

The Community of the Desert and the Loneliness of the Cities

Toward the end of the eighteen century, St. Kosmas Aitolos foretold that a time would come when a person would have to travel for days to meet another person whom he could embrace as a brother. We are living in an age where this is already happening. Contemporary man, in his loneliness, experiences pathological anxiety, anguish and suffering. He is tormented and, in turn, torments others.

Why? This essay will attempt an answer by bringing the fragrance of community found in the desert to the loneliness and the desolation found in cities.

CONTEMPORARY LONELINESS

Loneliness is the absence of communication and relationship – the inability to develop and maintain associations with others. Contemporary culture and the structures of society, the mass media reflecting prevailing ideologies, even children's games, lead to social alienation, political estrangement and personal isolation. The individual person begins, early on, to be possessed by an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy, to lose the meaning and purpose of life, to live without principles and discipline, to be constantly suspicious and in doubt.

Alone and insecure, anxious and disorderly, modern man – and particularly the contemporary young person – attempts to build bridges, to raise flags, to shout slogans. But without a guide – or with bad guides – he is readily disillusioned and becomes hard and aggressive, a plaything for political exploiters and power-hungry anarchists. The desire for freedom becomes the bitter death of his freedom.

The young, who earlier had declared that they would never compromise with anyone, are now themselves compromised. They take refuge in demonstrations and sit-ins, becoming rebellious in an effort to relieve themselves of the weight of their loneliness, not realizing that they are thrusting themselves into an even more unbearable slavery.

It is particularly unfortunate that all this is happening where least expected – even with young people of good education, exceptional intelligence, energy and talent. Unsatisfied with material prosperity and disillusioned by the hypocrisy of their elders, these young people struggle for simpler life, for quality in life, for a better way of life – but unfortunately they do not manage to make the right beginning.

Modern art is a good example of the spiritual alienation that we see. Instead of shedding light and opening windows – toward others and toward heaven – it tends to shut us in and to plunge us, ever deeper, into obscurity and darkness.

It is not long before isolated man begins to talk to himself, to the irrational animals, to the shadows that surround him, and to the dead. By now he is seriously sick. Melancholy, phobias, suspicion and mistrust have made him a psychopath. A most appropriate observation characterizes our time as the century of the psychiatrist. According to World Health Organization statistics for 1985 there are more than 400 million people in the world suffering from deep depression, with about 400,000 committing suicide each year. And these statistics refer only to the developed countries.

In his isolation man is plagued relentlessly by egotism and pride which are the natural parents of his loneliness.

HUMILITY – AN ANTIDOTE TO LONELINESS

If egotism and pride foster this kind of loneliness, then true humility – even though the term is misused

and loses meaning among those who merely talk about it – produces the climate in which this loneliness is not permitted to thrive. Behold how the desert – that good mother, excellent philosopher and theologian – speaks about holy humility, silence and peace.

The humble person, according to Abba Poimen, is comfortable and at peace wherever he may find himself.

Abba Isaac tells us that he who makes himself small in everything will be exalted above all. And his discerning voice continues: “Hate honor and you will be honored indeed. He who runs after honors causes honor itself to be banished from him. But if you merely disdain yourself hypocritically in order to appear humble, God will reveal you.”

In the *Gerontikon*, which contains a wide variety of spiritual writings from the Fathers, it is repeatedly made clear that “the humble-minded and lowly in heart is not the one who cheapens himself and talks about humility, but the one who endures joyfully the dishonors which come from his neighbor.” In another place the *Gerontikon* states that “the person honored more than he deserves is actually harmed, while the person who is not honored at all by his fellow human beings will be honored in heaven by God.”

Abba Poimen gives us this advice. “Every possible sorrow that comes to you can be overcome with silence.”

Abba Isaiah agrees with him: “Until your heart is at peace through prayer, make no effort to explain anything to your brother.”

In studying the writings of the holy fathers of the desert, one can easily observe a common mind, a common noble spirit, a humaneness, an understanding, a wisdom. These are dew drops of the Holy Spirit, which fall in the arid desert after long struggles, which make fragrant flowers grow among the communities of faithful committed totally to God, and which make fragrant the souls of those who truly thirst for God.

Abba Isaiah, that great mind, notes with particular grace and subtlety: “He who humbles himself before God is capable of enduring every insult. The humble person is not concerned about what others say about him. The person who bears the harsh word of a rude and foolish man for the sake of God is worthy of acquiring peace.”

Abba Mark, on this important topic – our relationship with ourselves and with others, in which we find ourselves stumbling on a daily basis – goes on to note the following: “When you become aware of the thought in your mind dictating human glory, you should know for sure that this thought is preparing you for shame. And if you discern someone praising you hypocritically, expect also his accusation some time soon.” And with the daring precision of a surgeon of the soul, the holy Abba continues: “When you see someone crying over the many insults he has received, you should know that, because he was overcome by vainglory, he is now unknowingly reaping the crop of evils in his heart. He who loves pleasure is grieved by accusations and abuse. On the other hand, he who loves God is grieved by praises and other superfluous remarks. The degree of our humility is measured by slander. Don't think that you have humility when you cannot forbear even the slightest accusation.”

Abba Zossima goes even further: “Remember the one who has ridiculed you, who has grieved you, who has wronged you, who has done evil to you, as your physician, your healer. Christ sent him to heal you; don't remember him with anger.”

Evagrius considered those who spoke badly of him as benefactors.

The divine wisdom of these physicians of the desert has tremendous significance to our topic. It has been said that these remarks are addressed by monks and for monks, but this is a superficial view. The epidemic of loneliness and depression that we are discussing results from proud minds lacking in humility, from failed interpersonal relationships, from unsatisfied egotistical aspirations, from self-aggrandizement, praise-seeking and self-love. This loneliness is strong enough to weaken a person and to make him sick. But love is

stronger, capable of healing and regenerating the whole world.

Man has an irrepressible need to communicate, but communication must be properly developed. Initially, we must strike up a conversation – a sincere, honorable and courageous conversation – with our unknown self. We must rediscover in the very depths of our soul the hidden innocence of our childhood years. Next we must learn to have unmasked face-to-face conversation with the only, true living friend – our heavenly Father and God. Only then will we be able to effectively communicate with others, whoever they are – the worst, the best, the neighbors, the distant, our brothers and sisters in Christ. In this manner the webs of loneliness are removed, the inaccessible and sunless dungeons of the heart are illumined, the shell of our ego is broken. When we have rejected the loneliness of miserable, self-centered egotism we can begin to rejoice, to be free, to breathe, to live.

