought it to my cell and pressed myself against it, as if it were the Cross of Christ. Oh, how my heart pounded! I didn't let it out of my hands even in my sleep!..

— Geronda, were you thinking about Christ's crucifixion at that time?

— Only of the Crucifixion and nothing else! I felt as if I were on Golgotha, as if I were embracing the True Cross. If it had been the True Cross itself, I don't know if my feeling would have been any stronger. My heart was bursting, and tears were streaming down my face. My heart was pounding so hard it felt as if it were about to burst through my ribcage. I pressed that wood close to me so my ribs wouldn't crack. And you? You take a book with the order of the Service to the Cross, you sing: “The Cross of Christ, the hope of Christians,”¹⁸⁶ — yet your mind is who knows where. How then can the soul be transformed? Ah, if only the heart were to awaken, if only the soul were to be transformed—what a feast day at the cathedral would then begin! Have you ever been to a feast day at the cathedral for an entire city?

When a person follows what they are singing with both mind and heart, they begin to feel reverence, and both tenderness and everything else come to them. Therefore, grasp the divine meanings so that they pierce your heart. If a single word breaks through the isolation of our heart, then a person will be uplifted, soar inwardly, and be spiritually transformed—and the rest of the words of the divine service will flow unhindered into his heart, and this spiritual transformation will touch his entire being. When I hear “My mind is amazed

¹⁸³ Monk Makarios Bouzikas (1886–1965)—a cantor who lived in one of the cells belonging to the Stavronikita Monastery. — Translator's note.

¹⁸⁴ Ps. 103:28. The verses of this psalm, from verse 28 to the end, are sung at festive All-Night Vigil services.

¹⁸⁵ Irmos of the Fifth Ode of the Canon for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14 (27)).

¹⁸⁶ A stichera based on Psalm 50 for Matins of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

and I sing to You, O Mother of God,”¹⁸⁷ my mind is “amazed”—that is, it refuses to function—and I almost lose consciousness. And when I hear “Rejoice, O earth, with great joy,”¹⁸⁸ do you know what happens to me? My heart trembles with joy, and my whole body shivers with a kind of sweet thrill. But if one ignores the meaning of what is sung and read in church, nothing changes in a person’s heart or body.

— Geronda, I really like the old soldiers’ songs about the Motherland.

— Old soldiers’ songs awaken a love for the Motherland, inspire heroic deeds, uplift the spirit, and rally people to the struggle. During the years of the German occupation, there was a blind musician with a pipe—do you know how many people he rallied to the struggle? With what pain that poor man played “Be Well, Poor People”! He felt compassion for the entire nation, and his pain could be heard in the sounds of his pipe. Then he would hold out his hat and ask for alms. The Germans would say, “He’s blind—what can you get from him?” and leave him alone—they’d even throw money at him! And with his music... he preached! People were in despair back then, but he kindled a fire in their souls, and many were filled with resolve and went straight to the Dzhumerka Mountains to join Zervas’s partisan units.¹⁸⁹ Now imagine: leaving everything behind just like that and going off to spiritual battle out of love for Christ!

When I hear the sounds of a march, tears well up in my eyes... I immediately think of the war, of the struggle for liberation, of the heroes who shed their blood, who were killed. When I hear the church’s penitential troparia, my heart is broken. When I hear the Paschal stichera, I rejoice. And when I sing them myself, my mind is in God, and my heart trembles. If I sing mournful stichera, my soul aches and I sing sorrowfully. When I sing joyful ones, I rejoice. Understand that one must begin with meaning. Is the mind focused on divine meanings? Then a person is spiritually transformed; the heart burns and receives this spiritual tenderness with spiritual joy. But if the mind is not where it should be, then there is neither tenderness nor joy.

