

Blessed Memory
Elder Paisios of Mount Athos
Words

Volume I
With Sorrow and Love
On Modern Man
Translated from Greek

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Biographical Note

Blessed Elder Paisios (born Arsenios Eznepidis) was born on July 25, 1924 (Old Style), in the village of Farasy, in Cappadocia (Asia Minor). During the Population Exchange¹, he was brought to Greece as an infant. His parents settled in the small town of Konitsa, where the future Elder grew up and received his primary education.

From his earliest childhood, Arsenius lived as an ascetic. He delighted in reading the Lives of the Saints, striving with great zeal, extraordinary fervor, and remarkable uncompromising dedication to emulate their feats. He devoted himself to ceaseless prayer and, at the same time, sought to cultivate love and humility within himself. As a young man, the future Elder learned the carpentry trade, desiring to be like Christ in this as well. When the Civil War broke out in Greece (1944–1948),² Arsenios Eznepidis was drafted into the active army, received training as a radio operator, and served his homeland for three and a half years. In the army, he continued his ascetic life, distinguishing himself through courage, self-sacrifice, high Christian morality, and diverse talents.

Having fulfilled his duty to his homeland, Arsenius embarked on the path of monastic life—the one he had aspired to since childhood. Even as a layperson, he had repeatedly experienced divine encounters in his life in Christ. But when he became a monk, the special favor bestowed upon him by the Saints, the Most Holy Theotokos, and the Lord Himself became all the more evident. Father Paisius labored on the Holy Mountain of Athos, at the Stomion Monastery in Konitsa, and on the Holy Mountain of Sinai. He lived his life in obscurity, entrusting himself entirely to God, Who, in turn, revealed and gave him to the people. Many, many people came to the Elder and found guidance and comfort, healing and peace for their tormented souls. Divine love overflowed from the Elder’s sanctified soul, and the radiance of Divine Grace emanated from his monastic countenance. Day after day, without tiring, Elder Paisios of Mount Athos took away people’s pain, spreading divine consolation all around him.

On July 12, 1994,³ after truly martyr-like sufferings—which, in the Elder’s own words, brought him greater benefit than the ascetic deeds of his entire previous life—he fell asleep in the Lord. The place of his blessed passing was the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, located near the village of Suroti, not far from Thessaloniki. There, to the left of the altar in the monastery church dedicated to St. Arsenius of Cappadocia, Elder Paisios of Svyatogor was buried.

May his blessing and prayers be with us.

Amen.

Preface

¹ The population exchange of 1924, during which Greeks from Asia Minor resettled in Greece, and Turks living in Greece resettled in Turkey. – *Translator’s note*

² The Greek Civil War of 1944–1948 between the government army and communist rebels. – *Translator’s note*.

³ According to the civil calendar. – *Translator’s note*.

After his passing in July 1994, Blessed Elder Paisios of Mount Athos left the world a spiritual legacy—his teachings. A simple monk who had received only a basic education in elementary school, yet generously endowed with God-given wisdom, he truly exhausted himself for the sake of his neighbor. His teaching was not preaching or catechism. He lived by the Gospel himself, and his teachings sprang from his own life, the defining characteristic of which was love. He “educated himself” according to the Gospel and therefore taught us first and foremost by his very demeanor, and only afterward through his Gospel-inspired love and God-enlightened words. When meeting with people—who were all so different from one another—the Elder did not merely listen patiently to what they confided in him. With his characteristic holy simplicity and discernment, he penetrated to the very depths of their hearts. The Elder made their pain, their anxiety, and their difficulties his own. And then, in an unobtrusive way, a miracle would take place—a transformation of the person. “God,” the Elder would say, “works a miracle when we wholeheartedly share in another person’s pain.”

It was a joy for us to see the keen interest with which the first books devoted to the life and teachings of Elder Paisios were read. Many people spoke with amazement about how, in these books, they found answers to the questions that had been tormenting them, solutions to their problems, and comfort in their sorrows. We were especially delighted to see how people who were distant from the Church, after reading about the Elder, became genuinely concerned and changed their lives. In this regard, we were often reminded of the words of a church hymn writer dedicated to St. Basil the Great: “He lives and has passed away in the Lord; he lives with us, as he speaks to us from the books.”⁴ At the same time, responding to the persistent requests of our brothers in Christ, we felt the need to share with them the words of the Elder—words that we had reverently recorded from the very beginning of our monastery’s life and which had brought us no small benefit.

By the providence of the Good God, our monastic community owes its very existence to Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. It was Father Paisios who received the bishop’s blessing to found the monastery, and it was he who made every effort to find a site for its construction. In 1966, after meeting Father Paissius in the hospital following his lung surgery, we came to his aid. From that time on, grateful to us with all his noble and compassionate heart, he regarded himself as our elder brother and said that his duty was to “find a home for his sisters”—meaning the founding of the convent.

In October 1967, when the first sisters settled in the monastery, Elder Paisios came to visit us and stayed in the community for two months, helping to establish the monastery’s communal life. Over the following years, while living on the Holy Mountain of Athos, the Elder usually visited us twice a year, offering his God-inspired counsel and setting a personal example to foster the spiritual growth of both the monastery as a whole and each sister individually. In addition, from Mount Athos—which he called “spiritual America”—the Elder supported us through his prayers and letters, which he sent either personally to individual sisters or to the entire community.

Thus, in 1967, Elder Paisios began laying the foundations for the communal structure of our monastery. He delved into every aspect of monastic life—from the simplest, everyday matters to the most serious and spiritual ones. He was 43 years old at the time, but he was already a mature man “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Even then, Father Paisius possessed the wisdom of an elder. From the very first days of the monastery’s existence, we regarded his words as “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68) and realized that they are the foundational and immutable truths upon which our daily lives must be built. Therefore, fearing that we might forget what the Elder said, we hurried to write down his words so that in the future we could use them as a reliable canon for our monastic life.

⁴ From the verses preceding the Synaxarion for the 6th ode of the canon at Matins, January 1. – *Translator’s note.*

When the first notebooks were filled with our notes, we very timidly submitted them to the Elder for his review. Why timidly? Because the Elder always emphasized the importance of putting teachings into practice, and because he did not want us to merely accumulate “raw material” or “ammunition” without applying what we had heard in practice. He demanded that we engage in spiritual work on what we had heard or read. The Elder said that otherwise, a multitude of notes and jottings would be of no use to us, just as a multitude of weapons and ammunition is of no use to a state whose army is untrained and unable to use that arsenal.

Yielding to our persistent requests, Father Paisius agreed to review our notes and, if necessary (if we had misunderstood any of his words), to make corrections and additions.

The Elder provided spiritual guidance to our monastery for twenty-eight years. Throughout all those years, we recorded his words: during gatherings of the entire monastic community, as well as during meetings of the monastery’s Spiritual Council, at which he was present. At first, the sisters took notes by hand, and in recent years—using a tape recorder. In addition, each nun would write down the content of her personal conversations with the Elder immediately afterward. Upon learning of all this, Father Paisius even scolded us a little: “Why are you writing all this down? Are you saving it for a rainy day or something? The point is for you to work and put what you’ve heard into practice. And who knows what you’ve written down there! Come on, bring it to me so I can take a look!” But when we showed him one of the sisters’ notes, his expression changed; he calmed down and exclaimed with satisfaction: “That’s the way to do it, my brother! This sister is just like a tape recorder! She wrote down exactly what I said!..”

Our conversations usually took the form of his answers to our questions. The main topic of our private conversations with the sisters was always personal spiritual struggle. The topics for the meetings of the Spiritual Council were prepared in advance. We would present to Father Paissius the questions that had accumulated during his absence—administrative and everyday matters, spiritual and social issues, church and national concerns, as well as many, many others. Finally, during general monastic gatherings, in addition to the questions asked by the sisters, anything could serve as a prompt for the Elder to begin speaking on a particular topic: the roar of a passing airplane, the noise of an engine, a bird’s song, the creak of a door, a word casually uttered by someone—the Elder knew how to draw spiritual benefit from everything. Any little thing or trifle could become a reason to discuss a serious topic. He would say: “I use everything to connect with the heavenly realm, with Heaven. Do you know what spiritual gain and spiritual experience a person acquires if he works spiritually on everything [that comes his way]?”

“The Good God cares first and foremost for our future life and [only] then for our earthly life,” the Elder would say. He himself, in his interactions with people, had the very same goal: by helping a person discern God’s will and unite with his Creator, Father Paisius prepared him for the Kingdom of Heaven. Citing examples from nature, science, art, or everyday human life, the Elder did not consider them in the abstract, detached from spiritual reality. He sought to awaken his listeners’ souls from their slumber; through parables, he helped them grasp the deepest meaning of life and “cling to God.”

Elder Paissios’s speech was characterized by simplicity, wit, and a lively, genuine sense of humor. He could express great truths simply and joyfully. “I warm you like the sun,” the Elder would say (), meaning that just as the sun’s warmth is necessary for flower buds to bloom, so too does a gentle pastoral touch on the soul help it to open up and be healed of its affliction. This was truly a God-inspired ministry. It often prepared the soil of the soul to receive the stern word of the Gospel truth, which brooks no compromise. Therefore, even the strictest words of Elder Paisios were received by the heart as life-giving dew. And subsequently, the hearts cultivated by the Elder’s teaching bore spiritual fruit.

The notes accumulated over twenty-eight years, as well as the Elder's letters from the Holy Mountain, were organized after his passing. We have sorted the material by topic for easier application in our daily lives. At the same time, we organized the accounts we had recorded of the Elder's life, as well as the miraculous events he had experienced. Father Paisios shared all this with us not for the sake of self-praise. Through his stories about himself, he truly offered us spiritual alms. "I'm telling you all this," he would say, "not so that you'll pin medals on me and call me a hero. When I talk about the war, the army, or anything else—even something funny—I don't say it just for the sake of it. I want to draw your attention to something; I want you to grasp the essence. I never say anything empty or useless." In this way, the Elder became a "spiritual donor." He gave his own blood to strengthen our weak, anemic faith. Being truly royal—a son of God—the Elder sought to "stir" our love of God and cultivate spiritual nobility within us, so that we might "become one with God." "I pour out of myself, I pour out," he would say, "but what is the result? After all, in order to help you, I am forced to share even very personal things. I am engaging in the greatest waste—squandering my spiritual reserves! Is this at least of any benefit? I mean to say that I lose every event I recount in order to help you—whether I am speaking of a manifestation of God's Providence in my life or some miraculous occurrence. Is there at least some benefit to this?"

Given that the years we are currently experiencing are very difficult, we have decided to divide all the material at our disposal into separate volumes by topic and begin publication with those topics that are of broader interest. Many of these questions are simple and mundane; however, if we do not approach them as the Gospel requires, the consequences will be sad—if not disastrous—for both this life and the life to come. In selecting material by topic and preparing it for publication, we were inspired by Elder Paisios's lifelong desire to write a book "concerning everyone: laypeople, monks, and clergy." The Elder did not have time to carry out his plan, since he devoted all his time to the people who came to his cell. Despite his waning physical strength, he gave himself entirely to others. In one of his letters from the Holy Mountain, we read: "And here is my news: there are many people, while I myself am tired and exhausted. There are more and more people with their problems, and as for my physical strength—well, it's better to pray that it does not diminish. I have to take care of myself a little—after all, I never have the right to say 'I can't.' Whether you can or can't—you have to be able to."

As mentioned above, Elder Paisios usually answered our questions. Therefore, the dialogue format was preserved when compiling this book. The Elder's answers are enriched with relevant excerpts from his letters to the monastery and to various individuals, from books he wrote himself, and from the personal notes of the sisters and others, which were made during or after conversations with him. These additions to the Elder's answers to a given question are intended to explore the topics as fully as possible. Every effort was also made to ensure that the liveliness and joyful tone of the Elder's spoken words were not lost when transcribed onto paper. We have not omitted certain repetitions with which the Elder sought to emphasize a particular point. We have also preserved some of the interjections and exclamations that frequently appear in the Elder's spoken words and which likewise express his great love for God and humanity.

Elder Paisios often speaks about the monastic life. The reason for this is not only that his address was directed at nuns. The Elder wanted every person—whether a monk or a layperson—to seek this "monastic joy," which springs from a person's complete self-surrender to God. In this way, a person is freed from the sense of insecurity born of faith in one's own "self" and, even in this life, tastes the joy of paradise.

The book **With Pain and Love: On Modern Man** is the first volume in the series **The Words** of Elder Paisios of Mount Athos. For the reader's convenience, the volume is divided into four thematic sections. Each section, in turn, is divided into chapters, and each chapter is divided into smaller sections

with corresponding subheadings. Footnotes are provided primarily for readers unfamiliar with ecclesiastical and patristic terminology.

As mentioned above, the Elder frequently drew on examples from science, art, and other specialized fields. To avoid errors in specialized terms and expressions, we consulted with our brothers in Christ who are experts in various fields. We sincerely thank them for the corrections they made, motivated by their special reverence for Elder Paisios. We would also be grateful to our readers for any advice or feedback.

We earnestly pray that the “spiritual expenditure” to which Elder Paisios devoted himself out of his great love may benefit the simple and kind-hearted souls of our readers, and that they may be enriched with divine wisdom, “hidden from the wise and intelligent, but revealed to little children” (see Luke 10:21). Amen.

June 14, 1998

Week of All Saints

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

- Tell us something, Geronda.
- What shall I tell you?
- Whatever your heart tells you.
- My heart tells me this: “Take a knife, cut me into pieces, give them to the people, and then die.”

Introduction (from the words of the Elder)

“The years we are living through are very difficult and very dangerous, but in the end, Christ will triumph.”

— In our age, most people are educated in a worldly manner and are rushing forward at a high worldly speed. But since they have no fear of God (and “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”⁵), they have no brakes either, and at such speed, without brakes, they end their race in the abyss. People are very preoccupied with their difficulties and, for the most part, have been driven to the point of madness. They have lost their bearings and are gradually reaching a point where they can no longer control themselves. If even those who come to the Holy Mountain are so deeply distressed and confused, so anxious, then imagine what the others are like—those who are far from God and from the Church!