NATURAL LONELINESS: A SANCTUARY OF KNOWLEDGE – OF SELF AND OF GOD

There is another type of loneliness – natural loneliness – which is not pathological but creative, life-giving, full of grace. It is exemplified by the natural separation of monastics from the world. It is a loneliness to which we all should devote much time. We must be able to withdraw ourselves from the noisy crowds which are so superficial, so distracting, and so counterproductive – in a withdrawal which is healthy, beautiful and good. It is important that we learn to shut off the constant communication with the many, which does not allow us to be alone with our self – and as a consequence, we are not able to be with the One who is always waiting, the incarnate Logos of God. We must make the time and find the way for this other kind of sacred communication of natural loneliness. And we must pursue this knowledgeably, with an orderly, disciplined program.

Please keep in mind that we are not talking about those who seek to escape from the preoccupations with the world in order to find rest, to view beautiful sunsets, to gaze at star-studded skies. Such activities are not spiritual. Neither are we talking about those who seek to meditate using techniques of doubtful origins to achieve dubious results. Nor are we discussing those who devote fleeting moments to superficial daydreams and who presume to have repented when they fell sentimental emotions as they remember indiscretions of their past. And we certainly are not talking about the well-meaning but naïve who think the spiritual life of sacred quietude consists of strolling at the seashore with a *komboschoini* (prayer beads) in hand. Furthermore, we are not referring to the spiritual tourists who visit holy places and converse boldly with holy persons, but who do not deny their ego nor sacrifice their will. Activities such as these are only superficial attempts to escape from life, through shallow daydreaming and capricious imagination.

What we are talking about is sacred quietude – achieved with ascetic effort – which liberates us from the loneliness of the world, even though we find ourselves in a noisy city or a disorderly household. We are talking about the persistence and the patience which help us probe the deepest roots of our existence and understand its limits, and which dispel the darkness that tires and discourages us.

We need to learn to pray. We need vigils – constant vigilance in a posture of immobility and calmness.

When I am near God what do I have to fear? He has guided me to where I may be guided by Him. Despairing of friends and acquaintances – sorely disappointed with the arts, the technologies, the ideologies – disenchanted with social chatter and vacuous etiquette – I come to the privilege of ultimate despair. I become aware that, in my nakedness, God Himself is there to vest me with authentic hope. And in this miracle the blessed Panaghia and all the saints are present to lend their support.

In this natural loneliness – this divine loneliness – I find relief. The actor's masks which I had felt obliged to put on – or which had been put on me – have been discarded. It had been a dreadful state. Every night I needed to go to another gathering, to be part of another group, for I had to be included somewhere. I

was constantly changing my mask. Now, however, by turning inward I begin to live, to become aware that I am a child of God, to unveil my unique and irreplaceable identity, my face, my person. I begin to observe the activities of the passions. I can see my strengths and my limitations. I am redeemed from errors, fantasies, excesses, and languid apathy.

A firm resolve helps guide our steps to this lonely sanctuary of knowledge – of self and of God. In this sanctuary the loneliness – the *aloneness* – which had been feared becomes a delight. For the person who is with God can never be alone since his is in dialogue with himself and with God. Here we find ourselves with less individualism, and greater love for others. We find tears for the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters, and strength for greater efforts that will help them. For the voice which arises from the depths of the lone person cuts through the clouds and reaches the Triune God, who always listens and always responds.

THE DIVINE LONELINESS OF MAN IN COMMUNION WITH GOD

The man in communion with God knows how to make his voice more fervent and to rejoice while standing in second place. He knows how to be a friend even with the stranger and to be satisfied with little. Moreover, he knows how to become tired in his diligent efforts and how to wash with tears those who are grasping and prodigal. And he knows how to do these things without complaint or dissatisfaction, even if abandoned by relatives, friends, colleagues.

Far from the tumultuous crowds and the confusion of public arena, in the privacy of your room, choose freely and without coercion. It may appear that you are not offering anything to others and that you are being self-centered, particularly when others are saying that they need you, as they suffer from painful loneliness. This loneliness which you have chosen for yourself is an arduous task, requiring great strength, heroism, persistence. It is a long and endless undertaking. And sometimes it can be preparation for a return to those whom you have left out of your life, although this should never be the purpose of your ascetic commitment.

All the saints of our Church, the most fervent and active missionaries, even the Lord Himself in His earthly life, experienced the mystery of divine loneliness. Remember those great personalities, the prophets of the Old Testament – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah and John the Forerunner.

Returning to our century, we find it tragically alone, in despair, pessimistic. In spite of efforts to the contrary, the world is in conflict with everyone and everything – countries, governments, races, colleagues, parents, friends, children, books, lessons, work. And being in conflict with itself it is also in conflict with God, to whom it never speaks, never says anything.

The most painful loneliness is to be next to your spouse and yet be unable to transmit your inner feelings, even as external messages are transmitted instantaneously from one hemisphere to another. It is painful loneliness for married couples to keep secrets from each other for years. It is painful when dialogue is non-existent between children and parents, between children and teachers, between children and clergy. There is no more cruel loneliness than for a family to sit for hours in front of the television without speaking a word among themselves. We live in a difficult time. Loneliness is at an all-time high. Man is lost. God is silent.

In this loneliness, in this desolation of the cities, in this apparent absence of God, man is called to gather his thoughts, to come to his senses, to put aside his many worldly preoccupations and to retire to his place of prayer – speechless, naked, a child – so that God may speak to him, clothe him, and endow him with spiritual maturity. Then his loneliness will become the divine loneliness of liberation and he will achieve a sense of fullness. Only such radical loneliness leads to a fundamental understanding and experience of God, destroying every hesitation, doubt and torment.

In this sacred loneliness man finds himself face-to-face with his existential poverty and the fear of death which it provokes. Yet, even here, there is the danger that he may choose procrastination as a solution and, for

a time, set his panic-stricken self at ease. He may resume running back and forth endlessly, expanding social activities, and seeking a variety of entertainments – a program of extreme *busyness*. Other people, other things, work and extensive involvements may serve as a cover for his spiritual impoverishment – for a time. And he may continue wandering aimlessly, driven by circumstances, tormented, flirting with one thing and another, fighting, being torn – and finally annihilated.

A life of work without the liberation of communion with God is slavery. The struggle for excessive wealth is an incurable, tormenting disease. Fear of the future can stimulate greed, miserliness, hoarding. And God can be easily forgotten.

Here is what Abba Markos says, on how man can avoid the slavery of misguided work and instead become a free servant of God: “The one who casts off anxious cares for ephemeral things and is freed from their every need, will place all his trust in God and in the eternal good things. The Lord did not forbid the necessary daily care for our physical well-being; but He indicated that man should be concerned only for each day. To limit our needs and cares to what is absolutely necessary is quite possible through prayer and self-control, but to eliminate them altogether is impossible.”

In the discerning remarks of Abba Markos which continue, let me call your attention to a subtle point which applies to many faithful. “The necessary services which we are obliged to carry out, we must of course accept and carry out, but we must let go of those other purposeless activities and prefer rather to spend our time in prayer, particularly when these activities would lead us into the greed and luxury of money and wealth. For the more one can limit, with the help of God, these worldly activities would lead us to gather his mind from such anxious wanderings. If again someone, out of weak faith or some other weakness, cannot do this, then, at least, let him understand well the truth and let him try, as much as he can, to censure himself for this weakness and for still remaining in this immature condition. For it is far better to have to give an account to God for omissions rather than for error and pride!”