Music is composed by the heart

Church singing is not only prayer, but also, in a certain sense, “madness”—the heart, as it were, bursts forth, and spiritual, heartfelt emotions pour out over its edges. When a person thinks of Christ, of paradise, then he sings from the heart. And when he begins, little by little, to taste the heavenly, the leaping of his heart can be heard in every hymn. Even if the mind isn’t immersed in the words, but there is only the thought of paradise, the heart trembles—like that of a nightingale. When it sings, it trembles all over, and the branch on which it sits quivers as well. It seems to say, “Don’t touch me, I need nothing; I’ve completely, completely lost my mind!”

— Geronda, I have a thought that when I sing from sheet music, my singing comes across as more dry, but when I sing from memory, it’s more heartfelt.

— Sheet music restricts us somewhat, but the heart cannot be restrained. When the heart begins to work, the sounds break free from their boundaries and soar into boundlessness, and then the singing becomes heavenly! Then, even if you go off-key somewhere, you still feel the sweetness, because it flows from the heart.

— Geronda, how can this be achieved when a singer is not singing alone but with a choir?

— If the protopsalt¹⁹⁰ sings from the heart, the other singers are inspired by him and get carried away—in the best sense of the word.

— Geronda, what if the protopsalt doesn’t sing from the heart? Can another singer then sing from the heart? After all, he’ll be following the rhythm and pitch set by the protopsalt.

— So what, in your opinion, does the protopsalt take away—his heart? The heart has nothing to do with it. A singer may have the weakest voice in the choir, but if he puts his heart into his singing, then he will sing from the heart, because he cannot do otherwise. He sings, and inside, everything is turned upside down—

¹⁸⁷ Irmos of the ninth ode of the first canon of the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord.

¹⁸⁸ Refrain of the ninth ode of the canon for the Feast of the Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos.

¹⁸⁹ Zervas Napoleon (1891–1957)—a political and military figure, one of the leading fighters of the national Resistance during the German occupation. By the end of the occupation, Zervas’s military forces controlled most of the Greek regions of Aetolia-Acarnania and Epirus, where the Dzhumerka Mountains are located.

¹⁹⁰ Protopsalt (Greek for “first singer”)—the lead singer in a choir, a choir director. — Translator’s note.

his heart flutters, and tears well up in his eyes. Do you understand? Neither the protopsalt nor the other singers get in his way. So let's not make excuses for ourselves. In my opinion, women have absolutely no excuse when they do not sing from the soul, wholeheartedly, and with tenderness—after all, they are naturally endowed with this heartfelt love and tenderness.

— Geronda, here's what I'm thinking: we convey the mood of the hymns, but only superficially.

— The mood in church singing comes from within, from the heart. When the mind is focused on the meaning, that is what gives rise to a heartfelt mood—a heartfelt tremor! The heart composes the music. The strength, compassion, and pain that a person holds within give rise to feeling, life, and a pulse, and this is what lends sweetness to church singing. And if you delve into the inner meaning, do you know how you'll sing?!

— We'll understand what you want from us, Geronda.

— You won't just understand—you'll lose your minds along with me! Look, some musicians deliberately drink wine before they play, and then they sing with all their heart; their driving force is wine. But you, let yourselves be intoxicated by the divine fire and the Holy Spirit!¹⁹¹

Part 7.

On the Realm of Praise

“Turn to the spiritual realm, to the kingdom of praise. ‘Glory to You, O God, glory to You, O God’—repeat these words constantly.”

Chapter 1.

On the Praise of God

Repentance is also present in the doxology

Elder, I am not striving as I should, and this grieves me.

— Be mindful and glorify God.

“Elder, I ask God for forgiveness more often than I praise Him.”

— Asking for forgiveness is also a good thing, but it is still better to glorify Him. There is also repentance in praise, which brings divine consolation, since it contains humility. “Glory to You, O God” also means “forgive me, my God, for my sins, so that I may praise You as the angels praise You.”

— Sometimes, Geronda, I begin my prayer not by asking God to have mercy on me, a sinner, but with praise. Perhaps this is wrong?