In every country you see a storm, great turmoil! The wretched world—may God stretch out His hand!—is boiling like a pressure cooker. And look at what those in power are doing! They’re stirring and stirring, throwing everything into the pressure cooker, and it’s already whistling! The valve is about to blow! I said to a man in a high position: “Why don’t you pay attention to certain things? Where will this lead?” He replied to me: “Father, at first the evil was like a light snowfall, but now it has turned into an avalanche. Only a miracle can help.” But some, wanting to remedy the situation, are making the avalanche of evil even greater. Instead of taking specific measures regarding education and upbringing to correct the situation, they make things even worse. They don’t care about how to stop the avalanche; instead, they make it bigger. After all, at first there’s just a little snowball. If it rolls down a slope, it

⁵ Ps. 110:10.

becomes a snowball. As the snowball gathers snow, trees, rocks, and debris, it grows larger and larger—and turns into an avalanche. So it is with evil: little by little, it has already become a snow avalanche and is rolling downhill. Now, to destroy this avalanche of evil, a bomb blast is required.

— Geronda, are you worried about all this?

— Ah, and why else did my beard turn gray before its time? I suffer twice over. First, when I foresee something and cry out for us to warn against the evil that is brewing. And then, when no one pays attention (not necessarily out of disregard), the evil strikes, and they begin to ask me for help. I understand now how the prophets suffered. The prophets were the greatest martyrs! They were greater martyrs than all other martyrs, even though not all of them died a martyr's death. Because martyrs suffered for only a short time, whereas the prophets saw evil being committed and suffered constantly. They kept shouting and shouting, while the rest went about their own business. And when God's wrath came because of those others, the prophets suffered along with them. But back then, at least, people's minds were limited, and because of that, they abandoned God and worshiped idols. Today, when people consciously abandon God—the greatest idolatry is taking place.

We have not yet realized that the devil has rushed to destroy God's creations. He has staged a "punkinia,"⁶ to destroy the world; he has gone into a rage because a wholesome restlessness has begun to appear in the world. He is enraged because he knows that he has little time left to act.⁷ Right now, he's acting like a criminal who, when surrounded, says, "There's no escape for me—they'll catch me!"—and smashes everything left and right. Or like during a war, when ammunition runs out, soldiers draw their bayonets or sabers, rush into battle, and—come what may! "We're going to die anyway," they say. "Let's kill as many enemies as we can!" The world is on fire! Do you understand this? A great temptation has come upon us. The devil has kindled such a fire that even if all the firefighters gathered together, they wouldn't be able to put it out. A spiritual fire—nothing remains unscathed. All that remains is to pray that God will spare us. After all, when a great fire breaks out and the firefighters can no longer do anything, people will be forced to turn to God and ask Him for a heavy rain to extinguish the flames. So it is with this spiritual fire that the devil has fanned—all we need is prayer for God's help.

The whole world is heading toward one thing: total collapse. You can't say, "There's a slightly broken window or something else in the house; let me fix it." The whole house has fallen apart. The world has become a ruined village. The situation has already spiraled out of control. It's entirely up to God now—what He will do. Now it is up to God to work: sometimes with a screwdriver, sometimes with a carrot, sometimes with a stick, to set all this right. The world has a sore; it has turned yellow and is ready to burst, but it is not yet ripe. Evil is ripening, just as it did back then in Jericho,⁸ which needed to be cleansed, subjected to "disinfection."

How people suffer

People's suffering knows no end. Widespread decay—entire families, adults, children... Every day my heart bleeds. Most homes are filled with turmoil, anxiety, and distress. Only in those homes where people live according to God's will are people at peace. In the others, however—there are divorces here, bankruptcies there, illnesses, accidents; some are on psychotropic drugs, others on narcotics... They are miserable: some more, some less, but everyone has pain. Especially now—no jobs, debts, suffering; banks are squeezing every last penny out of people, evictions from homes—so much torment! And this isn't just a matter of a day or two! Even if there are one or two resilient children in such a family, they,

⁶ Pankinia (Greek: πάντες ἀπὸ κοινου—all together, in common)—a work in which all the inhabitants of a monastery or skete participate. (Hereafter, notes by the Greek editors are given without references.)

⁷ See Rev. 12:12.

⁸ See Josh. 6:23.

too, fall ill because of these conditions. If people in many such families could find, even for just one day, the carefree detachment of monks, that would be the very best Easter for them.

What a tragedy the world is! If you suffer and worry about others rather than yourself, the whole world becomes visible, as if on an X-ray illuminated by spiritual rays. When I pray, I often see little children—unfortunate little ones—passing before me in sorrow and asking God for help. Their families are facing problems and difficulties, so their mothers have them pray—to ask God for help. They “tune in to the same frequency,” and that is how we communicate with them.

Security and Vulnerability

The world today is protected by all sorts of “safety measures,” but, being far from Christ, it is completely defenseless. In no other era has there been such defenselessness as that experienced by people today. And since human safeguards do not help them, they flee to the ship of the Church to feel spiritually secure, for they see that the worldly ship has sunk. However, if they see that water is seeping into the ship of the Church as well, and that those on board are preoccupied with the spirit of this world while the Holy Spirit is absent, then people will lose all hope, for after that they will have nothing left to cling to.

The world is suffering, perishing, and, unfortunately, all people are forced to live amid this worldly torment. Most feel a profound sense of abandonment and indifference—especially now—and they feel it everywhere. People have nothing to hold on to. Just as the proverb says: “A drowning man clutches at his own hair”—that is, a drowning man searches for something to grab onto, as if to save himself. A ship is sinking, and someone, wanting to save himself, tries to grab hold of the mast. He doesn’t think about the fact that the mast will go down with the ship. He clings to the mast and sinks even faster. What I mean is that people are looking for something to lean on, something to hold onto. And if they lack the faith to lean on it—if they haven’t trusted God enough to rely on Him completely—then they cannot escape suffering. Trusting in God is a great thing.

The years we are living through are very difficult and very dangerous, but in the end, Christ will triumph. You’ll see how much respect people will have for the Church—as long as we [Christians] live rightly. People will realize that nothing good will come of it otherwise. Politicians have already realized that if anyone can help people in a world that has turned into a madhouse, it is the people of the Church. Yes, don’t be surprised! Our political leaders have acknowledged their powerlessness and thrown up their hands. Once, several politicians came to my cell and said, “Monks must go out into the world to preach and enlighten people. There’s no other way.” What difficult years these have been!... If only you knew how far we’ve come and what lies ahead of us!...

People’s Searches

— One winter, eighty people came to my kaliva—[all kinds of people] from students to theater directors. With tears in their eyes, these people asked me if they could... study theology! The state of the world is insane. Everyone is searching for something, but most don’t know what. Some seek the truth in entertainment centers; others want to find Christ by listening to crazy music...

— It’s true, Geronda, what a search people are on! So many people come to you, and they stand for hours waiting in line to meet you.

— That, too, is one of the signs of the times—people seek help [even] from my frailty. I see nothing good in myself and wonder: what do people find in me that makes them rush to me so headlong? After all, who am I really? A pumpkin with a watermelon rind. And these days, people even eat pumpkins instead of watermelons because their rinds look like watermelon rinds. People travel to see me from the other side of the world and don’t even know for sure whether they’ll find me there or not. And how do

I feel? On the one hand, I loathe myself, but on the other—it hurts for these people, too. What have we come to! How low the world has fallen! The prophet Isaiah says that a time will come when people will find a single person wearing a robe and say to him, “Come, let’s make you king.”⁹ May God have mercy on us!

Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia read Psalm 28 about those who face danger at sea. And as I read it, I say, “My God, even dry land—that is, the whole world—has become more dangerous than the sea! People are spiritually drowning in the world.” When people who have lost faith in life come to me, I read Psalms 93 and 36 to them: “*God is the Lord of vengeance, God is the Lord of vengeance; He is not unjust. Arise, O Judge of the earth; render retribution to the proud... “Your people, O Lord, have been humbled, and Your inheritance has been afflicted... But the Lord has been my refuge, and my God the help of my hope...*” These sacred words greatly comfort the soul. If the unfortunate would cast even a single glance toward Heaven, much would change. But today, people do not think about God. Therefore, spiritual help finds no response within people themselves; you cannot reach a mutual understanding with them.

I constantly ask God to raise up upright people, Christians, in the world so that they may help others. May God grant such Christians many years of life. Let us pray that God will enlighten the world and that new people will emerge—not like those who are destroying the world today, but new, pure ones. Let us ask God for new Maccabees to emerge.¹⁰ Young people may lack experience, but they are free from deceit and cunning.

Let us ask God to enlighten not only those who belong to the Church, but also those in power, so that they may have the fear of God and be able to speak some word of wisdom. Those in power can change the state of affairs in the world in the blink of an eye with just one enlightened word, and with just one foolish word, they can bring an entire state to ruin. A good decision is a blessing to the world, while a bad decision is a catastrophe for it. People’s misfortune lies not only in their material needs, not only in the fact that they have nothing to eat and suffer deprivation. Their spiritual misfortune is far more terrible. Prayer will greatly help ensure that Christ grants people a little light. After all, this is how Christ [acts]: He takes a screwdriver, tightens a bit where needed, loosens a bit where needed—and everything is in order, a joy to behold—everything falls into place. When God enlightens certain people, evil itself gradually loses its value and finds no demand. Because it is not God who destroys evil—no, evil destroys itself. The time will come—and everything will fall into place. I see that many of those in high positions understand what is happening; it pains them, and they are fighting against evil. All of this brings me special joy.

In our age, there is a lack of living examples

— Geronda, why does St. Cyril of Jerusalem say that the martyrs of the last days will be “*greater than all the martyrs*”?¹¹

— Because in the past there were many heroes [of the spirit]. But in our time, there is a lack of living examples; I am speaking now generally about the Church and monasticism. In our time, words and books have multiplied, but real-life experiences have diminished. We merely admire the holy ascetics of our Church, without understanding how great their labor was. To understand this, we must labor ourselves; we must love the saints and, out of love for them¹², make an effort to be like them. Of

⁹ See Isa. 3:6.

¹⁰ The nickname “Maccabee” (most likely meaning “one who strikes down enemies”) was given to the leader of the Jewish revolt (166 B.C.) Judas and his successors. The revolt was directed against Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the leader of the Seleucid dynasty. The Maccabees fought selflessly for the faith of their forefathers and for the political independence of Israel (see the Books of Maccabees).

¹¹ “The martyrs of the last days will be greater than the first martyrs.” *St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Homilies, 15th Homily. Moscow, 1855. p. 261.*

course, the Good God will take into account both the particularities of our era and the conditions in which we are called to live, and He will hold us accountable accordingly. And if we undertake even a small feat, we will be crowned with greater glory than the Christians of ancient times.

In the old days, there was a spirit of self-sacrifice. Everyone strove to emulate what was good. As a result, neither evil nor indifference could prevail. There was an abundance of goodness, there was a spirit of self-sacrifice, and therefore an indifferent person could not remain indifferent. He was swept along by the general tide of goodness. I remember once in Thessaloniki we were waiting for the traffic light to change so we could cross the street. The light turned green, the crowd started moving, and I felt myself being carried along with everyone else. All I had to do was keep moving my feet and make my way toward the other side of the street. What I mean is that if everyone is heading in the same direction, it's hard for a single person not to go along with the crowd—even if they don't want to. Others sweep them along, carrying them with them. Today, if a person wants to live honestly and spiritually, there is no place for them in the world; they have a hard time. And if they aren't careful, they'll start rolling downhill; the worldly current will sweep them away.

In days gone by, there was an abundance of goodness, an abundance of virtue; there were plenty of good examples, and evil was drowned out by the multitude of good. The few instances of misconduct that existed in the world or in monasteries went unnoticed and did no harm to people. But what is happening now? There is an abundance of bad examples, and the little good that remains is not valued at all. In other words, the exact opposite is happening now: the little good is drowning in the abundance of evil, and evil is in power.

If one person or a few people possess a spirit of self-sacrifice, this greatly helps others. For if someone prospers spiritually, the benefit will extend not only to that person but also to those who witness it. The same is true of a lax person—he influences others. And if one person after another lets their guard down, then gradually, in an imperceptible way, nothing good remains around them. That is why, amid the prevailing laxity, a spirit of self-sacrifice is essential. We must be extremely vigilant in this regard, because people today, unfortunately, have reached the point where they even pass laws that promote laxity and licentiousness. Even those who are striving for spiritual growth are forced to obey these laws. Therefore, those who are striving must not only resist the influence of the worldly spirit but also refrain from comparing themselves to the people of this world.¹³ By comparing themselves to worldly people, Christians begin to consider themselves holy and grow complacent, and ultimately end up becoming worse than those with whom they compared themselves. The saints, not the people of this world, should be the models for spiritual life. It would be good to do the following with regard to each virtue: find a saint who was distinguished by that virtue, and read his or her life story attentively. Then a person will see that he has done nothing yet, and will continue his spiritual life with humility. Runners in a stadium do not look back to see where the last ones are. For if they were to stare at those at the back, they themselves would become the last. If I strive to imitate those who excel, my conscience is refined. But when I look at those who are lagging behind, I find an excuse for myself, justifying my shortcomings by thinking that, compared to theirs, my own are minor. I reassure myself with the thought that there is someone worse off than I am. In this way, I stifle my conscience, or, rather, I make my heart insensitive, as if it were covered with a layer of plaster.

¹² Philotimo (Greek: φιλότιμο) – there is no exact equivalent for this word in modern Russian. In a non-literal sense, it can be translated as magnanimity, a disposition toward self-sacrifice, or a disregard for material things in favor of some spiritual or moral ideal. This word frequently appears in the writings of Elder Paisios, who emphasizes the importance of philotimo in the spiritual life. – *Translator's note.*

¹³ The word “κοσμικός” in the writings of Elder Paisios—and in the Greek language in general—usually means a person who does not belong to the Church or who belongs to it only nominally. In this text, this word is generally translated as “worldly person” or “person of this world,” whereas the word “layperson” corresponds to the Greek λαϊκός, which denotes a conscious Christian living in the world. – *Translator's note.*

It's easy to find a "slippery slope" and slide down it

— “Why, Geronda, is it so hard for us to do good, yet so easy to fall into evil?”