A drama is played out in man wherein he continuously and intently seeks peace and knowledge externally. But when he comes to his senses he realizes that true hospitality exists in an unexpected place. For it is precisely within himself that he discovers and experiences the particularity of his personhood. It is here that the divine loneliness of liberation, based on the knowledge of his individual personality, is to be found. It is here, in mystical quietude, that he measures, decides, and takes on his responsibilities.

Achieving the mystical experience of what we are, what we should seek, and what we can do, involves troublesome effort which, nevertheless, is critical. It is within us that we rescue ourselves from the loneliness of ego and where we find the way to the light and joy of communion.

Much of the world is governed by sophistry, wisdom has been ostracized, and decency has been lost. Lies and deception abound, revisionism has made history counterfeit, the Gospel is misinterpreted, schoolbooks are political tools mouthing the ideologies of those in power. There is a tendency to mimic false western ideologies, including sentimental pietism and painless social neochristianity. The life of the Church and its life-giving Sacred Traditions are ignored.

The only refuge is for each of us to set up our own sanctuary wherever we can. To a world which considers deception to be intelligence and honor to be weakness, we must dare say “Do not touch me!” We must choose to remain voluntarily and responsibly alone, even though such aloneness requires great courage in a society which aggressively seeks our applause and urges us into amalgamation. The weariness over vanities, bitterness, constant motion and joyless joys that has filled our lives helps us come to the realization that this is the best for of resistance to the general disorientation.

By restoring our inner world, we increase our resistance, and in time become invincible to, the organized attacks of evil. By placing our whole life at God's feet and seeking the authentic life he wants us to live we begin to have a foretaste of immortality, where we are never alone but in the company of Christ and His

saints. All loneliness is dispelled by inner self-sufficiency.

And it may help you to know that there are many, out of sight, who are assisting you with their prayers. These are the monastics, dedicated totally to God, who keep vigil. Even though you have not met them they pray for you, with arms raised and with knees and knuckles callused by their prostrations.

THE SUPREME LONELINESS OF BELIEVERS TODAY

It has been said that each person carries his own loneliness. The mentally unbalanced individual has a dangerous loneliness. The sick person has an agonizing loneliness. One who has unjustly accumulated wealth has a bitter and ugly loneliness. But the believer carries a permanent, incurable and supreme loneliness, the loneliness of the way to salvation.

We have become accustomed to referring to the loneliness of late evening, of mourning, of living abroad. And each of us deals with our own individual circumstances as best we can. But, how long will we continue to go around in circles, examining the subject externally yet never entering its reality? Standing, before the eternal enigma of existence, when will we – the sons and daughters of God by grace and participation, created in His image and likeness, the children of light – when will we dare to cast aside worldly ideas and discussions and, standing face to face before God, make the decision to fundamentally change our lives?

Our movements remain uncertain. We talk about God, yet God remains someone we do not really know. We desire to be with God, we advance toward Him, yet at the last minute we find an escape route and evade Him.

We love ourselves excessively, beyond measure. We are unwilling to bear God. We are afraid of Him, and we try to deceive Him – although in fact we only deceive ourselves – with excuses which appear to be convincing. We have come to love our deceptions to the point of no longer being ashamed of them. And yet God Himself never tires of seeking us out discreetly, reminding us of His presence in our sufferings and in our joys, in our mistakes and in our victories.

It is necessary for believers to begin again the way of the Lord. Let us abandon the crowds and their excited shouting; let not their words entice and influence us. The way of the Lord is narrow, uphill, demanding. Lonely, but it is also salutary, as He Himself has promised us. The believer must at last attach himself with love to what is essential to his personal existence, setting aside decisively and irrevocably the secondary and superfluous.

The message of the Book of Revelation is truly awesome. The lukewarm believers will be spewed out of the mouth of God (Rev. 3.15-16) The term used is most expressive of God's dissatisfaction with those who are indecisive and ambiguous, neither hot nor cold.

To be in the company of God is both a joy to God and the greatest liberating blessedness to man. But reconciliation with God cannot be detached from reconciliation with ourselves and with our brothers and sisters. These always go together – the friend of God is a friend of himself and of others.

The relationships that result have no room for conceit or isolation. Love of God must never degenerated into pharisaism, nor love of neighbor into sterile duty. Openness in three directions – toward self, God and neighbor – is achieved symmetrically, with balance, with knowledge, with freedom and with love.

The great fourth century teacher of the desert, Abba Isaiah, reminds us that “the pathological love of self and of others is an obstacle to our relationship with God.”

Cicero used to say that “a great city is a great loneliness!” This loneliness produces boredom, lack of appetite, pessimistic bitterness, a constant looking to the future and doing nothing today, dissatisfaction, a desire to escape, cowardice. These conditions, collectively referred to by the ascetic literature as *accidia*, mercilessly plague many, including the careless monastic.

Here is how St. Maximos the Confessor, the great Byzantine theologian, speaks about *accidia*: “All of the powers of the soul are enslaved by *accidia*, while almost all of the other passions are also and immediately aroused by it, because, of all the passions, *accidia* is the most burdensome.”

St. John of the Ladder, who knows profoundly even the most subtle movements of the soul, described *accidia* to monks who inquired with characteristic harshness: “*Accidia* is the breakdown of the soul, the disorientation of the mind, negligence of ascetic practice, hatred of monasticism, love of worldliness, irreverence toward God, forgetfulness of prayer.”

Evagrius mentions that this unbearable condition of the soul devastates its victim, “who does not know what to do anymore, seeing the time not passing and wondering when the mealtime will come which seems delayed.”

Antiochos, who lived in the seventh century, is even more vivid and precise in his definition of *accidia*: “This condition brings you anxiety, dislike for the place where you are living, but also for your brothers and for every activity. There is even a dislike for Sacred Scripture, with constant yawning and sleepiness. Moreover, this condition keeps you in a state of hunger and nervousness, wondering when the next meal will come. And when you decide to pick up a book to read a little, you immediately put it down. You begin to scratch yourself and to look out of the windows. Again you begin to read a little, and then you count the number of pages and look at the titles of the chapters. Finally, you give up on the book and go to sleep, and as soon as you have slept a little you find it necessary to get up again. And all of these things you are doing just to pass the time...”

St. John of Damascus says that this struggle is very heavy and very difficult for monks.

St. Theodore of Studion says that the passion of *accidia* can send you directly to the depths of Hades.