— That is exactly right. Haven't we spoken about how praise also contains repentance? Cheerful people are inclined toward praise. You see, if someone, out of love for God, deeply regrets one of their failures and then shows repentance, this moves God to compassion. But a person of a different disposition, having repented, thanks and glorifies God day and night for deliverance from their former sinful life, and God rejoices in His child's love for Him.

Praise is an expression of the greatest gratitude

— Elder, what kind of rain was that just now? The leaves are still completely dry!¹⁹²

— What can I say to that? Even rain that merely dampened the leaves—is that not enough? When I saw the clouds in the sky, I couldn't sleep because of my sense of gratitude to God. “My God,” I said, “we are unworthy of rain.” Beware of ingratitude. Give thanks to God for everything He gives you.

— Geronda, when God answers our prayers for the monastery's needs, how should we express our gratitude to Him?

¹⁹¹ See: Matt. 3:11.

¹⁹² This was said during a severe drought, when a light rain fell one day.

— Hold a vigil to thank God, who sent help through His saints. And always follow this rule: after any request—when you ask fervently and from the heart—as soon as the Good God grants it, offer heartfelt praise and give thanks with joy.

— Geronda, how should we offer praise to Him?

— You can offer praise aloud,¹⁹³ or you can do so solely with your heart; in the latter case, it is inner praise.

— Geronda, is there always gratitude in praise?

— Well, what kind of praise is there without gratitude? Don't the angels give thanks to God when they praise Him?

— Geronda, what is the difference between praise and gratitude?

— Praise is joyful gratitude, an outpouring of gratitude, a surge that comes from within, from the heart. A person may not know all the words of a troparion by heart, may know only half of it, and may fill in the gaps with their own words, but their heart will still tremble with joy. If you thank God for His abundant blessings, then as you give thanks and praise, you will feel the full richness of His Goodness.

Praise begins with gratitude to God

— Geronda, is our feeling of gratitude toward God the same as praise?

— The feeling of gratitude is the most important thing. That is precisely where praise begins.

— Geronda, how can we cultivate a sense of gratitude toward God?

— To feel gratitude toward God in your soul, it is very helpful to observe yourself, to behave properly toward your neighbors, and to be grateful to people. Whoever feels gratitude toward a neighbor even for a small kindness will undoubtedly feel incomparably greater gratitude toward Christ, Who has bestowed and continues to bestow His blessings upon us abundantly. In this way, a person will be constantly filled with gratitude, for just as he ponders how to express his gratitude to Christ, the Lord will bestow even greater blessings upon him, so that a sincere soul will simply melt with love for Him. For if a person has spiritual receptivity and constantly thanks God for even His smallest gifts, then God responds to this with even greater blessings.

— Geronda, when thinking about God's blessings, should one think about each one specifically or in general?

— If you can reflect on each blessing specifically, that is best. If you pay attention to everything and don't miss a thing, you will sense even the slightest touch of the Good God and feel great gratitude. When a child's mind is focused on his mother, he senses her tender touches. But if the child is absorbed in his toys, then even if she caresses and kisses him, he will feel nothing. God constantly touches us with tenderness. A person who reflects on God's blessings is moved to tenderness, his heart is stirred, and he constantly glorifies God.

— Geronda, how can the heart begin to rejoice and take delight in a sense of gratitude toward God?

— Through humility and love, a person comes to feel God's great blessings and becomes a grateful servant.¹⁹⁴ "My God," he says, "I am not worthy of Your care; help someone else—someone who is suffering more than I am..." And God, seeing such love and humility, pours out His grace upon that person. And so this mutual exchange continues: a person gives thanks—and God bestows upon him more and more gifts.

"Glory to You, O God"

— Geronda, what do the words "Glory to You, O God" mean?

— The words "Glory to You, O God" mean "may all come to know God." You see, Christ Himself said:

¹⁹³ As a sign of gratitude to God, one may recite the doxology "Glory be to You..." or pray with prayer beads, saying, "Glory to You, our God, glory to You."

¹⁹⁴ See Matt. 25:21–23.