— Because when it comes to doing good, a person must work hard and make an effort on their own, whereas when it comes to evil, the devil helps them. Besides, people do not imitate goodness, and they do not have good thoughts either. I often give laypeople the following example. Suppose I have a car. I start thinking: “Why do I need it? A friend of mine who also has a car can give me a ride to run errands. If necessary, I can take a taxi. I’d better give this car to my friend, a father of many children, so he can take his poor little ones out of town to visit monasteries, so they can rest and regain their strength.” So, if I give the car to someone else, no one will follow my example. However, if I trade in my car—the same make as yours—for a better one, you’ll see: you won’t sleep a wink that night, trying to figure out how to trade in your car for a better one, just like mine. You won’t even consider that the car you have now is also good. In that case, you’ll say, “I’ll sell something, go into debt, but I’ll trade in my car.” In the first case, on the other hand, no one will follow my example; no one will say, “Why do I need this car? I’d better give it to someone who really needs it!” They might even say I’ve lost my mind.

People are easily influenced by evil. Deep down, they recognize goodness; it commands their respect. However, they are easily influenced by evil and get carried away by it, because evil is where the¹⁴ tangalashka reigns.¹⁵ It’s easy to find the “sweet hill”—after all, the tempter does nothing but push God’s creatures toward that hill. But Christ acts with the utmost nobility. “This is good,” He says, “*if anyone wishes to follow Me...*”¹⁶ He does not force anyone to come to Him; He does not say, “Come on, march right over here to Me!” The devil is dishonest. He binds a person hand and foot to lead him where he wants. God, however, honors human freedom. He created people not as slaves, but as sons. He knew that the Fall would occur, but even so, He did not make people His slaves. He chose instead to condescend, to become incarnate, to endure the Crucifixion, and in this way to save humanity. God has granted man freedom. And although the devil can use it for much evil, the freedom granted to man offers a favorable opportunity for people to be tested. It becomes clear what a person does from the heart—and what he does not. And when someone has a great deal of self-love, it is very noticeable.

God does not abandon us to our fate

People today, finding themselves in such a [terrible] state, do whatever comes into their heads. Some live on pills, others on drugs. Every now and then, three or four deluded people create some new religion. But there are relatively few crimes, accidents, or atrocities. God helps people. I remember once a young man wandered into my hut and asked, “Hey, do you have a guitar?” Not only does he smoke hashish, not only does he chatter away without asking if others want to listen to him—but no, he also wants a guitar! Others are tired of life and want to take their own lives or, by committing some evil act, cause a big commotion. We’re not talking about those in whom these desires arise as blasphemous thoughts, and who drive them away. Right now we’re talking about people who are tired of life and don’t know what to do. One such person told me, “I want the newspapers to write that I’m a hero.” It is precisely these kinds of people that some exploit to achieve their [evil] goals. But—thank God!—relatively little evil actually happens.

Even though we have brought ourselves to this state, God does not abandon us to our fate. God protects the present world with both hands, whereas in former times He protected it with only one.

¹⁴ “Kanonarch,” that is, one who suggests what to do. From the word “kanonarch”—a reader who announces during the divine service what the choir is to sing.

¹⁵ Tangalashka (Greek: *ταγκαλάκι*) is the nickname the Elder gave to the devil.

¹⁶ Matt. 16:24.

Today, when people are surrounded by so many dangers, God protects them just as a mother protects a child who is just learning to walk. Now Christ, the Most Holy Mother of God, and the saints help us more than in times past, but we do not realize it. And where would the world have ended up if it weren't for this help!...

Most people are in such a state that it's frightening to even say. One is drunk, another is disillusioned with life, a third's mind is clouded, and a fourth is tormented by pain and insomnia. And yet you see all these people driving cars, riding motorcycles, performing risky work, and operating dangerous machinery. Are they really all in a fit state to do these things? How many people could have been maimed long ago! How God protects us—yet we do not realize it...

I remember how, back in the day, our parents would go off to work in the fields and leave us in the care of a neighbor. We would play with her children. In those days, children were well-behaved. The neighbor would just glance at us now and then and go back to her chores, while we played quietly. Likewise, Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints used to simply watch over the world. But today, Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints are constantly either catching one person here or holding another back from something there, because people today are unbalanced. The things that are happening now—God forbid!... It's just like a mother who has several difficult children: one is a bit slow, another is a bit naughty, and the third is disobedient... So there she is, keeping an eye on them—not just her own, but her neighbor's as well. One has climbed too high and is about to fall, another grabs a knife and wants to slit his own throat, and a third is getting ready to hurt the fourth. The mother can't relax; she doesn't close her eyes, watching over them, but the children don't understand her anxiety. In the same way, the world does not understand that God is helping it. If God were not helping, then with all the dangerous modern technology out there, the world would have been completely destroyed long ago. But [fortunately] we have defenders: our Father—God, our Mother—the Most Holy Theotokos, and our brothers and sisters—the saints and the angels.

How great is the devil's hatred for the human race! How strong is the enemy's desire to destroy us! And yet we forget against whom we are waging war. If only you knew how many times the devil has already entangled the earth with his tail, seeking to destroy it! But God does not allow him to do so; He thwarts his plans. God brings good even out of the evil that the devil seeks to do; He brings great good out of evil. The devil is plowing the earth now, but in the end, it will be Christ who sows it.

Consider this: the Good God never allows great trials to last more than three generations. He always leaves a seed of hope. Before the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites hid the fire from their last sacrifice in an empty well so that they could later use it to kindle the fire for new sacrifices. And indeed—seventy years later, when they returned from captivity, the fire for the first sacrifice was kindled from what they found in the well.¹⁷ In any difficult times, not everyone is drawn to evil. God preserves the heaven for future generations. The Communists resisted for seventy-five years and held out for seventy-five years—exactly three generations. But the Zionists, despite having resisted for so many years, will not last even seven.

Difficult times are coming

God is now allowing a severe upheaval to take place. Difficult times are coming. Great trials await us. Let's take this seriously and begin to live spiritually. Circumstances are forcing us—and will continue to force us—to work spiritually. However, this spiritual work will be worthwhile only if we perform it joyfully, of our own free will, and not because we are compelled to do so by sorrow. Many saints would have asked to live in our era so they could perform feats of faith.

¹⁷ See 2 Maccabees 1:19–22.

I rejoice when some threaten me for not keeping silent and for thwarting their plans. When late at night I hear someone jumping over the fence into the kaliva's courtyard, my heart begins to beat with sweet joy. But when the nighttime visitors ask, "A telegram has arrived—pray for so-and-so who is sick!" — I say to myself: "Ah, so that's it! It turns out to be another setback!.." I say this not because I'm tired of living, but because I rejoice in dying for Christ. Let us rejoice, then, that such a favorable opportunity has presented itself today. A great reward awaits those who desire martyrdom.

In times past, when war broke out, a man would go to battle against the enemy, defending his Fatherland and his people. Now we are entering the fray not to defend the Fatherland. We are going into battle not to prevent barbarians from burning our homes, assaulting our sisters, and dishonoring us. We are waging war neither for national interests nor for any ideology. Now we are fighting either on the side of Christ or on the side of the devil. Who is on whose side—the balance of power is crystal clear. During the occupation, you became a hero if you did not greet the Germans. Now you become a hero if you do not greet the devil.

One way or another, we are about to witness terrible events. Spiritual battles will take place. The saints will be sanctified even more, while the impure will become even more wicked.¹⁸ A storm awaits us, and our struggle has its price, because now our enemy is not Ali Pasha, not Hitler, and not Mussolini, but the devil himself. And therefore, our reward will be a heavenly one.

May God, as the Good God, turn evil into good. Amen.

Part 1.

On Sin and the Devil

"Living far from Sweet Jesus, we drink from a bitter cup"

Chapter 1.

On How Sin Has Become Fashionable

— Geronda, we heard that you told someone there would be a war. Is that true?

— I don't say anything, but people say whatever they please. And even if I knew something—who would I tell?..

— War, Geronda, is such barbarism!...

— If people hadn't "refined" sin, they wouldn't have reached this level of barbarism. But an even greater barbarism is the moral catastrophe. People are decaying both spiritually and physically. One man told me: "People have nicknamed Athens 'the jungle,' but look—nobody ever leaves this jungle. Everyone says, 'The jungle!'—and everyone flees to this jungle." What have people come to! To the state of animals. You know how it is with animals: first they enter the barn, defecate, urinate, then the manure begins to decompose and burn, and the animals get warm. They like it in the barn and don't want to leave it. What I mean is that people feel the "warmth" of sin in the same way and don't want to leave. They smell the stench, but they're reluctant to leave the warmth. If a newcomer enters the barn, he won't be able to stand the stench. But another has already gotten used to it; he lives in the barn all the time, and the stench doesn't bother him.

¹⁸ See Rev. 22:11.

— And some, Geronda, justify themselves by saying that this sinful way of life didn't begin in our day. "Look," they say, "at what went on in ancient Rome!..."

— Yes, but in Rome people worshiped idols; they were pagans. And the Apostle Paul [in his Epistle to the Romans] addressed pagans who had received Holy Baptism but had not yet renounced their evil habits.¹⁹ We shouldn't take the examples of the greatest moral decline from every era as models. Today, sin has become fashionable. Just think—we are an Orthodox people, after all, but look what we've come to! And as for other peoples, there's no point even talking about them... But worst of all is that people today, having become universally enamored with sin and seeing someone who does not follow the spirit of the times—who does not sin and possesses a modicum of piety—call that person backward or reactionary. It bothers such people that someone does not sin. They consider sin to be progress. And that is the worst of all. If modern people living in sin would at least admit that [they are living sinfully], God would have mercy on them. But they justify the unjustifiable and sing the praises of sin. And to regard sin as progress and to say that morality has had its day—this is, among other things, the most terrible blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if someone, while living in the world, strives to keep their life pure, this is of great value. A great reward awaits such people.

In the old days, a debauched man or a drunkard would be too ashamed to even go to the market, because people would mock him. And if a woman was promiscuous, she would be afraid to even stick her nose out of the house. And, one might say, this served as a kind of force that restrained sin. But today, if a person lives righteously—if, for example, a young woman lives a life of piety—people say of her, "Did she fall from the moon or something?" And in general, in the old days, when worldly people committed sins, those poor souls would feel the weight of their sinfulness and become a little more humble. They didn't mock those who lived spiritually; on the contrary, they admired them. But in our times, those who sin feel no guilt. They have no respect for others either. Everything has been leveled to the ground. If a person doesn't live a worldly life, sinners make a laughingstock of him.

Conscience condemns people

France is not just any developing country; it is ahead of many others. Nevertheless, in recent years²⁰, eighty thousand French people have converted to Islam. Why? Because sin has become fashionable among them, but their conscience accuses them, and they want to appease it. The ancient Greeks, wishing to justify their passions, invented twelve gods for themselves. Likewise, the French have tried to find a religion that would justify their passions so that this issue would no longer trouble them. Islam, one might say, suits them just fine: you can take as many wives as you want, and in the afterlife this faith promises an endless supply of pilaf, sour cream galore, and a veritable sea of honey. And if the deceased is washed with warm water after death, he is [supposedly] cleansed of his sins—no matter how many there may be. They go to Allah all clean! What more could one want? It's all so convenient! But the French will find no peace. They strive for inner peace, but they will not find it, because there is no justification for their passions.

No matter what people come up with, no matter how much numbness they hide behind—they still cannot find peace. In their efforts to justify the unjustifiable, their souls are tormented. They are torn apart from within. That is why these unfortunate souls seek entertainment, run around bars and nightclubs, get drunk, watch TV... In other words, their conscience accuses them, and to forget themselves, they engage in foolishness. And even when they're asleep—do you think they're at peace? A person has a conscience. Conscience is the very first Holy Scripture given by God to the first humans. We "inherit" our conscience from our parents like a photocopy. No matter how much a person tramples

¹⁹ See Rom. 1:24–32.

²⁰ Delivered in November 1988.

on their conscience—it will still convict them from within. That’s why they say, “A worm is gnawing at him.” After all, there is nothing sweeter than a peaceful, calm conscience. Such a person feels inwardly uplifted, and then they soar.

When a person turns away from God, they experience hellish torment

I cannot recall a single day when I did not experience divine consolation. There are occasional lulls, and during those times I feel unwell. Thus, I am able to understand just how poorly most people live. They have turned away from God and are therefore deprived of divine consolation. The further a person drifts from God, the harder life becomes for them. But if one has God, one can have nothing else and desire nothing more. That is the whole point. If, however, a person has everything but lacks God, he experiences inner torment. Therefore, as much as possible, we must draw near to God. Only near God does a person find joy—true, eternal joy. Living far from Sweet Jesus, we drink from a bitter cup. When the old man becomes a new man—a royal son—he feasts on divine delight and heavenly sweetness, experiencing paradisiacal joy and, even in this life, partially sensing the joy of paradise. From a lesser heavenly joy, a person moves every day to a greater and greater one. He asks himself, “, is there really something in Paradise greater than what I am experiencing now?” He experiences such a state that he cannot engage in any activity. From this Divine warmth and sweetness, his knees buckle as if they were candles. His heart is overwhelmed, trembling with joy; it wants to burst through the thin clay wall of his ribcage and fly away—because the earth and all earthly things seem to his heart like worthless trifles.

At first, man was in communion with God. However, he later turned away from God and began to feel as if he had first lived in a palace, and then, having found himself forever outside the palace gates, gazed at the palace from afar and wept. Just as a child suffers when separated from its mother, so does a person who has turned away from God suffer and agonize. By turning away from God, man experiences hellish torment. The devil has succeeded in leading man so far away from God that people have begun to worship idols and sacrifice their children to them. How terrifying this is! And then there are the demons: where on earth do they dig up so many of these “gods”? “God” Khamos!...²¹ Just hearing one of those names is enough! However, the devil himself suffers the most—for he has strayed farther from God and from love than anyone else. But when love departs, hellish torment begins. What is the opposite of love? Malice. And malice and torment are one and the same.