Dostoyevski, who had a patristic mind, offered a solution to this problem when he had the Starets Zossima tell us we must make ourselves responsible for the sins of the whole world: “This understanding of our salvation through others helps us to realize that love is not exhausted only in doing good, but in making the agonies and the sufferings of others our very own. The monks pray daily for the salvation of the whole world. Created in the image of God, we are all His, we are all brothers, His children. Loneliness is abolished in God. We are all 'members of each other' according to St. Paul. Thus, our sins and our virtues have a bearing upon the others, since, as we have said, we are all members of one body. *Accidia* provides a reason for more fervent prayer, and the difficulties are an opportunity for spiritual maturity and progress.”

Let me repeat. Separation from the world, maligned by some as desertion, is courageous and necessary, a resistance to the general leveling of all things. Man finds his authenticity, the beauty of his uniqueness, within the sacred silence of quietude, standing apart from the crowd. His suffering in solitude prepares him to return to the common and familiar, revitalized and ready for whole-hearted service.

Abba Alonios once said: “Unless a man can bring himself to say to his heart that he alone and God are present in this place, he will never find peace and rest of soul.”

St. John Chrysostom said: “Quietude in solitude is no small teacher of virtue.” Elsewhere he also said: no matter where you are, you can set up your sanctuary. Just have pure intentions and neither the place, nor the time will be an obstacle, even without kneeling down, striking your chest or raising your arms to heaven. As long as your mind is fervently concentrated you are totally composed for prayer. God is not troubled by any place. He only requires a clear and fervent mind and a soul desiring prudence.”

St. Makarios of Egypt, in his spiritual homilies, becomes a little more affectionate: “Even if you find yourself poverty stricken of spiritual gifts, just have sorrow and pain in your heart for being outside of His kingdom, and as a wounded person shout to the Lord and ask Him to make you also worthy of the true life.” Further on, he says: “God and the angels grieve over those who are not satisfied with heavenly nourishment.” Finally, St. Makarios makes this significant and remarkable observation: “Everything is quite simple and easy for those who desire to be transfigured spiritually. They need only to struggle to be a friend of God and

pleasing to Him, and they will receive experience and understanding of heavenly gifts, an inexpressible blessedness, and a truly great divine wealth.”

Being inexperienced in these more profound spiritual conditions, I should simply work in the beloved desert to uproot my passions. But there is a need to speak of men I have seen and heard, who live on the peaceful mountain sides of the sacred Athos peninsula, who experience the mysteries of God. They are charismatic monks consumed by heaven, bearing Christ in their hearts and loving God, devotees of quietude, of solitude, thunderous workers of silence, alone but without loneliness, who, in their solitude, remember the loneliness of the whole world. While some in the world suffer involuntarily sleeplessness and other spend their nights without love in strange places, the monks of Mt. Athos keep a voluntary vigil, praying for the health, mercy and salvation of the whole world.

An amazing book by a contemporary hermit, which circulated recently, describes the famous ascetic of Mt. Athos, Hatzi-Georgis, as a faithful friend of quietude in the caves of the desert, an honorable and noble fighter, a great faster who found his rest in vigils, in prayer and in solitude. The desert did not make him wild and harsh like itself. On the contrary it refined and beautified him his reverend biographer writes as follows: “Hatzi-Georgis had much innocent love for all. He was always peaceful, tolerant and forgiving. He had a great heart and that is why he had room for everything and everyone, just as they were. In a sense he had been rendered incorporeal. Living the angelic life on earth he became an angel and flew to heaven, for he held on to nothing – neither spiritual passions nor material things. He had thrown everything away and, consequently, flew very high.”

The Elder Gerasimos, the hesychast from Katounakia, remained for seventeen years, as noted by his fellow ascetic, at the peak of Prophet Elijah struggling, with demons and the elements. He remained an immovable pillar of patience. His tears were flowing constantly. He completed his carefree and quiet life in the sweetness of the constant vision of Christ.

Another hesychast from Katounakia, Fr. Kallinikos, loved pain, toil and quietude beyond measure. He bathed in his tears and perspiration. The last forty-five years of his life he passed in seclusion, praying without ceasing. His face attained the grace of shining like that of Moses when he descended from Mt. Sinai.

The spiritual Father Ignatios had the peculiar habit of closing the shutters of his cell so that he would not notice the coming of the new day, but could continue his prayers. It was his custom to beseech his visitors in this manner: “Love God who has loved you!” He would sometimes forget to wash, to comb himself, to eat, but prayer beads were always in his hand and prayer always on his lips and heart. When he lost his eyesight, he became even brighter. He was fragrant in life and he was also fragrant after falling asleep in the Lord.

The remarkable priest and father confessor, Fr. Savvas, from the Little St. Anna, drew his strength from the daily Divine Liturgy which he celebrated in tears. During Liturgy, and during his all night vigils, he would take hours to commemorate thousands of names.

This is the nature of the community of the desert – silent, praying, serene, blessed. This is the life of the desert. If a monk does not possess an intense spiritual life and a constant vigilance, he will certainly fall into a myriad of temptations. *Accidia* will lead him to a barren isolation when, mocked by angels and demons, he will become the worse of the worst, and the loneliness of the desert will become unbearable for him.

SUMMING UP THE PARADOXES

The cities become more and more desolate and they will continue in this direction, while the deserts will become inhabited and will again blossom. No one who remains unrepentant will be able to block the repentance of the willing, the prayer of the faithful, the supplication of the poor. No one can prevent the mystery of the living God. This miracle is experienced in martyrdom and in humility, where the Orthodox way

of life always blossoms – in quietude, in silence, in anticipation. We are called to experience the transcendence of Christianity, which is not so much the abolishment of evil as it is the honorable acceptance of ourselves and of others, living the wealth of poverty, the health of illness, the blessing of tribulation, the power of weakness, the joy of patience, the victory of defeat, the honor of dishonor, the freedom of seclusion, the majesty of meekness, the resistance to death, the incarnation of God, the deification of man. And we should expect all these spiritual realities, not from the authority of the leaders of this world, but from the authority we exercise over ourselves, and from the creation of healthy and bright spiritual hearths which we call parish, family, cell, workshop, office, auditorium, room.

In this way, though the desolation and loneliness of the cities will continue to exist, it will not penetrate into our hearts. In this way the world can be changed, not from without, but from within and from above.

Do not consider great the missionary to Africa or the significant inventor. Great is the little person who forbears the madness, the injustice, the persecution, the pain of his neighbor and of his own life. According to Abba Isaac, the person who recognizes and overcomes his passions is greater than the person who raises the dead.

All who seek redemption from pathological anxiety, from sorrow and sadness, from emptiness and loneliness are invited to a rendezvous – with themselves and with God. And when you do meet, remember the humble person who has offered these thoughts.

Jesus Christ: The Life of the World

WHO IS CHRIST?

Two thousand years have passed since the coming of Christ, yet Christ still remains unknown to the world because the world has a false understanding of Him. This regrettable fact has serious impact on the Christian communities themselves. The impression prevails that Christ is simply a god among the gods, who now dwells in heaven, very far away from us – that the religion He founded is a beautiful religion, perhaps the best ever – and that His moral teaching, although impeccable, may be a bit austere.