“I have glorified You on earth; and now, Father, glorify Me.”¹⁹⁵ Some misinterpret these words and say, “Even Christ seeks glory!” But these words mean the following: “I, Father, have revealed You on earth; reveal Me, too, so that people may believe.”

— Geronda, I want to repeat “Glory to You, O God” more often than “Lord, have mercy.” Is that wrong?

— No, blessed soul, that’s right! I can spend the whole day doing needlework and repeating: “Glory to You, O God! Glory to You, O God, for the fact that I am alive. Glory to You, O God, for the fact that I will die and go to You. Glory to You, God, for even if I end up in hell, someone else will be taken from hell to heaven in my place. And so that I won’t grieve over the fact that I’m suffering in hell, may God take many sinners from hell to heaven, so that His joy over them may increase, and His sorrow for me may diminish.”

May the words “Glory to You, O God” never leave your lips. When I am in pain, my medicine is “Glory to You, O God”; other pills do not help me. “Glory to You, O God” is even higher than “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Elder Tikhon said: “‘Lord Jesus Christ’ is worth a hundred drachmas, but ‘Glory to You, O God’ is worth a whole thousand”—that is, much more. By this he meant that a person asks for God’s mercy out of necessity, but glorifies God out of love, which is why glorification has greater value before God. The Elder advised saying “Glory to You, O God” not only when everything is going well for us, but also when we are enduring hardships, because God even allows trials for the benefit of our souls.

— Geronda, sometimes I say “Glory to God” and feel a kind of joy in my soul. What is this?

— That is true spiritual joy!... How you have gladdened me with those words! Right now, out of joy, I’ll pick up a pen and start writing “Glory to God, Glory to God...,” until I’ve filled an entire sheet of paper with those words! May God grant you, in the life to come, to be together with the angels who constantly glorify Him. Amen.

Chapter 2. On the Realm of Praise

Two Ranks in the Realm of Praise

The key to understanding praise is that there are two stages in this realm. If a person does not pass through the first, they will not be able to ascend to the second. At the first stage, a person endures suffering but perceives everything correctly. They follow good intentions, blame themselves, humble themselves, repent, and thank God for everything: “My God,” he says, “I thank You; because of my sins, I am enduring all this. I deserve even worse, but I fear I cannot bear it. I ask You to grant me patience and strength to endure it all.” Then divine consolation comes, and the person moves on to the second stage. There are those who have already walked the path of repentance and experienced the divine consolation that comes with forsaking sins, who have already passed through joyful weeping and reached the stage of glorification. Then the person has no sorrow; he feels a sacred joy and gratitude toward God that he cannot contain. He constantly repeats, “Glory to You, O God,” giving thanks to God for His great blessings, for His great love, and then the soul is already moved of its own accord toward prayer, toward the glorification of God, or, at the very least, asks God for forgiveness for being unworthy of His blessings.

— Geronda, how did Father Tikhon pray?

— Father Tikhon entered the realm of glorification and no longer remained in prayer, but in glorification. All that could be heard from his lips was: “Glory to You, O God, glory to You, O God!...” — and almost every day of the year was “bright” for him,¹⁹⁶ because he constantly lived in Paschal joy.

For people in such a state, it is always Easter, always the Resurrection! All the bells and chimes ring joyfully.

¹⁹⁵ See John 17:4–5.

¹⁹⁶ The first week after Easter is called Bright Week.

Praise Him with melodious cymbals, praise Him with exultant cymbals!¹⁹⁷ All day long they glorify God, and the beating of their hearts is like the ringing of a bell.