Those who have turned away from God are subject to demonic influence, whereas those who live with God receive Divine Grace. God’s Grace will be bestowed upon those who possess it. And if a person has only a little Grace but treats it without due reverence, even that little bit they have will be taken away from them.²² Modern people lack God’s grace because, by sinning, they cast away even the crumbs of grace they possess. And when Divine Grace departs, all the demons rush furiously into a person. To the extent that people have strayed from God, they experience sorrow in this life. In the life to come, they will experience eternal sorrow. To the extent that a person lives according to God’s will, to that extent—even in this life—he or she tastes, to some degree, a portion of the sweetness of Paradise. Either we will already experience some of the joy of Paradise in this life and proceed from here to Paradise, or we will experience some of the torments of Hell—and may God preserve us from this—and end up in Hell. Paradise is the very essence of good; the torments of Hell are the very essence of evil. By doing good, a person feels joy. When committing sin, they suffer. The more good a person does, the more they rejoice; the more evil they do, the more their soul suffers. Does a thief feel joy? What joy is there in that—for joy is felt by those who do good deeds. Even here, if you find something on the road

²¹ Χαμός – “god” of the descendants of Moab, the eldest son of Lot (see 3 Kings 11:7); χαμός (Modern Greek) – loss, ruin, damage. – *Translator’s note.*

²² Cf. Luke 19:26.

and pick it up, telling yourself it's yours—you'll immediately lose your peace of mind. The finder doesn't know who lost the item; he hasn't wronged or robbed anyone, yet he still loses his peace of mind. And what can be said about a thief! Even when a person simply accepts something from another—he does not feel the joy he experiences when he gives something himself. And what joy is there at all in stealing and harming others! Therefore, look at those who harm and deceive others: what terrible faces they have, how hideously they grimace!

A person will be paid by the employer they work for

People who have turned away from God never find comfort and suffer twice as much. Those who do not believe in God and the afterlife are not only deprived of comfort but also condemn themselves to eternal torment. A person will be rewarded by the master for whom he works. If you work for an evil master, he will make your life miserable even here on earth. If you work for sin, the devil will settle the score with you. If you cultivate virtue, Christ will reward you. And the more you work for Christ, the more enlightened and joyful you become. But we say, “Work for Christ? Are we out of our minds!” How terrifying! To fail to acknowledge Christ's Sacrifice for humanity! Christ endured the Crucifixion to redeem us from sin, so that the entire human race might be purified. What did Christ do for us, and what do we do for Him?..

People want to sin and have a kind God—a God who would forgive us so that we could continue sinning. That is, so that we could do whatever we want, and He would forgive us; so that He would forgive us without ceasing, while we go our own way. People do not believe, and because of this, they throw themselves insatiably into sin. This—that is, unbelief—is where all evil begins. People do not believe in another life and therefore have no regard for anything. They hurt and deceive one another, abandon their children... Things are happening that are too terrible to put into words. These are no trivial sins. Such sins that even the Holy Fathers did not foresee anything like them in the Sacred Canons. As God said about Sodom and Gomorrah: “I cannot believe it—are such sins truly being committed? I will go and see for myself.”²³

If people do not repent and return to God, they will lose eternal life. A person must help themselves to feel the deepest meaning of life. They must come to their senses in order to experience divine consolation. The goal is for a person to grow spiritually, not merely to abstain from sin.

Chapter 2.

On How the Devil Is Running Rampant These Days

Through our sin, we give the devil power over us

— There is a great deal of demonic possession in the world today. The devil has run rampant, because people today have given him a great deal of power. People are subjected to terrible demonic influences. One person explained this very accurately: “In the past, the devil used to deal with people, but now he doesn't bother with them. He leads them onto [his] path and sends them on their way, saying, ‘Well, good luck!’ And people wander down that path on their own.” This is terrifying. Consider this: the demons in the region of Gadara²⁴ asked Christ for permission to enter the pigs, because the pigs did not grant the devil authority over them, and he had no right to enter them without permission. Christ granted him this permission to punish the Israelites, since the law forbade them from eating pork.

²³ See Gen. 18:21.

²⁴ See Luke 8:26–33.

— And some, Geronda, say that the devil does not exist.

— Yes, one person also advised me to remove from the French translation of the book *The Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia*²⁵ the passages that mention the demon-possessed. “Europeans,” he said, “won’t understand this. They don’t believe the devil exists.” You see how it is: they explain everything through psychology. If the possessed people from the Gospels had fallen into the hands of psychiatrists, they would have subjected them to electroshock therapy! Christ deprived the devil of the right to do evil. He can do evil only if a person himself grants him that right. By not participating in the Sacraments of the Church, a person grants the devil these rights and becomes vulnerable to demonic influence.

— Geronda, how else can a person grant the devil such rights?

— Logic,²⁶ argumentativeness, stubbornness, self-will, disobedience, shamelessness—all these are distinctive traits of the devil. A person becomes vulnerable to demonic influence to the extent that he possesses the qualities listed above. However, when a person’s soul is purified, the Holy Spirit dwells within him, and he is filled with Grace. If a person defiles themselves with mortal sins, an unclean spirit takes up residence within them. If, however, the sins with which a person has defiled themselves are not mortal, then they are under the influence of an evil spirit from without.

Unfortunately, in our time, people do not want to cut off their passions or their own willfulness. They do not accept advice from others. After that, they begin to speak shamelessly and drive away the Grace of God from themselves. And then, no matter where a person turns, he cannot succeed, because he has become vulnerable to demonic influences. A person is no longer in control of themselves, because the devil commands them from the outside. The devil is not inside them—God forbid! But even from the outside, he can command a person.

A person abandoned by Grace becomes worse than the devil. Because the devil does not do everything himself, but incites people to evil. For example, he does not commit crimes, but persuades people to do so. And because of this, people become possessed.

Confession strips the devil of his power over a person

If people would at least go to a spiritual father and confess, then the demonic influence would disappear and they would be able to think again. After all, right now, because of the demonic influence, they are unable to even think for themselves. Repentance and confession strip the devil of his power over a person. Recently,²⁷ a sorcerer came to the Holy Mountain. Using some kind of magical stakes and nets, he blocked off the entire path leading to my hermitage in one spot. If a person who had not confessed their sins had passed through there, they would have suffered, without even knowing the reason why. When I saw these sorcerous nets on the road, I immediately made the sign of the cross and walked right over them—tearing them all to pieces. Then the sorcerer himself came to the kaliva. He told me about all his schemes and burned his books.

The devil has no power or authority over a believer who attends church, goes to confession, and receives Communion. The Devil merely barks at such a person, just like a toothless dog. However, he wields great power over an unbeliever who has granted him authority over himself. The Devil can even tear such a person to pieces—in this case, he has teeth and uses them to torment the unfortunate soul. The Devil wields power over the soul in accordance with the rights that the soul grants him.

When a spiritually orderly person dies, the ascent of his soul to Heaven is like a speeding train. Barking dogs rush after the train, choking on their own barking, trying to run ahead, but the train just

²⁵ The Russian translation was published by the Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra in 1997. — *Translator’s note.*

²⁶ By “logic,” the Elder means rationalism, intellectualism.

²⁷ Delivered in June 1985, when the Elder was living in the “Panaguda” cell.

keeps racing on and on—it might even run over some stray dog and split it in half. If, however, a person dies whose spiritual state leaves much to be desired, his soul is as if on a train that is barely crawling along. It cannot go any faster because the wheels are faulty. The dogs jump into the open doors of the cars and bite the people.

When the devil has gained significant power over a person and has taken control of them, the cause of what has happened must be identified so that the devil can be stripped of this power. Otherwise, no matter how much others pray for this person, the enemy will not leave. He cripples the person. Priests rebuke him again and again,²⁸ but in the end, the unfortunate person becomes even worse off, because the devil torments him more than before. A person must repent, go to confession, and strip the devil of the rights that he himself granted him. Only then will the devil leave; otherwise, the person will continue to suffer. You can rebuke him for a whole day, or two days, or even weeks, months, and years—the devil still holds power over the unfortunate person and will not leave.

The devil does not approach God's pure creation

— Geronda, how is it, then, that I am enslaved by my passions?

— A person becomes enslaved to passions by giving the devil power over himself. Throw all your passions right in the devil's face. This is what God wants, and it's in your own best interest. In other words, turn anger, stubbornness, and similar passions against the enemy. Or, better yet, sell your passions to the devil, and with the money you get, buy some cobblestones and throw them at the devil so that he won't even come near you. Usually, we humans, through inattention or prideful thoughts, allow the enemy to harm us. The devil can take advantage of even a single thought or word. I remember a family—a very close-knit one. Once, the husband jokingly said to his wife, "Oh, I'm going to divorce you!"—and the wife replied, also jokingly, "No, I'm the one who's going to end this marriage!" They were just talking like that, without any ulterior motive, but their joking went so far that the devil took advantage of it. He caused a small complication for them, and they were already seriously ready to get a divorce—they didn't think about the children or anything else. Fortunately, a spiritual father stepped in and spoke with them. "What are you doing," he said, "getting a divorce over such nonsense?"

If a person strays from God's commandments, he is overcome by his passions. And if a person allows his passions to control him, then the devil isn't even needed. After all, demons also have their "specializations." They probe a person, search for where he is "vulnerable," seek to expose his weakness, and thus overcome him. We must be vigilant, closing the windows and doors—that is, our senses. We must not leave any cracks open for the evil one, nor let him crawl through them to get inside. These cracks and holes are our weak spots. If we leave even the smallest crack open for the enemy, he can squeeze through and cause harm. The devil enters a person whose heart is filled with filth. The devil does not approach a pure creation of God. If a person's heart is cleansed of filth, the enemy flees and Christ returns. Just as a pig, finding no mud, grunts and walks away, so the devil does not approach a heart that is free from impurity. And what would he even find in a pure and humble heart? So, if we see that our home—our heart—has become the enemy's dwelling place—a shack on chicken legs—then we must immediately tear it down so that the tangalashka—our malicious tenant—will leave. After all, if sin dwells in a person for a long time, then, naturally, the devil acquires greater authority over that person.

— Geronda, what if a person used to live carelessly and thereby gave the tempter power over himself, but now wants to reform and begin living mindfully—will the tangalashka fight him?

²⁸ The casting out of unclean spirits (exorcism or exorcism rite) is a rite established by the Church, during which a priest, reciting special incantatory prayers, casts out unclean spirits from people possessed by them. The Elder emphasizes that a possessed person seeking the help of exorcism must necessarily repent, confess their sins to a spiritual father, and be determined to live a Christian life. Detailed information on demon possession and exorcism is found in Volume III of Elder Paisios's **Words**. — *Translator's note.*

“When a person turns to God, he receives from Him the strength, enlightenment, and comfort necessary at the beginning of the journey. But as soon as a person begins the spiritual struggle, the enemy wages a fierce battle against him. That is precisely when it is necessary to show a little patience. Otherwise, how will the passions be eradicated? How will the old self be cast off? How will pride be cast aside? In this way, a person comes to understand that on their own, by their own strength, they can do nothing. They humbly ask for God’s mercy, and humility comes to them. The same thing happens when a person wants to break a bad habit, such as smoking, drugs, or drunkenness. At first, they feel joy and give up the habit. Then they see others smoking, using drugs, or drinking, and face intense temptation. If a person overcomes this temptation, then it becomes easy for them to give up this addiction and turn their back on it. One just needs to make a little effort and struggle a bit. Tangalashka does her part—so why aren’t we doing ours?

Let’s not get into conversations with Tangalashka

We all have inherited passions, but in and of themselves, they do us no harm. It’s just like a person being born, for example, with a mole on their face that gives them a special beauty. But if you pick at that mole, a cancerous tumor may develop. We must not let the devil pick at our passions. If we allow him to pick at our weakness, we will develop [spiritual] cancer.

We must have spiritual courage, despise the devil, and reject all his cunning thoughts—his “telegrams.” Let’s not engage in conversation with that little devil. Even if every lawyer in the world were to gather together, they wouldn’t be able to outargue a single little devil. Don’t engage in conversation with the tempter, and in this way you’ll sever ties with him and avoid temptation. Let’s say something happened to us: we were treated unfairly, we were insulted. Let’s examine whether we ourselves are to blame for this. If we’re not to blame, then recompense awaits us. We must stop there: there’s no need to delve deeper. If a person continues to converse with the tempter, he will later spin such a web of lies,²⁹ and create such a commotion... The tempter urges one to examine what happened according to his own laws of “truth” and drives a person to bitterness.

I remember how Italian troops, as they withdrew from Greece, left behind tents filled with piles of hand grenades. And there were whole heaps of gunpowder left behind as well. People took these tents for themselves, along with whatever was inside. Children played with the grenades, and do you know how many of those poor souls perished!

How can anyone play with grenades! It’s the same with us—are we really going to play games with the devil?

The devil is powerless

— Geronda, a thought occurs to me that the devil possesses immense power, especially in our day and age.

— The devil possesses not power, but malice and hatred. God’s love is all-powerful. Satan pretends to be all-powerful, but he cannot live up to that role. He seems strong, but in reality he is completely powerless. Many of his destructive plans fall apart before they even begin to be carried out. Would a father—a very good and kind one—really allow some punk to beat his children?

— But I, Geronda, am afraid of the tangalashki.

— Why are you afraid of them? The tangalashki have no power at all. Christ is all-powerful, and the devil is nothing but rot. Don’t you wear a cross? The devil’s weapons have no power. Christ has armed

²⁹ In other words, the tangalashka keeps a person occupied with “trivial tasks”—it instills thoughts in them so that they are constantly “busy,” remain in a state of distress, and are unable to engage in spiritual work. In this way, the devil weakens a person.

us with His Cross. The enemy possesses power only when we ourselves lay down our spiritual weapons. There was a case when an Orthodox priest showed a sorcerer a small cross and thereby struck terror into the demon that the sorcerer had summoned through his sorcery.

— “And why is he so afraid of the Cross?”

“Because when Christ endured spitting, mockery, and beatings, the kingdom and power of the devil were crushed. What an amazing way Christ triumphed over him!” “The devil’s dominion was crushed by a reed,” says one saint. That is, the devil’s power was crushed when Christ received the final blow to the head with a reed. Therefore, the defensive spiritual remedy against the devil is patience, and the strongest weapon against him is humility. The crushing of the devil is the most healing balm, poured out by Christ during His Sacrifice on the Cross. After Christ’s crucifixion, the devil is like a snake stripped of its venom, like a dog with its teeth torn out. The devil has been stripped of his poisonous power; the dogs—that is, the demons—have had their teeth pulled out. They are now disarmed, while we are armed with the Cross. Demons cannot do God’s creatures absolutely anything unless we ourselves grant them that right. All they can do is cause a ruckus—they have no real power.