Christ is of course an historical person, but He is much more than this. He is a great, beneficent and significant teacher, whose message has enriched the world, and whose presence marked a turning point in the flow of history. But, again, He is not only this. Jesus Christ – our Lord and God, the Redeemer and Savior, the God-Man (*Theanthropos*), the Second Person of the All-Holy Trinity, the One “above every name,” the Son “without mother from the Father and without father from the mother,” of one essence and co-unoriginate with the Father, the revealed God Word of the Father, the Incarnate, Crucified, Resurrected and Ascended – is the Way, the Life of the world, the Light, the truth and the Resurrection. He is not the traditional, customary, historical and religious god, but my Father, my Life, the Life of all mankind. He is the one who renewed life and rejuvenated mortal man. He is the one who created man and who constantly watches over him paternally, as Creator, Provider and All-Wise.

CHRIST AND THE BELIEVERS

The connection of the believer with Christ is not achieved on an intellectual, sentimental or even

psychological level, but rather on the realistic, that is, the existential level. Christ is a stance and a way, a style and a manner of life. The faithful today have distanced themselves from this sense and understanding of life, which is the real relationship with the living God. Christ is no longer at the center of life. The approach to Him is rather guarded. But, through the sacramental life of the Church, our existential experience of Christ will be restored.

With the Mysteries (Sacraments) of our Holy church we can feel the presence of God in our lives – here and now. Through Baptism we become members of the one and undivided body of Christ. We are vested with a garment of light and gladness, and we receive Christ Himself in an eternal relationship. With the mystery of Chrismation the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us. We thus enter into a new and holy community, that of the sons and daughters of God, and we receive new life. This new life is nourished and constantly renewed through the Holy Eucharist. We eat and drink the body and blood of Christ – unworthy and ungrateful though we are – as the source of eternal life, the greatest gift of God to mankind. Our life draws its existence from this divine food and drink.

A significant contribution to the connection of the believer with Christ is made through the study of Sacred Scripture, particularly the New Testament, on a very regular basis and in a prayerful manner. This provides not only information but spiritual transfiguration.

Christ is not simply a good ideologist, but the unique Theologian. He is the only one who can speak of heaven from which He descended. Moreover, Christ is not the successful miracle-worker, but the one who is sacrificed for the life of the world. Christ does not simply change the world; He gives it life in a vital way. Christians are not members of a society with rights and responsibilities, or adherents of a particular political party, gathered, grouped and herded together, but rather free sons and daughters of God, invited to the heavenly banquet, whose foretaste clearly begins from this life, as the Fathers of the Church reassure us.

The entire cycle of dominical holy days is for the souls of the faithful. It is not merely a reminder of ancient events but a reenactment, an experience of those events in the depths of our hearts. The Fathers say that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. He becomes incarnate in us when the pain of asceticism bends and cuts the passions. And He is resurrected when the Christian, freed from sinful passions, experiences spiritual visions, ascents and delights.

Christ offers true and real life to His friends. Without Christ life is dark, joyless, despairing. As the twentieth century draws to a close and as life gallops toward new conquests in space, we have an amazing diminution of distances and instantaneous knowledge of what is taking place in the four corners of the earth. Yet, more than any other time in history, we are restless, insecure and pathologically anxious. Nuclear, atomic and chemical weapons, totalitarian governments of every type, accidents with many victims, ecological catastrophes, and economic and social disasters weave the fabric of modern man's anxiety. At the same time one can also observe a great "spiritual" movement with new philosophical trends, political theories, deviant expressions of art, cultural manifestations and a variety of heresies. Is it possible that this contemporary crises can become an impetus for authentic spiritual regeneration? Is it possible that utopia is to be found in man's attempt to bring heaven down to earth? Could the tragedy of our time be found in the willful ignorance of, or at least in the inability to believe in, the existence of eternal life? Can out of despair and decay come the privilege of hope and the flowering of real joy? We shall not attempt to answer these difficult questions, but to introduce an atmosphere from within which can come divine help, or at least the problematic and the intimation of another way of life that has no end.

CHRIST AS THE GIFT OF LIFE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

I shall share with you here the words of a great contemporary starets of the North, who began his spiritual journey on Mt. Athos. In a recent book he writes that, after the breakout of the First World War, “my youthful dreams were devastated. But at the same time, a new vision of the world and its significance appeared before me. Next to the destruction I gradually formulated my rebirth. I saw that there was no tragedy in God. The tragedy was only in the life of the people, whose vision never extended beyond earthly boundaries. Undoubtedly, not even Christ Himself depicted a tragedy in his passion. Nor were all His sufferings on earth of a tragic nature. And the Christian who has accepted the gift of the love of Christ, even though he recognizes that he is not yet fulfilled, can escape the nightmare of death that destroys everything. The love of Christ, for the entire duration of His stay here on earth, was indeed a fearful tribulation” (Fr. Sophronios).

During His earthly sojourn, Christ did not cease to endure the disbelief of our perverse nature – weeping at the grave of His friend Lazaros, embittered with the Jews who would be killers of prophets, deeply saddened in the garden of Gethsamane, and thus partaking fully in the tragedy human of the human condition. It is this fallen and suffering nature that Christ bends and raises, granting it peace, courage, fearlessness, love and eternal life.

The stubborn refusal of a great part of mankind to accept Christ as the only true God deprives it of the redemptive light of eternal life. For it is our willingness to freely align ourselves with the company of the disciples of Christ that transfers us beyond this present pain and suffering, and introduces us into the graceful intimation and foretaste of the unwaning light of Christ.

Self-condemned in the prison of selfish individualism, strongly secured in the pleasure of our ideas, emotions, preferences and idiosyncrasies, we isolate ourselves from others, toward whom the Gospel wants us to be open, to be available, and to have good intentions. Thus, we are unable to accept our neighbors and, consequently, to love them and to pray for them. For it is with prayer that this tragic isolation is overcome, we become united with others, and we meet Christ Himself.

It is thus, dear friends, that man begins to be called spiritual when he begins conscientiously to be preoccupied with himself; when he is aware of sin within him; when he ceases to scrutinize others; when he repents and begins to pray. For one to see and acknowledge his real condition requires strong willpower, and also powerful divine help. Christ exists for such moments, to hasten to us and to help, significantly and effectively, as long as we continue to truly want His help. For it is often enough that we begin something but are unable to finish. It is in such instances that the danger is readily at hand, due to fear of what we shall encounter. The continuous and difficult struggle that is required for our labors to be fruitful, and the temptation which introduces thoughts of cowardliness, are in themselves impediments of considerable power.

As we come to know ourselves, we also know God. It is thus that our person is revealed to us. By loving God, we gradually become aware of the magnitude of His love. It is thus that God is known and thus that He is revealed – primarily as love. Illumined by divine love, man transcends space and time intrepidly, fearlessly, joyfully, becoming a sojourner who is vitally interested in the purpose of his journey – the heavenly kingdom – without neglecting the present life, but giving it only the importance that it deserves.