Tears of repentance and tears of praise

— Geronda, please explain to us the words of Abba Isaac when he writes about tears: “Some tears burn and dry up the body, while other tears gladden and nourish it. Tears born of the tenderness of a humbled heart because of sin—those burn and dry up the body... Tears of a different kind, however, arise from knowledge and discernment: they adorn the face and nourish the body.”¹⁹⁸

— The first tears are tears of repentance. You grieve deeply and sincerely over the sin you have committed and mourn it with humility. These tears exhaust a person, but there is also divine consolation in them. But when the soul is reconciled with God, tears of gratitude and praise come—and these are tears of joy. Then the soul finds itself in a different place; it soars joyfully in tender sweetness, heavenly sweetness. In this second state, a person requires only a small amount of food. The heart rejoices, and the little food he eats is enough for the body; indeed, the lack of sleep does him no harm. It is not that he forces himself to stay awake, but out of an abundance of joy he cannot fall asleep. Divine care blazes up in his heart, and he forgets about sleep. This great joy more than makes up for the lack of sleep.

— Geronda, can a person sing with tears, “Christ is born, glorify Him”?

— Yes, he can sing it with tears of gratitude to God!

— So, Geronda, can a person weep while glorifying God?

— Yes! He feels an inexpressible joy from gratitude, so much so that he cannot hold back. This is a true outpouring of praise. Turn to the spiritual realm, to the kingdom of praise! “Glory to You, O God, glory to You, O God”—repeat these words constantly. Then everything will fill you with tenderness; for everything you will feel great gratitude toward God, and God will overwhelm you with the abundance of His blessings.

Chapter 3. On God’s Gifts

God bestows His grace little by little

Elder, why is it that sometimes we clearly feel grace during prayer, while at other times we feel nothing?

— The Good Lord, to inspire us to great deeds, bestows such blessings upon us from time to time. It’s just as if we give a small child a piece of candy and tell him, “If you behave well, you’ll get more”—in the same way, God gives us such “candies” so that we may understand how sweet He is, and strive to please Him and be close to Him.

— Geronda, what about the sweetness that a person who has not yet been purified of passions experiences in prayer—could it be a sensual rather than a spiritual sensation?

— At first, it might be... But as one grows spiritually, everything falls into place; after all, even a fruit is sour and astringent until it ripens... God gradually bestows His grace for the person’s own good, for if they were to experience the fullness of God’s grace all at once, they might not be able to bear it. But if a person does not realize that even this small thing comes from God, and does not become firmly convinced that he is nothing in and of himself, then God will take away His gifts from him until he understands that these gifts do not belong to him, but to God.

— Sometimes, Geronda, after a whole day of working in obedience, I come back to my cell and don’t want to rest, but rather to be with God.

— That means wheat has sprouted in your spiritual fields. Don’t be lazy; reap a bountiful harvest.

— Geronda, how should I glorify God in such cases?

— Just tell God what’s in your heart. God has caressed you—and you can feel it.

¹⁹⁷ Ps. 150:5.

¹⁹⁸ See: Isaac the Syrian, St., *Words of the Ascetics*. Word 21. p. 126. — Translator’s note.

Divine Comfort in Prayer

- Geronda, why does God sometimes send a sweet fragrance?
- God allows us to sense a fragrance sometimes during prayer, sometimes at other times, to comfort, strengthen, or reveal something. But He always does this for a specific purpose.
- Sometimes, Geronda, when I pray the Jesus Prayer and ask for God’s mercy, I feel a certain inner change, a sense of tenderness.
- When a person humbly asks for God’s mercy and recognizes his own sinfulness, then God sends him His grace, and the person is spiritually transformed. He regrets having grieved God with his sins, repents, feels contrition, and God rewards him with such divine consolation.
- Geronda, when I pray the Jesus Prayer, I feel a certain comfort and joy. Is this from God, or is it a delusion?
- That’s not bad, but it’s better not to pay attention to it. When a person doesn’t pay attention to such things, God is even more moved and offers His help in other ways. Be careful not to seek prayer just to feel pleasure or joy. After all, a child runs to his father not because the father gives him a piece of chocolate, but because he loves his father; it’s a different matter if the father himself wants to give the child a piece of chocolate.
- Prayer offered for the sake of feeling joy, rather than for the sake of union with God, is not true prayer.
- Sometimes, Geronda, when I pray for a solution to some difficulty, I feel that there is praise present in my prayer. Is that normal?
- And after prayer, do you feel divine consolation?
- I don’t know, Geronda, whether it’s Divine consolation or not... But I feel peace and confidence.
- That means your hope in God and Divine consolation have come together.
- Geronda, how can a person know whether they are communing with God correctly?
- They are communing with God correctly if they feel divine consolation. This divine consolation is incomparable to human consolation, just as heaven is incomparable to earth.
- Geronda, I’m trying—I’m working hard in prayer—but I don’t feel any comfort.
- That’s good. It means you’re serving God selflessly. Let’s surrender our hearts to God, humbly asking for His mercy, and He knows exactly what we need. A spiritual person seeks nothing but the salvation of his soul. And he does not strive for divine delights—no, he does so out of love, accepting whatever God gives him.