Once, while living in the Holy Cross Hermitage, I celebrated a remarkable All-Night Vigil! That night, a multitude of demons gathered in the attic. At first, they were striking something with sledgehammers with all their might, and then they began to make a racket, as if they were rolling massive logs and tree trunks across the attic floor. I made the sign of the cross toward the ceiling and sang: “*We bow down before Thy Cross, O Lord...*”³⁰ When I finished singing, they began rolling the logs again. “Now,” I said to them, “let’s divide into two choirs. You roll the logs on the upper choir, and I’ll sing here on the lower one.” When I began to sing, they stopped. I sang *alternately* “*We bow down before Your Cross...*” and “*Lord, You have given us Your Cross as a weapon against the devil...*”³¹ I spent a most joyful night singing psalms. As soon as I fell silent, they continued to entertain me. And what a vast repertoire they have! Every time they come up with something new!...

— And when you began singing the troparion for the first time, didn’t they leave?

— No. As soon as I finished, they would join in. Apparently, we were supposed to sing the vigil with two choirs. It was a beautiful vigil. I sang with feeling! Those were wonderful days...

— Geronda, what does the devil look like?

— Do you know what a “handsome fellow” he is? It’s beyond description—neither in a fairy tale nor in writing! If only you could see him!... How [wisely] God’s love prevents people from seeing the devil! If they saw him, most would die of fear. Just think, if people could see how he operates, if they could see just how “handsome” he really is!... True, some would turn it into a pleasant form of entertainment. I forgot what it’s called... “Movies,” maybe?.. However, such “movie screenings” are expensive, and even despite the high price, it’s still not easy to see something like that.

— Does the devil have horns and a tail?

— Yes, yes. Horns, a tail, and all the trimmings!

— Geronda, did the demons become such terrifying creatures after their fall, after they turned from angels into demons?

— Of course they did. They’re like that now, as if they’d been struck by lightning. If lightning strikes a tree, doesn’t it turn into a charred log in the blink of an eye? That’s exactly how they are now—as if lightning had struck them. There was a time when I’d say to the little rascal: “Come here so I can see you and not fall into your clutches! Now I’m just looking at you, and I can already tell how vicious you are! And if I ever fall into your clutches—oh, I can just imagine what’s in store for me then!”

³⁰ “*We bow down before Your Cross, O Lord, and we glorify Your Holy Resurrection*”—stichera to the Holy Cross.

³¹ Sunday stichera of the 8th tone for the Praises.

The devil is foolish

— Geronda, does the devil know what's in our hearts?

— Not a chance! As if he could possibly know what's in people's hearts. Only God knows the hearts. And only to God's people does He sometimes reveal, for our own good, what is in our hearts. The little devil knows only deceit and malice, which he himself instills in those who serve him. He knows nothing of our good thoughts. He only sometimes guesses at them from experience, but even then, in most cases, he gets it wrong!

And if God does not allow the devil to understand something, then the devil will constantly be wrong about everything. After all, the devil is utter darkness! "Zero visibility!" Let's say I have some kind thought. The devil doesn't know about it. If I have an evil thought, then the devil knows it, because he himself instills it in me. If I now want to go somewhere and do a good deed—for example, to save someone—the devil doesn't know about it. However, if the devil himself suggests to a person, "Go and save so-and-so"—that is, if he plants that thought in the person's mind—then he himself will stir up that person's pride and will therefore know what's in that person's heart.

All of this is very subtle. Do you remember the story about Abba Macarius?³² Once he met the devil, who was returning from the nearby desert. He had gone there to tempt the monks living there. The devil said to Abba Macarius, "All the brothers are very harsh toward me, except for one friend of mine who obeys me and, when he sees me, spins like a spindle." "Who is this brother?" asked Abba Macarius. "His name is Theopemptus," replied the devil. The reverend went into the desert and found this brother. Very tactfully, he led him to the confession of his thoughts and helped him spiritually. When he met the devil again, Abba Macarius asked him about the brothers living in the desert. "They are all very harsh toward me," the devil replied. "And worst of all, the one who used to be my friend—I don't know why—has changed, and now he is the harshest of them all." The devil did not know that Abba Macarius had gone to the brother and set him right, because the reverend acted humbly, out of love. The devil had no claim over Abba Macarius's good intention. But if the reverend had become proud, he would have driven God's grace away from himself, and the devil would have gained that claim. Then the devil would have known the reverend's intention, because in that case, the devil himself would have stirred up his pride.

— And if a person has expressed a good thought somewhere, can the devil eavesdrop on it and then tempt that person?

— How could he eavesdrop if there is nothing of the devil in what was said? However, if a person expressed his thought in order to boast, then the devil will intervene. That is, if a person has a predisposition toward pride and proudly declares, "I will go and save so-and-so!"—then the devil will get involved. In this case, the devil will be aware of his intention, whereas if a person is motivated by love and acts humbly, the devil does not know about it. Caution is necessary. This is a very delicate matter. It is no wonder that the Holy Fathers call the spiritual life "the science of sciences."

— Geronda, however, there are times when a sorcerer predicts, for example, to three young women that one will get married, another will too but will be unhappy, and the third will remain unmarried—and this comes true. Why is that?

— The devil has experience. For example, an engineer, seeing a house in a state of disrepair, can tell how much longer it will stand. In the same way, the devil sees how a person lives and, based on experience, concludes how that person will end up.

³² See The Ancient Paterikon, Moscow, 1899. pp. 343–344.

The devil lacks sharpness of mind; he is very foolish. He is one big mess—you can't make head or tail of him. And he behaves sometimes like a wise man, sometimes like a fool. His tricks are clumsy and crude. God arranged it this way so that we could see through him. One must be deeply clouded by pride not to see through the devil. With humility, we are able to recognize the devil's snares, because through humility a person is enlightened and becomes one with God. Humility is what cripples the devil.

Why Does God Allow the Devil to Tempt Us?

— Elder, tell me, why does God allow the devil to tempt us?

— In order to win back His children. “Do whatever you want, devil,” God says. For whatever the devil does—in the end, he will still break his teeth on the cornerstone—Christ. And if we believe that Christ is the cornerstone, then we have nothing to fear.

God does not allow a trial unless something good will come of it. Seeing that the good that will result will outweigh the evil, God allows the devil to do his work. Do you remember Herod? He killed fourteen thousand infants and added fourteen thousand angelic martyrs to the heavenly host. Have you ever seen any angelic martyrs? The devil broke his teeth on them! Diocletian, by cruelly persecuting Christians, was an accomplice of the devil. But, without intending to, he did a service to the Church of Christ by enriching it with saints. He thought he would exterminate all Christians, but he achieved nothing—he merely left us with many holy relics to venerate and enriched the Church of Christ.

God could have dealt with the devil long ago, for He is God. And even now, if He so desires, He can twist the devil into a ram's horn and send him to hellish torment [for all eternity]. But God does not do this for our own good. Would He allow the devil to torment and afflict His creation? And yet, to a certain extent, for a time, He has permitted this so that the devil might help us through his malice, so that he might tempt us and we might turn to God. God allows the devil to tempt us only if it leads to good. If it does not lead to good, then He does not permit it. God permits everything for our own good. We must believe this. God allows the devil to do evil so that man may struggle. After all, if you don't knead the dough, you won't get a loaf of bread. If the devil did not tempt us, we might become conceited, thinking of ourselves as saints. And that is why God allows him to wound us with his malice. For by striking us, the devil knocks all the chaff out of our dusty souls, and they become purer. Or God allows him to pounce on us and bite us so that we may turn to Him for help. God calls us to Himself constantly, but we usually turn away from Him and turn to Him again only when we are in danger. When a person is united with God, the evil one has no place to squeeze in. But, besides this, God has no reason to allow the devil to tempt such a person; after all, He permits this so that the one being tempted will be compelled to turn to Him. But, one way or another, the evil one does us good—he helps us become holy. For this reason, God tolerates him.

God has left not only people but also demons free, since they do not harm—nor can they harm—a person's soul, except in those cases where the person himself wishes to harm his own soul. On the contrary, evil or careless people—who, without intending to, do us harm—prepare our reward. “If there were no temptations, no one would be saved,”³³ — says one Abba. Why does he say this? Because considerable benefit comes from temptations. Not because the devil would ever be capable of doing good—no, he is evil. He wants to crush our heads and hurls a stone at us, but the Good God... catches that stone and places it in our hand. And into the palm of our other hand, He pours nuts for us to crack open with that stone and eat! In other words, God allows temptations not so that the devil may tyrannize us. No, He allows him to tempt us so that in this way we may pass the exams for admission into the next life and have no excessive complaints at the Second Coming of Christ. We must clearly understand that

³³ Abba Evagrius. Instructions on the Active Life. In: The Love of Goodness (Russian translation). Vol. I. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1992. p. 637.

we are at war with the devil himself and will continue to fight him until we depart from this life. As long as a person is alive, he has much work to do to improve his soul. As long as he is alive, he has the right to take spiritual exams. But if a person dies and fails, he is removed from the list of examinees. There is no retake.

The Devil Refuses to Repent

The Good God created the angels. However, out of pride, some of them fell and became demons. God created a perfect creation—man—so that he might replace the fallen angelic order. That is why the devil is very jealous of man—God’s creation. The demons bellow: “We committed a single transgression, and You oppress us, yet You forgive people who have so many transgressions to their credit.” Yes, He forgives, but people repent, whereas the former angels have fallen so low that they have become demons, and instead of repenting, they grow ever more cunning and ever more malicious. With fury, they set out to destroy God’s creations. Lucifer was the brightest of the angelic ranks! And look where he has ended up... Out of pride, the demons turned away from God thousands of years ago, and out of pride they continue to turn away from Him and remain unrepentant. If only they had said one thing: “*Lord, have mercy,*” then God would have found a way [to save them]. If only they had said, “*I have sinned,*” but they do not say that. By saying “*I have sinned,*” the devil would once again become an angel. God’s love is boundless. But the devil possesses a stubborn will, obstinacy, and selfishness. He does not want to yield; he does not want to be saved. This is terrifying. After all, he was once an angel!

— Geronda, tell me, does the devil remember his former state?

— You’re still asking! He is [all] fire and fury, because he doesn’t want others—those who will take his former place—to become angels. And the more time passes, the worse he becomes. He grows in malice and envy. Oh, if only a person could sense the state the devil is in! He would weep day and night. Even when some good person changes for the worse and becomes a criminal, one feels great pity for him. What more can be said when one witnesses the fall of an angel!

Once, a certain monk³⁴ felt great sorrow for the demons. Kneeling and prostrating himself, he prayed to God with the following words: “You are God, and if You so desire, You can find a way to save even these wretched demons, who once possessed such great glory but now embody all the malice and cunning of the world; and were it not for Your intercession, they would have destroyed all of humanity.” The monk prayed with anguish. As he spoke these words, he saw the muzzle of a dog beside him, sticking out its tongue and mimicking him. Apparently, God allowed this, wishing to let the monk know that He is ready to accept the demons, provided they repent. But they themselves do not desire their own salvation. Consider this: Adam’s fall was healed by God’s coming to earth, by the Incarnation. But the devil’s fall cannot be healed by anything other than his own humility. The devil does not reform because he himself does not want to. Do you know how glad Christ would be if the devil wanted to be reformed! And a person does not reform only if he does not want to himself.

— Geronda, so what then? Does the devil know that God is Love, know that He loves him, and yet, despite this, continue on his path?

— Of course he knows! But will his pride ever allow him to humble himself? Besides, he’s also cunning. Right now, he’s trying to take over the whole world. “If I have more followers,” he says, “then eventually God will be forced to spare all His creatures, and I’ll be included in that plan too!” That’s what he believes. That’s why he wants to draw as many people as to his side. Do you see where he’s heading? “There are so many people,” he says, “on my side! God will be forced to show mercy to me as well!” [He wants to be saved] without repentance! And didn’t Judas do the very same thing? He knew

³⁴ As was later discovered, this monk was Elder Paisius himself.

that Christ would free the dead from hell. “I’ll go to hell before Christ,” said Judas, “so that He might free me too!” Do you see what a trick that is? Instead of asking Christ for forgiveness, he put his head in the noose. And look—God’s mercy bent the fig tree on which he hanged himself, but Judas [not wanting to remain alive] tucked his legs under himself so they wouldn’t touch the ground. And all this just to avoid saying a single “forgive me.” How terrifying! Even the devil, the very embodiment of selfishness, does not say, “I have sinned,” but endlessly strives to draw as many people as possible to his side.

Humility reduces the devil to dust

Humility possesses great power. Before humility, the devil crumbles to dust. It is the most powerful blow to the devil. Where there is humility, there is no place for the devil. And if there is no place for the devil, then there are no temptations either. Once, an ascetic compelled a tangalashka to say, “*Holy God....*” “*Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One!*” the tangalashka rattled off and stopped there; he did not say, “Have mercy on us.” “Say, ‘*Have mercy on us!*’ No way! If he had said those words, he would have become an angel. A tangalashka can say anything you want, except ‘*have mercy on us,*’ because humility is necessary to utter those words. In the plea ‘*have mercy on us*’ there is humility—and the soul that asks for God’s great mercy receives what it asks for.

Whatever we do, humility, love, and nobility are essential. After all, it’s so simple—we’re the ones who complicate [our spiritual life] ourselves. Let us, as much as possible, make life difficult for the devil and easier for man. Love and humility are difficult for the devil and easy for man. Even a weak, sickly person, lacking the strength for asceticism, can defeat the devil through humility. A person can, in a single moment, turn into an angel or into a devil. How? Through humility or pride. Did it take long for Lucifer to turn from an angel into a devil? His fall happened in a matter of moments. The easiest way to be saved is through love and humility. Therefore, we need to start with love and humility, and only then move on to the rest.

Pray to Christ that we may constantly bring Him joy and upset the devil, since he so enjoys his hellish torment and refuses to repent.

Chapter 3. On the Worldly Spirit

The Devil Rules the Vanities of This World

— Geronda, why is the devil called the “ruler of this world”? Does he really rule the world?

— That’s the last thing we need—for the devil to rule the world! When Christ referred to the devil as “the prince of this world” (³⁵), He did not mean that he is the ruler of the world, but that he reigns over vanity and lies. But how could that be! Would God ever allow the devil to rule the world? However, those whose hearts are devoted to the vain and worldly live under the authority of “the ruler of this age.”³⁶ That is, the devil rules over vanity and those who are enslaved to vanity and the world. After all, what does the word “world” mean? Ornamentation, vain trinkets, is that not so?³⁷ Thus, anyone enslaved by vanity is under the devil’s power. A heart captivated by the vain world keeps the soul in a state of stagnation and the mind in darkness. And then a person only appears to be human; in essence, he is a spiritual miscarriage.