As we have said, to this knowledge are guided all the souls who humbly pray, discretely struggle and sincerely repent. Christ finds it impossible to dwell in darkness. And sin is but darkness. Let us not seek to justify our sins, for we thus grieve the Lord and become transgressors of His commandments. Christ will leave us in our darkness if we prefer to remain there, but He will always and in every circumstance anticipate our repentance.

Oftentimes, a so-called “misfortune” of life – illness, bankruptcy, the illness or death of a relative or friend – will lead someone closer to Christ. It also often happens that, as soon as the problem passes, Christ is

forgotten. As you well can understand, this is not the Christian way. Christ is not only for the moment of need. But, if one does not make the resolve, and take the necessary effort, to anchor himself permanently” at the feet of Jesus,” the waves of contemporary influences will likely sweep them away.

In a world of deception, despair, violence and abuse, it is no longer fashionable to hear words of love, nobility and grace. But when founded upon the immovable rock of faith in Christ, we become strong and invincible, receiving as His children the inheritance of His victory.

The time of loquaciousness has passed and the world today anxiously seeks authentic life and example. Many times the most thunderous message is given in silence, as the Fathers of the desert have said. A message without the manner and the style of authentic and pure experience becomes tiresome, without consequence or continuity. This is why many young people are helped only by silence, by the sacred services of worship in the Church, or the measured words of the monks of Mt. Athos. A wise man of recent history has said the following words, which are both significant and need to be carefully observed: “I love Christ, but the Christians I do not love because they do not resemble Christ” (Ghandi). I think he is right. Many times, more than the so-called atheist, it is we Christians who denigrate the name of Christ and provoke with our inconsistencies the blaspheming of His holy name. In the life of the great martyr George it is noted that fellow soldiers, seeing his face shining with joy, asked what it was that made him so happy. He answered that it was the fact that he was a Christian that made him so happy and joyful. They in turn responded by saying that if their own lives were to become so beautiful and joyful, then they too would like to become Christians. This is the best way to preach the Gospel truth. It is the pure life of the martyr. Someone said that to be a Christian means to be joyful. Christians of today are far from this true joy.

In the present fickle world, which you know better than I since you live it on a daily basis, man is easily influenced and sometimes swept away. His conscience has been blunted to the point where his mind and his heart are constantly accepting notions which alter his Orthodox ecclesial principles, his genuine Orthodox beliefs, and even the basic principles of his ethics. Today most Christians are indistinguishable from the rest of society. With all the decadence that is seen and heard, hardly anyone reacts with indignation. And if someone manages to break loose from the evil intrigues of the world, arrives broken and hurting at the doorway of the Church, and finds no doorkeeper there, it is truly tragic. But even more tragic is to find the church's doorkeeper there, but unprepared, tired, superficial, preoccupied with many other things, and struggling to justify a rapid departure. And this while the returning prodigal so of God stands before him. I would like to conclude this parenthetical remark by repeating what was said by a famous physician: “If we had good spiritual guides we would not need psychiatrists and psychoanalysts” (Jung).

As we continue, please give your attention, not to me, but to the word of God, which leaves no one uninformed, without rest, without consolation. I would like to assure you, supported by the assurance provided us by our other brothers, the saints, that there is no wound or disease that Christ cannot heal. No matter what our individual history or condition, let us never be afraid. It does not matter that one was born at a difficult time under adverse conditions; that life was accompanied by poverty, ignorance and hardships; that he was swept away by the easy life. No matter what the problems of life or of character, if there is repentance, Christ comes and wipes everything clean, makes everything new. We see this many times among monks of Mt. Athos, whose repentance guided them, by varied paths, to the “Garden of Panaghia.” After their conversion there is no indication of former evil and sins. They have been visited by the grace of God.

When the mind of the Christian is filled with the memory of Christ, a condition that each monk seeks, this proves in the final analysis to be extraordinarily pleasant and beneficial. Through the remembrance of Christ every event of the day takes on a different character. Whether circumstances are pleasant or unpleasant let us say: “Glory to You, O God!” St. John Chrysostom expired during his exile in Armenia, praying on the floor of a deserted chapel, with the words: “Glory be to God for all things!”

The blessing of a consciousness continuously focused on Christ anoints man and makes him Christ-like. This blessing enables man to see, to touch, to understand and to interpret the world in a different way. The Christian is then able to go through this life with respect, patience and love, and with the spirit of acquisition, exploitation and greed no longer present. To be able to approach the world in this manner is an enormous freedom and a beneficent ease.

Spiritual ease is not necessarily associated with material luxury. Often we meet people “who have everything” but lack the serenity of sweet sleep, the fearlessness of the believer, and the roominess of simplicity. The believer, by giving his first thoughts to Christ, as well as his hopes and his “programs,” and by giving very little if any concern to “what people will say,” will surely gain that serenity with which Christ rewards His true friends. By being more concerned with ourselves and to a lesser degree with others, we can be easily spared many anxieties. This, of course, does not mean that we will be careless about others or that we will ignore the possibility of scandalizing them with our words and actions, but rather that our love for them, while remaining undiminished, will not degenerate to pathological anxiety.

Our love will not depend on their love. The existence of the love of others must not necessarily be taken for granted in order for our love to be manifested. We are called, therefore, to revolt for a spiritual independence that will be subjugated to the Orthodox tradition and will naturally have nothing in common with any form of isolation. Perhaps in this way we may not be popular with the many, but then again this is hardly our goal. If we should desire to have the praises of all, this can only mean that we do not really desire the praise of Christ. In order to have all the people on our side, we must necessarily become sophists, diplomats, flatterers and politicians, compromising, retreating and behaving obsequiously, in an undignified manner that is not consistent with our Christian identity.

Let not these remarks be taken as a prideful stance, because Christ Himself in the praetorium, when unjustly slapped by the servant, asked for an explanation, while on another occasion He suggested that when slapped we should offer the other cheek as well. Also, on Golgotha the garments of Christ were divided among the soldiers, not so that the executioners may have a talisman, nor even for the prophecies to be fulfilled, but rather to indicate for us a manner and way of life. Christ had only one valuable garment, woven and seamless from top to bottom. With this single garment Christ is teaching us the virtue of simplicity and frugality, sobriety and dignity.

Once a monk was wearing a worn cassock full of holes and a very discreet ascetic who saw him remarked: “Through the holes of your cassock I see your great pride!” There is great significance in the way we behave. The spiritual man is not obvious at the “good times” of regular church attendance and of required acts of charity, but during the whole day and night. Our spirituality is judged at each and every moment. Our mirror is Christ and His word. Imitation of Christ means to have a profound delight in His Gospel, to be buried with Him and to be raised with Him, adorned with the evangelic virtues. Let us not confuse humility with wretchedness.