The Visitation of Divine Grace

- Geronda, what is the Uncreated Light?
- How should I know? My stove is man-made, and I stoke it to keep warm. And if I need light, I light a candle and I can see everything!
- One should never seek light or divine gifts, but only repentance, which leads to humility; then the Good God will give a person what he needs. Once I went to visit Father David of Dionysia.¹⁹⁹ He lived in a dirty, dark, and untidy cell. But in that dark cell, he lived in the Light. He had made great progress in prayer and had ascended to a high spiritual level. I was afraid to ask him anything! “We don’t talk about this, we don’t talk about it,” he kept repeating. Do you know what it means to see the Light in the midst of darkness, without having any light? To live amid mountains of trash and dwell in the abodes of God!
- “To receive the Spirit, you must give blood.”²⁰⁰ When I lived in a dormitory, I once decided to put this into practice during Great Lent. I didn’t spare myself at all; I “pulled the bowstring” so tight that it was just a hair’s breadth away from snapping. I felt so exhausted that I would collapse in the middle of the road and ask God to help me get up, so that people wouldn’t see me and then say, “Look at that—these monks are striving so hard that they’re falling from exhaustion.” It was a daily martyrdom. On the evening of the Thursday before Lazarus Saturday, while praying in my cell, I felt such sweetness, such joy! Light shone upon me, and tears

¹⁹⁹ See about him: The New Athonite Paterikon, Vol. 1, pp. 172–181. — Translator’s note.

²⁰⁰ See: Memorable Tales. On Abba Longinus.

streamed from my eyes—sweet tears. This lasted twenty or thirty minutes and gave me such strength that it nourished me spiritually for no less than ten whole years.

When I asked Elder Peter about this,²⁰¹ he told me: “I constantly experience such states. In such moments, when Divine grace visits me, my heart is sweetly warmed by God’s love, and some extraordinary Light illuminates me from within and without. In such moments, I feel that even my face is glowing. Even my cell is illuminated! Then I remove my skufia, bow my head humbly, and say to Christ: ‘Lord, pierce my heart with the spear of Your goodness.’ Out of great gratitude, sweet tears flow unceasingly from my eyes, and I glorify God. Then everything comes to a halt, because I feel Christ very close and can ask for nothing more; the prayer ceases, and the prayer beads cannot move.”

— Geronda, does a person see the Uncreated Light with their physical eyes?

— Once you put aside your petty squabbles, then I’ll tell you.

— Geronda, by the time we free ourselves from them, you’ll already be gone to Athos... Well, please: let this be a spiritual act of charity!