³⁵ John 16:11.

³⁶ See Eph. 6:12.

³⁷ Meanings of the word “κόσμος” in Ancient Greek: 1. adornment, finery; 2. order; 3. world, universe; 4. all that is worldly and earthly. See A.D. Weisman. Greek-Russian Dictionary. St. Petersburg, 1899. p. 725.

My thoughts tell me that the greatest enemy of our soul—an enemy greater even than the devil—is the worldly spirit. It sweetly entices us and leaves us with bitterness forever. But if we were to see the devil himself, we would be seized with terror; we would be compelled to turn to God and would undoubtedly go to Paradise. In our age, much that is worldly has entered the world—much of the spirit of this world. This worldliness will destroy the world. By accepting this world into themselves [becoming worldly from within], people have cast Christ out of themselves.

— Geronda, why is it that we do not understand how much evil the worldly spirit brings, and yet we are drawn to it?

— Because the spirit of the world creeps into our lives little by little. Just like the hedgehog who went into the hare's little house: first, he asked the hare for permission to stick his head inside so it wouldn't get wet in the rain. Then it stuck one paw inside, then the other, and finally squeezed its whole body inside, using its quills to drive the hare out of its home. In the same way, worldly wisdom deceives us with small concessions and gradually takes control of us. Evil advances quietly. If it advanced in sudden leaps, we would not be deceived. When [pranksters] scald a frog, they pour boiling water on it drop by drop. If they were to pour all the boiling water on the frog at once, it would jump up and flee from the danger. But if you pour just a little boiling water on it, at first it will shake it off, and then it will calm down. If you keep pouring a little at a time, at first it will shake some of it off again, but gradually it will get scalded without even noticing. "Come on, little frog! As soon as boiling water splashes on you, jump up and run!" No, it doesn't run away. It puffs itself up, puffs itself up, and then gets scalded. The devil acts the same way—he "pours boiling water on us" drop by drop, and in the end, without even noticing, we find ourselves "scalded."³⁸

Preference must be given to the beauty of the soul

A soul moved by the beauties of the material world confirms that a vain world dwells within it. Therefore, it is captivated not by the Creator—but by creation, not by God—but by clay. The fact that this clay is pure and free from sinful filth is of no consequence. Enchanted by worldly beauties—which, though not sinful, nonetheless remain vain—the heart experiences temporary joy: a joy devoid of divine consolation and inner inspiration through spiritual exultation. But when a person loves spiritual beauty, his soul is filled and made beautiful.

If a person—and especially a monk—were aware of his own inner ugliness, he would not chase after outward beauty. The soul is so soiled, so muddled—and yet we concern ourselves, for example, with our clothes? We wash and iron our clothes, and on the outside we are clean, but as for what we are like on the inside—it is better not to even ask. Therefore, by turning his attention to his inner spiritual impurity, a person will not waste time meticulously cleaning his clothes down to the very last speck at—after all, these clothes are a thousand times cleaner than his soul. But, ignoring the spiritual debris that has accumulated within him, a person diligently tries to remove even the tiniest speck from his clothes. All attention should be directed toward spiritual purity—toward inner beauty, not outward beauty. Preference should be given not to vain beauties, but to the beauty of the soul, to spiritual beauty. For our Lord Himself said that the whole world is not worth as much as a single soul.³⁹

³⁸ The elder gives this example to show how easily we accept evil or sin if they enter our lives quietly, step by step. If evil or sin were to intrude into our lives abruptly, we would resist them; whereas, by gradually yielding to evil, we grow accustomed to it and ultimately become completely enslaved by it. – *Translator's note.*

³⁹ See Matt. 16:26.

Worldly Desires

Those who do not rein in their hearts, which yearn for such material desires—which are not essential (let alone carnal lusts)—and those who do not gather their minds into their hearts to surrender them to God together with their souls—are in for utter misfortune.

— Geronda, is it always wrong to desire something?

— No, a heartfelt desire in and of itself is not evil. But things—even if they are not sinful—by capturing a part of my heart, diminish my love for Christ. And such a non-sinful desire also becomes evil, because through it the enemy hinders my love for Christ. If I desire to obtain something useful, such as a book, and this useful thing captures a part of my heart, then such a desire is not good. Why should a book capture a part of my heart? Which is better—to desire a book or to long for Christ? Any human desire—no matter how good it may seem—is [nevertheless] inferior to Christ or the Most Holy Theotokos. Can God fail to give me His whole Self if I give Him my heart? God seeks the human heart. *“Give Me, my son, your heart.”*⁴⁰ And if a person gives Him his heart, then God gives him what his heart loves, provided it does him no harm. The heart does not squander itself in vain only when it is given to Christ. And only in Christ does a person find, in this life, the fulfillment of divine love, and in the life to come—eternal joy.

We should avoid worldly things so that they do not captivate our hearts. Let us make use of simple things, such that they merely provide for our needs. However, let us ensure that the things we use are reliable. When I wish to use some beautiful object, I give my whole heart to that beauty. Then there is no room left in the heart for God. For example, as you walk past a house, you see luxurious decorations, marble, and fine finishes; you admire the stones and bricks and leave your heart behind amid all of this. Or you see a beautiful pair of eyeglass frames in a store, and you want to buy them. If you don’t buy them, you’ll leave your heart in that store. But if you do buy them and wear them, your heart will be set into those frames and glued to them. Women, in particular, fall for this trick very easily. There are very few women who don’t squander their hearts on vain trifles. What I mean is that the devil plunders their rich hearts with the help of everything worldly, colorful, and shiny. If a woman needs a plate, she’ll try to find one with flowers on it. You’d think her food would go bad in a plate without flowers! And some spiritual women fall for serious designs—two-headed [Byzantine] eagles and the like. And then they ask, “Why are we insensitive to the spiritual?” But how can you come to your senses if your heart is scattered across cabinets and saucers? You don’t have a heart; you have only a piece of meat—the heart muscle that ticks in your chest like a clock. And such mechanical work of the heart is enough only to move your feet. Because a little of the heart goes to one thing, a little to another, and nothing remains for Christ.

— Geronda, does that mean even such simple desires are sinful?

— These desires, no matter how sinless they may seem, are even worse than sinful desires. After all, sinful lust will eventually be recognized by a person as sin—in time, he will begin to feel pangs of conscience and will make an effort to correct himself. He will repent, saying, “I have sinned, O my God.” Whereas these ‘good’ desires, on the contrary, do not trouble him; a person assumes that everything is fine with him. “I,” he says, “love everything that is good, everything that is beautiful. After all, God, too, created everything beautiful.” Yes, that is true, but such a person’s love is directed not toward the Creator but toward creation. Therefore, it is good if we cut off every such desire. When a person makes some effort for Christ’s sake, sacrifices what he loves—no matter how good it may be—and does what he does not love, God grants him greater peace.

⁴⁰ Prov. 23:26.

Before the heart is purified, it has worldly desires, and these bring it joy. However, once purified, the heart grieves over worldly desires and feels aversion toward them. And then the heart rejoices in spiritual things. In this way, by abhorring worldly desires, the heart becomes pure. If the heart does not feel aversion toward these desires, it becomes carried away by them. But see how it turns out: we do not want to restrain our old self even a little bit; rather, we want to fulfill its whims. How, then, can we become imitators of Christ?

— Elder, if I find it difficult to cut off a certain desire, should I persist in the struggle?

— Yes. Even if your heart feels distressed because you're not giving in to it and doing what it loves, you must not listen to it, because if you do, you'll first experience worldly joy, and afterward—worldly anxiety. But if you do not obey your heart and it is grieved that you have not yielded to it, yet you rejoice in this, then Divine Grace comes. And the attainment of Divine Grace is our task. That is, in order to attain Divine Grace, desires—even good ones—must be cut off, and self-will must be cut off. Then a person becomes humble. And when he becomes humble—Divine Grace comes. Having grown indifferent to worldly things, the heart rejoices spiritually. We must, as much as possible, learn to avoid worldly comfort and engage in inner spiritual work to attain Divine comfort.

Worldly joys are material joys

— Geronda, people of the world often say that, even though they have all the material comforts, they feel a certain emptiness.

— True, pure joy can be found in Christ. By uniting with Him in prayer, you will see your soul filled. People of this world seek joy in pleasures. Some spiritual people seek joy in theological debates, discussions, and the like. But when their theological conversations end, they are left with a sense of emptiness and ask themselves what to do next. Whatever they do—whether sinful or neutral—the result is the same. They might as well just go to sleep so they can go to work in the morning with a clear head.

Spiritual joy does not come to those who indulge the worldly desires of their hearts. Such people are plagued by restlessness. Spiritual people feel unease from worldly joy. Worldly joy is not lasting; it is not true. It is a temporary, fleeting joy—a material, non-spiritual joy. Worldly joys do not “nourish” the human soul, but only clutter it. *Once we experience spiritual joy, we will no longer desire material joy. “I will be satisfied when I behold Your glory.”*⁴¹ Worldly joy does not restore, but rather saps the strength of the spiritual person. Place a spiritual person in a worldly apartment—he will not find rest there. And even a worldly person: it will only seem to him that he is resting, but in reality he will be tormented. Outwardly he will rejoice, but this will bring him no inner satisfaction, and he will suffer.

— Geronda, it's hard to breathe amidst worldly ways!

— People find it stifling, but they themselves want this confinement! Just like a frog—after all, it jumps into the snake's mouth of its own accord. The snake lies in wait by the pond and stares intently at the frog. Staring at the snake and losing control of itself, the frog, as if spellbound, runs croaking into its mouth. The snake paralyzes it with its venom so that it cannot resist. Then the frog squeaks, but even if someone comes to its aid and drives the snake away, the frog will still die, having already been poisoned.

— Geronda, why do people take joy in worldly things?

— People today do not think about eternity. Self-love helps them forget that they will lose everything. They have not yet realized the deepest meaning of life, nor have they experienced other, heavenly joys. The hearts of these people do not joyfully aspire to something higher. For example, you give a person a pumpkin. “What a delightful pumpkin!” he says. You give him a pineapple. “Look at all that spiky skin on these pineapples!” he says, and throws the pineapple away because he's never tasted

⁴¹ Ps. 16:15.

one. Or tell a mole, “How beautiful the sun is!”—and he’ll burrow back into the ground. Those who are satisfied with the material world are like foolish baby birds who sit quietly in their eggs, making no noise, making no attempt to break through the shell, crawl out, and rejoice in the sunshine—that heavenly flight into a life of paradise—but instead, sitting motionless, die inside the eggshell.

The Worldly Spirit in the Spiritual Life

— Geronda, you sometimes say that such-and-such a person looks through a European lens rather than through the Eastern spirit. What do you mean by that?

— I mean that he looks through European eyes, with European logic, without faith, in a human way.

— And what is the Eastern spirit?

— “...*The East of the East, and those who dwell in darkness and shadow...*”⁴²

— Meaning?

— When I say that someone has embraced the Eastern spirit and left behind the European spirit, I mean that by setting aside logic and rationalism, a person has embraced simplicity and reverence. After all, simplicity and reverence are the very essence of the Orthodox spirit, in which Christ dwells. Today, spiritual people often lack simplicity—that holy simplicity that restores the soul’s strength. Without renouncing the worldly spirit and without beginning to behave simply—that is, without worrying about how others will look at you or what they will say about you—a person does not enter into communion with God or with the saints. To enter into such communion, one must begin to live in the spiritual realm. The more simply a person behaves—especially in a monastic community—the smoother, the more “polished” they become, because the rough edges of their passions are smoothed away. If this is not the case, then they try to mold themselves into a false person. Therefore, in order to become like the angels, let us strive to cast off the costumes of the worldly carnival.

Do you know what distinguishes worldly people from spiritual people? Worldly people make sure their yard is clean. They aren’t interested in whether their house is cluttered inside. They clean the yard and sweep the debris inside the house. “People,” they say, “can see the yard; they don’t see the inside of the house.” In other words, let me be a mess on the inside, but not on the outside. They want others to admire them. Spiritual people, on the other hand, make sure their house is clean on the inside. They don’t care what people say about them, because Christ dwells in the house—in the heart, not in the yard.

However, it happens that even spiritual people behave ostentatiously, in a worldly manner—or, to put it more precisely, in a Pharisaical way. Such people do not think about how to get into Heaven, to God, but about how to appear good in this life. They deprive themselves of all spiritual joys, whereas they could be experiencing a heavenly state right here on earth. And in this way, they remain worldly people. They try to lead a spiritual life according to worldly customs. Yet inside, they are empty—God is not within them.

Unfortunately, the worldly spirit has had a strong influence even on spiritual people. And if spiritual people act and think in a worldly way, what is left for worldly people to do and think? When I asked some people to help young drug addicts, they replied to me: “If we set up a shelter for drug addicts, no one will want to donate to that cause. So we’d be better off setting up a nursing home.” I’m not saying that a nursing home isn’t needed—it certainly is. But if we proceed from such premises, our charitable work will end in failure. People don’t understand that worldly success is spiritual failure.

⁴² “He has visited us from on high, our Savior, the East of the East, and we who were in darkness and shadow have found the Truth, for the Lord was born of the Virgin”—hymn for the 9th ode at Matins on the Nativity of Christ.

The Worldly Spirit in Monastic Life

— Geronda, many people tell us, “You live here as if in Paradise.”

— Pray that you do not end up without the other Paradise. I would be pleased if your spiritual growth made an impression on worldly people, but you yourselves—precisely because of this very growth—would not notice the impression you make on others, nor would you strive to make any impression at all; let it be internal and natural, arising of its own accord. Try not to lose yourselves in what is useless—otherwise you will lose Christ. Strive to make your conscience as monastic as possible. Live spiritually, like nuns. Do not forget Christ, so that He, too, may remember you. My goal is not to upset you, but to help you and strengthen you. The worldly spirit, when it infiltrates monastic life, grieves Christ Himself. Try to discern this foreign spirit and drive it away.