CHRIST AND OUR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Our Christian identity wants us to be strong, courageous, noble and direct. If we are pleasing to Christ it should not matter to us if the world considers us unworthy of its favor and appreciation. But it is virtually certain that if we are truly pleasing to Christ there will be no serious person who will not appreciate our Christian attitude.

Of course, it is not easy to reach this degree of freedom. There is need for a responsible struggle, for fervent prayer, for an active sacramental life, and for corresponding spiritual community. I believe you will agree that it is easy to be influenced by the nature of our conversations and occasional encounters with other

people. It is natural in a world of lies and deceptions for some to be easily influenced. It is, therefore, most useful to cultivate beneficial friendships which will support us in times of suffering, mourning and affliction. The best company, however, is our friendship with Christ, especially in times of prayer. He is indeed the friend who never betrays, but who is always betrayed.

st. John Chrysostom proceeds even deeper and remarks in his homily: "From indolence comes evil and from effort comes virtue. Virtuous people become better even when they find themselves living among those who would impede their right living and seek to draw them to their side. Christ has permitted evil persons to exist so that the good may become more virtuous." The benefit, of course, is not derived from the evil, but from the courage and the effort to resist it. Let nothing, therefore, get in the way of spiritual progress. Let even the negative things become occasions for contrition and repentance.

Many are those, satiated with emptiness of the world, who seek to find a way out of the impasse. Are they afraid of, or do they simply ignore, Christianity? They fear the struggle of which the Gospel speaks, and ignore the redemptive essence of Christianity, which cannot be known and experienced painlessly. The fatigue and the indolence of contemporary men, their ignorance and hurry, leads them, unfortunately, to the prescriptions of other religions, often enough inspired by demons, or to the easy solutions of clever heretics animated by the deception and dangerous elements of error. My beloved brothers, the Masonic lodges, the temples of eastern religions, the auditoriums where "charismatic" Protestants preach, have increased in our country. The land of heroes and saints, the land enriched by the martyrs, our beloved Greece, has been reduced to a dangerous inn, offering hospitality to all manner of deceivers and unworthy characters, in the name of some vague notion of freedom, which undermines the foundations of the Nation, the Church, our tradition and our history. As we approach the year 2000, we find Greece unprepared to face the onslaught of Europe. Christ remains unknown even to the Christians. There is an urgent need to re-evangelize the Christians. There is need for intense effort and struggle.

The pain of the struggle is an indispensable element. Pain exists in our life to soften our stone hearts, to humble our pride, to make us prudent, to heal our souls. When we do not offer pain to ourselves, in the form of asceticism, or when we do not endure it, as with an illness or some other problem, Christ comes discreetly to give us as much as we can bear and always for our spiritual edification.

If we only knew the beneficial power of pain, all the tribulations of life would be accepted as tests of healing for our soul. No temporal success can bring about real rest. Most people today do not have the necessary spiritual courage to undertake the journey upon the road of asceticism, required by the Gospel. This courage can only be given by Christ. Many times it is necessary to despair over the world in order to overcome it, and to receive the hope of our salvation from above. Staretz Leo of the Optina Monastery used to say: "Temptations are not stronger than the gifts of God. With the power of the Name of our Savior Jesus, who empowers us, everything is possible. The following truth is always applicable to the believer: If you have an ailing faith, even a speck of dust seems like a mountain. But if you have a strong and healthy faith you can lift up and remove whole mountains of temptations." The blessed staretz is absolutely right.

I recall a recent visit to our *kalyvi* on Mt. Athos by a professor of theology, who discussed with great facility such topics as the revision of the Gospel and the superfluousness of asceticism. He argued that, since the life of contemporary Christians in large cities is so suffocated by loneliness, anxiety, noise, pollution, fatigue, these in a sense can substitute for asceticism, and therefore fasting, lengthy services of worship, ascetic prostrations and vigils are no longer needed at all. I tried to follow his thoughts, to pay attention. I wanted to understand him. But I observed a certain impertinence and conceit in his words, not toward me, but toward the divine commandments of Sacred Tradition, which discreetly and constantly speak about the necessity of ascetic struggle in Christian life. This asceticism, of course, is to be practiced to the degree which is possible for each person living under various conditions and circumstances, and according to the blessing and guidance

given by the spiritual father.

As I turned my head toward the window in the room where we were talking, I could see the cell where the life of st. Arsenios the Cappadocian had been written. His biographer, among other things, has written the following: "Fr. Arsenios proclaimed Orthodoxy appropriately with his Orthodox way of life. He literally melted down his body in ascetic endeavors because of the warmth of his love for God, and he transformed souls by the divine grace which emanated from him. He had a strong faith and he healed many, both believers and unbelievers. He had few words, many miracles. He experienced much and hid much. Inside his apparently rough shell, he kept his sweet spiritual fruit. He was a very austere Father for himself, but very paternally loving to his children. He did not strike them with the law to discipline them, but rather with the love of honor (*philotimo*), with the meaning of the law. As a liturgical celebrant of the Most High, he did not touch the earth, and as a concelebrant he was truly resplendent upon the earth."

If we truly humble ourselves before Christ, we shall indeed be liberated from the bondage of the passions. We must descend before we can ascend. This fall into the abyss is an indication of our trust in God. In the Person of Christ, God Himself comes to lift us and to raise us up to heaven. Disillusioned by the powerful of this world, we choose rather to have Christ as the Lord of our life, and life receives a new propensity and duration. The more painful this spiritual regeneration and the journey which leads to it, the greater the grace and the blessings it provides. Without suffering no one can attain a life in Christ. When the tribulations cease and the grace of peace arrives, we shall surely be grateful and consider blessed those days of grief, which now are seen as the most fruitful.

CHRIST AND THE EVIL IN THE WORLD

A considerable number of people justify their unbelief or their disbelief by pointing to the presence of extensive and senseless suffering in the world. They consider it proof of the absence of God or, at least, the absence of His compassion. The deaths of countless children from famine or illness, innocent victims, automobile accidents with entire families killed, and so many other similar events of suffering, leave people in doubt. Of course, a satisfactory answer can only be given to someone who is sincerely and appropriately predisposed. God who respects with absolute integrity the historical life of mankind does not interfere arbitrarily to overthrow it. God is helpless, we may say, to save those who under any circumstance simply do not want to be saved, and who knowingly and consciously have utterly rejected God. God points to the ways of perdition and to salvation, and allows man to choose freely. God's involvement in the evil of the world is simply non-existent. God is creator only of the good. The results of the rebellion, the impudence, the insults and the pride of man bring about this intensification of evil, which victimizes even the innocent. Also, it often happens, as is well known, that in an externally fearful and inexplicable, sudden and violent accident, there is hidden the providence of God, even for those who are unjustly lost, as well as for those around them. Usually the concessions for such great suffering are given for general repentance. Divine providence never ceases to be active above and beyond all of these accidents. For the believer all of these things are clear and easy to comprehend.