— When I lived in Katunaki, in the cell of Saint Hypatius, one evening I recited Vespers using my rosary, drank some tea, and continued praying. I completed the required number of rosary counts for Compline and the Akathist,²⁰² and then simply began to recite the Jesus Prayer. The longer I repeated it, the more my fatigue faded, and the greater the lightness I felt. I felt such joy in my soul that I didn’t want to sleep, and I continued reciting the Jesus Prayer without ceasing. Around eleven o’clock at night, my cell was suddenly filled with a sweet, heavenly Light. It was very intense, but it didn’t blind me. At the same time, I realized that my eyes had become “stronger”—strong enough to withstand this radiance. While I was in this state, in this Divine Light, I was in another world—the spiritual one. I felt indescribable joy, and my body felt light; the heaviness of my body had vanished. I felt God’s grace, Divine enlightenment. Divine answers flashed through my mind. I had no intention of asking anything, but as soon as a question arose, I received the answer. The answers were in simple words, but they were filled with theology; they were sacred words. If I were to write it all down, it would amount to a second “Evergetin.” This continued all night, until nine in the morning. When that Light disappeared, everything seemed dark to me. I went out onto the street, and it was as if it were night. “What time is it? Has dawn not yet broken?” I asked a monk who was passing by. He looked at me and asked in bewilderment, “What did you say, Father Paisius?” “What did I say...?” I asked myself and returned to my cell. Glancing at the clock, I suddenly realized what had happened. It was nine o’clock in the morning; the sun was high in the sky, yet the day seemed like night to me! It seemed to me that the sun was barely shining, as if an eclipse had begun. I felt like a person who had suddenly gone from bright light into darkness—such was the difference! When this divine state ended, I returned to my usual life and began doing what I always did. I did a little needlework, kept track of the time with my rosary beads, and after nine o’clock, I soaked some crackers to eat... But while doing all this, I felt like an animal that would scratch against a fence one moment, chew on grass the next, and stare aimlessly back and forth, and I said to myself: “Look at what I’m doing! And like this—for many years?” Until evening, I felt such joy that I didn’t even feel the need to rest—that’s how intense that state was! All that day, my vision was blurry; I could barely go about my business. And yet it was summer, and the sun was shining brightly. The next day, I could already see objects as usual. I was following my rule, but I no longer felt like an animal, as I had the day before.

What senseless things we waste our time on—and what we end up losing! That’s why, when I see pettiness, squabbles, and cowardice, I get very upset.

The mind is silent in the presence of Christ

— Geronda, Abba Isaac writes: “The humble-minded person, standing before God, does not dare to pray.”²⁰³ So what does the humble-minded person do?

— He feels unworthy to pray, to speak with God.

²⁰¹ See regarding Father Peter of Katounak: Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. *Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. pp. 65–75.

²⁰² The Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos is usually recited during the Athonite Vespers. — Translator’s note.

²⁰³ “The truly humble do not dare to pray to God when they begin to pray, nor do they consider themselves worthy of prayer, nor do they ask for anything else; they do not know what to pray for, but remain silent in all their thoughts, awaiting only mercy and whatever grace may be granted to them...” See: Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetic Sayings*. Saying 48. p. 262. — Translator’s note.

— And what does he do, Geronda?

— It is enough for him simply to stand before God.

— Geronda, how did you practice prayer in the places where you lived as a monk?

— I would withdraw into prayer... Do you know what it means to withdraw into prayer? To immerse oneself in it. A sweet immersion.

— Are you saying, Geronda, that you lost all sense of place and time?

— Yes, I would lose myself completely in prayer... Even to simply bring a thought to mind, I had to pause my prayer. Do you know what it's like to sink deeper and deeper?.. Then you no longer want anything; you simply need nothing.

— Then, Geronda, do you say only "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me"?

— You don't say anything anymore; you just feel God's warmth and sweetness. At that point, the Jesus Prayer ceases, because the mind has united with God and doesn't want to be separated from Him for anything: it feels so good.

When a person reaches this state, prayer ceases of its own accord. And not only prayer, but the mind itself comes to a standstill in the presence of God. Thoughts vanish, and the soul feels only the sweetness of Divine love, Divine warmth, and care. It is like an infant who thinks of nothing, but simply rejoices in its mother's arms. When a child grows still in its mother's arms, does it say anything? No, they are now one, and in this lies their communion.

Good is the Jesus Prayer in silence, but even better is silence within silence—the mind silent in the presence of Christ.