Unfortunately, the worldly spirit has seeped in from the outside world into many monasteries. The reason for this is that in our era, some spiritual mentors are steering monastic life along a worldly path, and the souls of the monks are not flowing toward the grace-filled spirit of the Holy Fathers. I see that today a spirit opposed to that of the Holy Fathers reigns in the monasteries. The monks do not accept the good, Holy-Fatherly spirit. That is to say, they do not live spiritually. Acting in the name of obedience and the subjugation of their own will, they bring spiritual heights down to earth and engage in worldly self-will. Living this way, they do not prosper, because the tempter—the worldly spirit—is “at work” alongside them in the monastery. We have no right to interpret God’s commandments as it suits us. We have no right to portray monasticism as we wish. To acknowledge our weaknesses and humbly ask for God’s mercy is an entirely different matter. The greatest evil, in my opinion, is that some consider this worldly spirit to be progress. We should recognize this spirit as a fall and cast it out of ourselves in order to be spiritually purified. And then the Holy Spirit will come immediately, sanctifying, enlightening, and strengthening our souls.

And there are also monks who say, “We must manifest our culture.” What culture? The worldly one? It would be natural for us, as monks, to manifest our spiritual culture, our spiritual development. What kind of spiritual development? Here’s what: not trying to outpace worldly people in worldly development, for this worldly development torments even them, let alone monks. Our spiritual pace should be so high that even the people of this world are drawn to follow us. If we monks do the same things as some highly spiritual layperson, this is again not beneficial to laypeople, because they already have the example of a highly spiritual layperson without us. Our life must be higher than that of spiritual laypeople. A monk must not set for himself the goal of demonstrating some kind of worldly development to others. This is an insult to monasticism. A monk who thinks in a worldly way shows that he has strayed from the path—he set out on the path for Christ’s sake, but his soul yearns for the world. Through worldly development, which is considered progress, monasticism descends into spiritual decay.

So much is disappearing from monastic life, just as honor and respect are disappearing from the world and are called outdated. That is why it pains me so much I could scream. I want to go somewhere far away [so as not to see all of this]. Someone who has not experienced anything higher does not worry much about his spiritual life, in which he arranges everything according to his own rule. However, do you know what a torment it is to live by such a rule for a person who has tasted something higher? If Christ were to grant me the grace to live as I wish—in a monastic manner—and to die a hero, I would consider that a death in battle, on the front lines. These are such times that it is worth dying, becoming a martyr, and making a sacrifice—if only to prevent the holy fathers from being slandered.

We read and read about the holy fathers, but we don’t even give a moment’s thought to where and how they lived. The Lord said: “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*”⁴³ This is staggering. The Holy Fathers strove to live in caves and to be like

Christ. They experienced the joy of Christ because they imitated Him in everything. That was their sole concern. The Holy Fathers transformed the desert into a spiritual city, but today we are turning it into a worldly city. The Church of Christ flees to the desert to be saved,⁴³ yet we are turning the desert into a worldly city. People will be seduced by this, left without help, and afterward they will have nothing to hold onto. It is precisely this great danger that I see in the difficult years we are experiencing. Although today we ought to live more like monks in order to possess divine strength, we, unfortunately, fall under the influence of the worldly spirit; it changes us for the worse, and we become powerless. That is, we ourselves drive our spirit out of ourselves and become a dead body.

There are monks today who live a monastic life only outwardly. They do not smoke, do not commit carnal sins, read **The Love of Goodness**, and quote the Holy Fathers at every turn. In the secular world, those children who did not lie, made the sign of the cross, attended church, and—as they grew older—were somewhat mindful of moral standards, considered this to be sufficient. People in some monasteries live exactly this kind of life, and this attracts laypeople there. But upon getting to know such monks more closely, laypeople see that they are no different from the people of this world, because they retain the entire worldly spirit. And if they smoked, read newspapers, or talked about politics, then laypeople would at least avoid them as people of this world, and monasticism would not be tarnished.

How can a spiritually weakened monk touch the heart of a worldly person? If you leave alcohol in an open bottle, it will evaporate, lose all its potency, and be unable to kill germs or burn. And if you fill a spirit lamp with such stale alcohol, it will also ruin the wick. So it is with a monk: by being inattentive, he drives away the Divine Grace, and after that he has only his monastic habit—the outward appearance of a monk. He is like stale alcohol and cannot “burn away” the devil. For “the light of monks is the angels, and the light of people is the monks!”⁴⁴ But “spent” monks cease to be light. Do you know how destructive worldly reasoning is! If the spiritual power leaves monastic life, then nothing remains in it. For “if salt loses its saltiness,”⁴⁵ then it is not even fit for fertilizer. Slop and garbage turn into humus, but not salt. If you “fertilize” a plant with salt, it will burn it. In the era we are now living through, monasticism must shine brightly. All this rot and decay requires salt. If there is no worldly wisdom in the monasteries, if their state is spiritual, then this will be their greatest offering to society. They will not need to say or do anything else, because they will speak through their very lives. Today, the world needs precisely this.

And look at the Catholics—look where they’ve ended up! I remember how, many years ago, when I was at the Stomion Monastery in Konitsa, someone brought me a newspaper clipping that read: “Three hundred Catholic nuns staged a protest—first because they were not allowed to see a feature film at the movie theater, and then another protest—because their dresses didn’t reach their knees but only their ankles.” After reading this, I was so outraged that I even said, “Well, after all, why did you become nuns in the first place?” And at the end of the article, it said that they had taken off their habits and returned to the secular world. But with that kind of mindset, they had already returned to it long before. Another time, I happened to see a Catholic nun who was supposedly engaged in missionary work and was—how shall I put it—well, just like some very worldly young women. Absolutely no difference at all! So let’s not allow this European spirit to take root in us, lest we end up the same way.

— Geronda, casting aside worldly reasoning seems like a difficult task to me.

⁴³ Cf. Rev. 12:6.

⁴⁴ “The light of the monks is the Angels, and the light for all people is the monastic life; and therefore let the monks strive to be a good example in everything, giving no one any cause for offense in anything, neither by deed nor by word (2 Cor. 6:3). But if this light becomes darkness, then that darkness—that is, those who are in the world—is made all the more dark.” The Reverend Father Abba John, Abbot of Mount Sinai, *The Ladder* (Russian translation). Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1898. p. 181.

⁴⁵ Matt. 5:13.

— It's not difficult, but it requires vigilance. Constantly reflect on what Arsenius the Great said: "For what reason did you leave the world?.." ⁴⁶ We forget why we came to the monastery. For better or worse, everyone starts out well, but not everyone finishes well, because they forget why they entered the monastery.

— Geronda, you said that the spirit of this world is infiltrating monastic life and eroding its spiritual standards. Will the true spirit of monasticism endure?

— This storm has come, but God will not forsake us.

— Geronda, a thought occurred to me: "Are there still any monastic brotherhoods of a spiritual nature?"

— As if there weren't enough of them already! If there weren't, the Mother of God would send our entire "brotherhood" under escort to places not so far away!... There are monks who live very spiritually, without fanfare. Such souls can be found in every monastery, in every diocese. It is precisely these rare souls who move God to mercy, and that is why He bears with us.

The worldly spirit is a disease

The most important thing today is not to conform to this worldly spirit. Such nonconformity is a testimony to Christ. Let us try, as much as possible, not to let this current sweep us away and carry us down the worldly path. A smart fish doesn't get caught on a hook. It sees the bait, understands what it is, swims away from that spot, and remains uncaptured. But another fish sees the bait, rushes to swallow it, and immediately gets caught on the hook. So it is with the world—it has its bait, and it uses it to catch people. People get carried away by the worldly spirit and then get caught in its nets.

Worldly wisdom is a disease. Just as a person tries not to contract any disease, so too must he try not to be infected by worldly wisdom—in any of its forms. In order to grow spiritually and remain healthy, in order to rejoice with angelic joy, a person must have nothing to do with the worldly spirit.

Chapter 4. On the Great Sin of Injustice

Injustice provokes God's wrath

If a person has God's blessing, that is a great thing. It is true wealth! That which is blessed endures and cannot be destroyed. That which lacks God's blessing does not last. Injustice is a great sin. All sins have mitigating circumstances, but not injustice—it draws down God's wrath. How terrifying this is! Those who treat others unjustly bring fire upon their own heads. People commit some act of injustice, and then their loved ones die, yet they cannot fathom the reason for it. But how can people who commit so many injustices prosper? By committing them, they give the devil power over themselves, and then misfortunes, illnesses, and other calamities begin to befall them... And [without understanding the spiritual causes of these misfortunes], they ask you to pray for their recovery.

Most misfortunes stem from injustices. For example, if people amass wealth through injustice, they may live the high life for a few years, but then they spend everything they've unjustly accumulated on doctors. After all, as it is written in the Psalm: "Better is a little for the righteous than the great wealth of the wicked." ⁴⁷ "Ill-gotten gains are like the wind," says the proverb. Everything accumulated through deceit vanishes, scattered by the wind. Illnesses, bankruptcies, and other misfortunes—which occur as

⁴⁶ See Memorable Tales of the Ascetic Life of the Holy and Blessed Fathers. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 27.

⁴⁷ Ps. 36:16.

trials from God—happen rarely and to very few people. Such people will receive a pure reward from God, and they usually become richer afterward, just like Job.⁴⁸ Moreover, the bodies of many who have died remain undecayed in the ground precisely for this reason—during their lifetimes, these people committed some injustice.⁴⁹

An unrighteous person suffers

An unrighteous person—and indeed anyone who has wronged another in some way and has not asked for forgiveness—is tormented by the pangs of his own conscience, and furthermore, by the indignation of the person he has wronged. For if the one who has been treated unjustly does not forgive their offender and continues to grieve over them, the offender will begin to experience intense torment and suffering. They will be unable to sleep; they will feel as if they are being tossed about by stormy waves. It is beyond comprehension—how he feels the indignation of the one he has wronged! When one person loves another and thinks of them, the latter feels that love. Something similar happens in the case of the wrongdoer. Oh, then the indignation of the wronged person tears his soul apart! Even if he is far away—whether in Australia or Johannesburg—if someone’s soul is indignant because of him, he finds no peace.

— But what if he’s insensitive?

— Do you think unfeeling people don’t suffer? They do, but they distract themselves with entertainment to take their minds off it. It may also be the case that someone who has been wronged unjustly has forgiven the guilty party, but a little indignation still remains in their heart. Then they themselves suffer to some extent, but the one responsible for their indignation suffers greatly. However, if the guilty party asks for forgiveness and the wronged person does not forgive him, then the wronged person himself begins to suffer. There is no flame that burns more fiercely than the inner burning of the soul caused by pangs of conscience. The conscience of such a person is tormented even in this life; it is constantly gnawed by an inner worm. But there is no doubt that in the next, eternal life, *the “worm that never sleeps”* will gnaw at his conscience even more fiercely if, in this life, the person does not repent and return to his neighbors what he unjustly took from them—at least through his own good will, if it is no longer possible to do so in any other way.

I remember a certain lawyer who committed many injustices against people. How he suffered at the end of his life! In the region where his law office was located, there were many livestock farmers, and therefore cases of livestock damaging crops and meadows were not uncommon. The shepherds responsible for the damage turned to this lawyer for help, and he, through cunning, twisted the case in such a way that he convinced both the agronomist and the justice of the peace of their innocence, while the unfortunate farmers not only failed to find justice but also brought trouble upon themselves. Everyone knew this lawyer to be a complete scoundrel, and no honest person would even go near him. Now listen to what a spiritually sensitive shepherd living in those parts was advised by his confessor.

This shepherd had a small flock of sheep and a dog. One day, the dog gave birth, and the shepherd gave away all the puppies. Around the same time, one little ewe went missing, leaving behind a suckling lamb. Unable to find its mother, the lamb ran after the dog and grew accustomed to drinking her milk. The dog felt relieved. Both animals had grown so accustomed to this that they sought each other out. No matter how hard the poor shepherd tried to separate them, they still found their way back to each other. The shepherd, being a spiritually sensitive man, did not know whether it was permissible to eat the meat

⁴⁸ See the Book of Job.

⁴⁹ On Mount Athos and throughout Greece in general, the remains of the departed are exhumed from the grave 3–4 years after death, washed, and placed in special burial chambers. If the body of the deceased has not decomposed, it is reburied in the grave, and prayers for the repose of the departed are intensified. – *Translator’s note.*

of this lamb, so he decided to ask his spiritual father about it. The confessor, knowing that the shepherd was poor, thought for a moment and said, “No, my son, you must not eat the meat of this lamb, because it was raised on dog’s milk. Do this instead: take this lamb as a gift to our lawyer, because other shepherds also bring him lambs and cheese. Let him eat this meat; after all, he’s the only one who has a blessing for it: everyone knows how unjust he is.”

Now old and bedridden, the unrighteous lawyer was tormented by nightmares and could not sleep. This went on for years. To make matters worse, he was struck by paralysis and could not speak. His confessor tried to persuade him to at least write down his sins on paper, but the unfortunate man had completely lost control of himself. The priest was forced to recite over him the prayer “of the Seven Youths for the Infirm and Sleepless,”⁵⁰ so that he might fall asleep even for a little while, as well as incantatory prayers to alleviate his condition in some way. And so the lawyer passed away, and now all that remains is to pray to God that He may grant his soul true rest.

— Geronda, many people are convinced that they have been cursed with witchcraft. Can a curse harm a person?

— If a person repents and confesses, then no, it cannot. For a curse to harm a person, he himself must give [the devil] some kind of power over himself. For example, a person acts unjustly toward someone, seduces a young woman through deception, or commits something similar to this. In this case, they must repent for what they have done, ask for forgiveness from the person they have wronged, go to confession, and make amends for their actions. Otherwise—even if all the priests were to gather to rebuke them—the curse will not be dispelled. And even if no curse were cast upon him—the mere resentment of the soul he has wronged would be enough to cause him torment.

There are two kinds of injustice: material and moral. Material injustice is when a person treats someone unfairly in a material, tangible sense. Moral injustice is when someone, for example, turns a young woman’s head and seduces her. And if the deceived young woman is also an orphan, then the one who deceived her burdens his soul five times over. Do you know how quickly a bullet finds such immoral people in war? In war, divine justice and God’s care for people are especially evident. War does not tolerate dishonor—a bullet quickly finds the immoral man. Once, our two companies were supposed to relieve a battalion on the front lines that was leaving for rest. During the relief, the communists launched an attack on us, and the battle raged. One soldier from the departing battalion had committed a vile act of dishonor the day before—raping an unfortunate pregnant woman. And what happened? He was the only one killed in that battle! Isn’t that terrifying? Everyone said afterward, “That’s what that beast deserved—he got what was coming to him.”