Jesus Christ permits and allows pain to come for a time into the life of man, and it is He who removes it and redeems man. The duration of pain corresponds to the degree of repentance. Christ Himself suffered; He feels compassion for us, and He understands us. Christ is the One sent to us to redeem us from pain and suffering. The great and sacred symbol of the ineffable pain of Christ is the Cross. The wood of dishonor, the painful crucifixion became a source of healing and redemption, the central aspect of the Gospel, the point of foolishness for the Greeks, the point of scandal for the Jews. Christ came to give light and life and the people preferred darkness. And now they attempt to justify their position by insulting the Church and the clergy, and

by rationalizing their moral and spiritual indolence. Like the Gerasenes of the Gospel story, such people pretend to be of noble disposition and they ask Christ to bypass them and to leave them alone in their deadness. Even worse are those who, with the deceptive mask of art, seek to present Christ the savior as having shameful carnal desires, at the time of His sacrifice for the life of the whole world (N. Kazantzakis). It is an awful shame, irreverence and sin.

All those who attempt to explain everything with finite logic make a serious mistake, distort the image of God they bear within themselves, and are troubled by the heavy anxiety of rationalism, which brings about a wearisome boredom. The same fate is suffered by the captives of unbridled imagination, who are even considered successful writers. Christ, who united divinity and humanity, the God-Man, is the Light (Jn. 7.17), the Truth (Jn. 14.16), Love (Jn. 8.31) and Wisdom (1 Cor. 2.7). He answers our questions and provides solutions. Christ who is above and beyond reason is rejected by those who are irrational. They choose to leave Him upon the Cross and to continue cursing Him with works of "art."

It is a terribly tragic thing that is happening in the world. The world prefers little pleasures and ephemeral honors instead of eternal glory. One wonders: what makes us so cowardly and foolish – to refuse an abundant eternity for a poor temporality? What makes us so faint-hearted that we ignore our divine calling? Only steadfast faith in Christ can make us victorious over the worldly spirit. It was Christ who first overcame the world, and His victory is our victory, but this should never give us cause for pride. The greatest victory is to overcome sin. Such victors are not at all few, in the Church of the past and of the present. The labors of battle for this victory become insignificant when one contemplates that he joins and is numbered among those who have entered the eternal kingdom of God.

CHRIST AND HIS VISITATIONS INTO OUR LIFE

Christ returns frequently into our life if we ask Him and permit Him. And He comes primarily as a physician, to heal. His visitations are usually personal and of a mystical nature. Christ never does miraculous deeds for the purpose of impression and enthusiasm, in a spectacular and public manner. Most of the miracles of the Lord were done among a limited number of spectators, and at certain times only with the sick person. Christ has no desire to convince anyone in an oppressive manner, to create commotion and disturbance, or to win delirious followers. The miracles are signs of the love of God for suffering man, and they are done within the sacred realm of faith, of silence and of quietude. So many miracles are done daily in life, and people see them but do not "see" them, they hear them and do not "hear" them, because they do not possess the eyes and the ears of faith. Others mock, doubt, ridicule, speak with irony and boastfulness, reaping nothing but the fruits of their doubt. They continue to exile Christ from their life. During His entire life on earth Christ was persecuted, and He is used to it. True Christians also were and are persecuted, not understood; for they are children of Christ and not born of this world, and this is the reason why the world hates them.

There is a psychological interpretation of the commotion caused by that crowd of people bent on insulting the Church and its founder. They strike out so as not to be struck and censured themselves. But the voice of conscience cannot be lulled so easily. And even if there are mistaken representatives of the Church, this does not mean that I am permitted to abandon the Church and deny Christ. The insidious powers of darkness and the heretics are working very systematically toward this goal – increasing scandals and creating new ones. Thoughtless people then can follow them readily.

Dostoevsky, the friend of truth and great author, writes: "There is nothing more good, more profound, more sympathetic, more rational, more noble and more perfect than Christ...If someone could prove to us that Christ is far from the truth and the truth far from Christ, I would definitely prefer to remain with Christ rather than the truth." The friend of Dostoevsky and great theologian of our century, Fr. Justin Popovic, continues in

the same vein: “Without our sweetest Lord Jesus not only this brief span of earthly life is terrible and without meaning, but even more so the infinite and endless immortality. Where death exists there can be no real joy. In other words, where Christ is not present, there can be no real joy. In the delirium of sin, in the inebriation of sinful pleasures, people proclaim many things to be the joy of life, all of which are insignificant and foolish. And everything that separates man from Christ is truly insignificant and foolish, everything that does not bring about for him the holiness and immortality of Christ.”

The blessed elder Avvakum of the Great Lavra Monastery used to say: “I have emptied myself for Christ! I have nothing but Christ! Nothing but Christ and joy. Poverty is beautiful because it makes one light and buoyant. One must be empty for Christ to enter. When Christ is with me joy is within me...”

The learned monk Gerasimos of St. Paul Monastery wrote the following: “I cannot find appropriate words to thank our Lord, who rescued me from the vanity of this world, even though I have yet to respond accordingly to the great beneficence of the All-holy God.”

The daily thought of the Elder Athanasios of the Iveron Monastery was this: “What gift can man offer to Christ in return for His love toward us? And more generally, how can the entire universe thank the Son of Mary? There is nothing worthy of Christ, unless we could have another Christ similar in everything to the One born in Bethlehem, whom the whole creation could offer to him.”

St. Silouan of Mt. Athos also writes: “On the first year of my life in the monastery my soul came to know the Lord in the Holy Spirit. The Lord loves us so dearly! I learned this from the Holy Spirit, given to me by the Lord in His great mercy. I have grown old and am preparing for death, and for the sake of the people I am writing this truth. The Spirit of Christ, given to me by the Lord, desires that all be saved, that all may come to know God. The Lord gave paradise to the thief, and He will give paradise to every sinner. I was worse than a wretched dog because of my sins, but I began to ask forgiveness from God. And He gave me not only forgiveness but also the Holy Spirit, and with the Holy Spirit I came to know God Himself. Do you see what manner of love God has for us? And who could possibly describe such compassion? O my beloved brother, I fall down upon my knees and beg you: believe in God!”

The poor writer of these lines is simply transmitting the spiritual wealth and Orthodox beauty of Mt. Athos to a people thirsting for it, in spite of their present vicissitudes. He is carrying out willingly the obligation of porter and repeats once again: Without an Orthodox anthropology, without true interpersonal relationships, we cannot have an Orthodox theology, we can never be christocentric, formed in the likeness of Christ, and speaking of Christ as the Life of the world.

These introductory thoughts are concluded with hope for our essential re-connection with Christ, the life of the world. In place of an epilogue please accept the prayer which is read everyday at the First Hour:

O Christ, the true light,
Which enlightens and sanctifies every person
Coming into the world,
Shine upon us the light of Your face,
That we may see in this light the unapproachable light.
And guide us in our life
To observe Your commandments,
Through the intercessions of Your immaculate Mother
And of all Your Saints. Amen.

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