And this also happens to those who are deceitful, who try to run away or slip off—in the end, they are the ones who get killed. Those who have strong faith, of course, live honestly, in a Christian manner. And here’s what’s been observed: such people guard the honor of their bodies, and this protects them from enemy bullets and shrapnel even better than if they were wearing a fragment of the Holy Cross of the Lord.

Injustice causes suffering even to one’s descendants

— Geronda, when I became a nun, my family treated me unfairly. Can I now seek from them what is rightfully mine according to the law?

— No, that would be wrong.

— Yes, but I’m afraid that some misfortune might befall them because of the injustice they committed.

⁵⁰ See The Great Service Book. Prayer for the Infirm and the Insomniac. Moscow: Synodal Printing House, 1884. Fol. 165v.

— Just look at how much pure self-love you have! If I were in your place, I would say this to them: “I don’t need anything for myself. However, I would like you to distribute the portion of the inheritance that belongs to me to the poor with your own hands. And above all, help our poor relatives. I say this so that God’s wrath may not befall your children.” After all, sometimes this happens: a father gives alms to strangers for the repose of his soul—for example, donating money to some charitable institution—but leaves nothing for his own children.

It may happen that in a certain family, a grandfather or grandmother committed some unjust acts, but this had no effect on them personally. However, punishment befalls their children or grandchildren, who fall ill and are forced to squander on doctors what was acquired unjustly, in order to pay off the debts of their ancestors. I remember one family that was struck by many misfortunes. First, a serious illness struck the head of the family: he suffered for several years, confined to his bed, and then died. Then his wife and children died—one after another. Recently, the last one—the fifth child—also died. This family had once been very wealthy, but they were reduced to poverty because, in order to pay the doctors and cover various other expenses, they sold everything they owned for a pittance. “Why are so many illnesses and misfortunes raining down on them?” I wondered. I was acquainted with some members of this family. It was clear from them that their misfortunes had nothing to do with the blessed trials that God sends to His chosen ones. “Most likely,” I thought, “God’s spiritual laws have come into effect in their case.” To dispel my doubts, I tried to ask some trustworthy elderly people—their fellow villagers—about their family, and they told me the following. The head of this family had received some inheritance from his father and subsequently increased it by committing various unjust acts. For example, a widow asked him to lend her money to marry off her daughter. She would have repaid the debt after harvesting and threshing the grain. He, however, gave her the money on the condition that she transfer ownership of her plot of land—intended for building a house—to his name. Being in dire need, the unfortunate woman gave him everything he asked for. Another man asked for a loan to pay off a debt to the bank. He would have repaid the money after the cotton harvest, but the unjust head of the household refused and demanded an entire field in return. Fearing persecution by the bank, the unfortunate man gave him his field. A third man asked to borrow a little money to pay the doctors, and the wicked moneylender demanded a cow from him. The poor man gave him what he asked for. In this way, this man amassed a considerable fortune. However, all the grievances of those who suffered fell not only on him and his wife, but even on their children. Thus, spiritual laws came into effect, and the very members of the unjust rich man’s family found themselves in the shoes of those they had wronged. Thus, to pay for doctors and other expenses related to illnesses, accidents, and other misfortunes, they sold off everything they owned for a pittance. From being very wealthy, they became beggars, and they all passed away—one after another. Of course, God will judge them in accordance with His great love and justice. But those who, in their time of need, were forced to sell their very last possessions to pay doctors or others, and who fell into poverty because of this, will receive their reward in accordance with the injustice they suffered. As for the unjust, by enduring such misfortunes, they are paying off their debts to God.

“Whoever treats us unjustly does us a favor.”

— Geronda, how should we treat a person who treats us unjustly?

— How should we treat him? As our great benefactor, who makes deposits in God’s savings account on our behalf. Such a person makes us rich for all eternity. Is that not enough? Do we not love those who do us good, do we not express our gratitude to them? In the same way, we must love and be grateful to those who treat us unjustly, because they are doing us a favor for eternity. Just as the

unrighteous are forever deprived of justification, so too do those who joyfully accept injustice receive eternal justification.

A devout man, the head of his household, endured many injustices at his job. But he was a man of great kindness, and he endured all these injustices without complaint. One day he came to Mount Athos, visited me in my cell, and, after telling me about his trials, asked, “What do you advise me to do?” “Continue as you have begun,” I replied. “Trust in divine justice and divine recompense, and be patient. [With God] nothing is lost. By doing so, you are depositing your riches into God’s savings account. There is no doubt that in the life to come, you will receive recompense for the trials that have befallen you. But, in addition to this, know also that the Good God grants recompense to a person who has been unjustly wronged even in this life—if not always to the person himself, then certainly to his children. God provides for His creation; He knows [how to reward him].”

If a person is patient, everything falls into place. God arranges everything. But it requires patience—a patience that is not based on human reasoning. Since God sees everything and watches over all things, a person must entrust himself completely to Him. Look at Joseph⁵¹—after all, he remained silent when his brothers sold him into slavery. He could have said: “I am their brother,” but he didn’t say a word—instead, God later spoke His word and made him a ruler. If a person lacks patience, however, his life turns into torment—he wants everything to happen as it suits him, so that he feels good. But, naturally, he finds no peace, and things don’t turn out the way he wants them to.

If a person has suffered injustice in this life at the hands of people or demons, God is not troubled by this, because such a person’s soul benefits from it. However, we often say that someone is treating us unjustly, when in reality we ourselves are unjust toward others. In this case, we need to be attentive and realize that we ourselves are to blame.

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”⁵²

— Geronda, when we buy something for the monastery, some merchants refuse to give us a receipt.⁵³ What should we do in such cases?

— They should always issue you a receipt, but, in addition, you yourselves must limit your requests. Limit your needs to what is necessary; don’t undertake unnecessary construction or repairs. If I were in your place, that is exactly what I would do. And whatever is needed—God will provide. By asking that they not send us bills, we—as monks—are leading others into sin as well, those who say, “Well, if even monasteries behave this way...” Do you realize how we—people striving to fulfill God’s commandments—tempt others when we act in this manner? “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,*” says Holy Scripture. When I send letters not by mail but via a messenger, I still put stamps on the envelope. Worldly people find excuses for themselves in such things, but if monasteries behave in the same way, it shows their insincerity and that the Gospel has taken a back seat for them. By not giving away material, tangible possessions (as the Gospel commands—“if anyone wants to take your shirt, give him your outer garment as well”⁵⁴), we thereby set a bad example, and afterward, worldly people justify their failures, trying to find excuses to somehow ease their consciences. We must be careful, because on the Day of Judgment we will have no excuse. Our task is to gain, above all, spiritual—not merely material—reward. And if, for some reason, you are not given a receipt, you should consider that you have suffered a spiritual loss.

⁵¹ See Gen. 37:20 ff.

⁵² Rom. 13:7.

⁵³ By not issuing a receipt, merchants conceal the transaction from the tax authorities, and the buyer does not pay the required tax, which is very high in Greece (up to 25% of the value of the goods). – *Translator’s note.*

⁵⁴ Cf. Matt. 5:40.

— And sometimes, Geronda, this happens: a person donates a small amount of money to the monastery and asks for a receipt stating that he donated more. What should be done in such cases?

— Tell him: “We do not issue receipts for large amounts. If that does not suit you, then let us return your money; perhaps your wish will be fulfilled somewhere else.” Be careful not to catch this kind of disease.

— Geronda, one craftsman asked us to dismiss him from the monastery so he could sign up for unemployment benefits and then return to work for us.

— No, my brother, that’s not right! If a person has even a shred of conscience, he won’t go along with something like that. It’s not proper to engage in such things in a monastery. It’s better to pay him double—even if the monastery doesn’t have extra money—just so he doesn’t resort to such fraud. After all, it’s a grave sin! Blessing brings blessing, but falsehood brings destruction. Be very careful in this regard. And do not haggle with those who work in the monastery, for this can later lead to fires and destruction in monasteries.

A civil servant swears to perform his duties honestly.⁵⁵ We monks do not take such an oath, but one twice as great: we take a spiritual vow, and if we break it, our sin is twice as great. Try to maintain balance, to preserve within monastic life something of a different [non-worldly] order. I see an abscess forming. It will burst and be cleansed. God does not grant His Grace to those who are in a spiritually corrupt state—otherwise, He would be aiding the devil. Strive for sincerity and honesty. What is happening now resembles the state of a drunkard who can barely stand on his feet. Can such a state last long? God’s wrath will break out. We are about to face a test. In the first round, the dross will be separated from the gold; in the second, it will become clear how many carats of gold there are in each of us.

The world has become full of lies. People are turning into liars; they’ve created yet another conscience for themselves. But I cannot become a liar; I cannot betray my true self just because society demands it. I’d rather suffer. It takes vigilance not to fall into this worldly rut. But the current economic system does nothing to encourage people to be honest. They’re forced to underreport their income on tax returns and resort to other similar schemes. I even scolded some tax inspectors I know—people of faith. “What are you doing?” I asked them. “Try to preserve at least a little bit of your integrity!” Do you know how many people complain about you? A person comes to the tax office and says, ‘My income is one million,’ but the tax inspector writes that his income is three million. Some people declare only a third of their income, and so the tax inspectors label everyone else as cheaters and lump them all together. But if a person with a conscience comes to you, by taxing him three times as much, you’re forcing him to become a thief. In other words, instead of improving the overall situation even a little, you’re doing the exact opposite.” In response, they told me that they couldn’t tell when they were being told the truth and when they were being lied to. “You will be able to tell the difference,” I said, “if you live a spiritual life. Then you will be able to distinguish truth from falsehood. God will reveal this to you, and it will become clear to you.”

How the World Has Become Full of Lies

People’s malice has crossed all boundaries. People strive to deceive one another and consider deception an achievement. Truly, how the world has become a lie! They do everything dishonestly and sloppily, yet they charge more money than in the past. And in general, no matter what you look at, everything has become a lie and a sham. Once, someone brought me some tomato seedlings. Each plant was planted in a tiny plastic bag filled with clumps of soil mixed with black soil and coarse sand, so that

⁵⁵ Civil servants in Greece take an oath to perform their duties honestly. – *Translator’s note.*

moisture wouldn't escape from the bag. In other words, it's hard for them to water the seedlings with water! The mixture wasn't fertilized—they'd just sprinkled a tiny bit on top—but it's still like a drop in the bucket! And sure enough, when I took the seedlings out of the bags, it turned out that all the roots had rotted. I had to completely cover the seedlings with soil for a while so they could grow new roots.

Oh, how they fool people! Someone brought me a big box of candy once. I didn't open it and waited for a large group of pilgrims to arrive. "Otherwise," I thought, "the candy will go uneaten, and ants will ruin it in the open box." One day, when a large crowd had gathered, I figured there would be enough sweets in the box for everyone with some to spare. When I opened the box, I saw that it was almost entirely filled with Styrofoam, and there was only a tiny space in the middle for the sweets—in other words, the box turned out to be almost completely empty! Another time, someone brought me a beautiful gift box of Turkish delight, tied with a ribbon. "I'll save this for the children at Afonia,"⁵⁶ — I decided. But when I opened it, it turned out that the Turkish delight was old and already hard. I don't give people Turkish delight that hard—I choose softer ones.

— Geronda, don't those who do this realize that it's not true?

— They consider it an achievement because, in our time, sin has become fashionable and untruth is regarded as resourcefulness. Unfortunately, the worldly spirit sharpens the mind in cunning, and whoever treats his neighbor unjustly considers it an achievement. On top of everything else, people say of him, "Look at that sly one—he's practically the devil himself!"—while inwardly this person is tormented by the accusations of his conscience, experiencing a small taste of hellish torment.

If a person is just, then God is on their side

Today, there is no longer enough room in this world for everyone. If a person wants to live honestly and spiritually, there is no place for him in the world.

— But why, Geronda, is there no place for him?

"If a sensitive, refined person finds himself surrounded by cruelty and heartlessness, and his life is made hopeless, how can he endure it? Or must he, like everyone else, become a foul-mouthed person, conform to others in every other way, or else leave? But he cannot leave either, because he has to make a living somehow." For example, a hay merchant tells his worker: "I trust you because you don't steal. But you have to mix some rotten hay in with the good hay. When loading the clover, you must mix in a little rotten hay among the good armfuls." To keep an honest worker, the employer makes him some kind of supervisor, but the latter is forced to do as the employer says—otherwise he'll be thrown out the door. Then the poor fellow loses sleep and starts taking pills. Do you know how these unfortunate people suffer? Do you know what hardships, what abuse many endure at work from their bosses? Their lives are made hopeless. And what are they to do? Quit their jobs? They have families. Stay? It's torture. It's such a dead end that there's nowhere to turn. Just like a grain of wheat caught between two millstones—you might as well scream your head off. You have to endure it, fight through it.

Sometimes it happens like this: all the work is dumped on one person, while his coworker comes in just to collect a paycheck. I know one such person; he was the manager at an organization. After the elections, he was removed from his position and replaced by someone else—a member of the party that had come to power. This new manager didn't even have a high school education. They made him the manager, but he didn't know the job, so they couldn't transfer his predecessor to another position. So what solution did they come up with? Here's what: they put another desk in the manager's office! The old manager did all the work, while the new one just sat there with his hands folded: cigarettes, coffee,

⁵⁶ Afoniada (Mount Athos Ecclesiastical Academy)—a boarding school for boys located on Mount Athos. Founded in 1753. In addition to the subjects included in the high school curriculum, students at the Athoniada study theological and ecclesiastical disciplines (Scripture, the lives of the saints, liturgy, Ancient Greek, Byzantine church chant, iconography, etc.). — *Translator's note.*

small talk... No shame, no conscience! And on top of that, he wasn't exactly a genius—he spouted all kinds of nonsense, while all the responsibility fell on the old manager. It got to the point where the poor guy was forced to quit. “Listen,” he said to the new guy, “I think I’m going to leave. Our office is cramped—there’s barely room for two desks. You’d be better off staying here alone.” So he left, because the other guy had made his life a living hell. And it wasn’t just for a day or two, but every single day, having a guy like that breathing down your neck—it’s pure torture!

People usually push a righteous person to the very back of the line or even leave them out entirely. Such people are treated unjustly; others wipe their feet on them and, as the saying goes, step over their corpses. But the more people pressure such a righteous person, the lower they push him down, the stronger and higher God lifts him up—just as water pushes a float upward. However, immense patience is required. Through patience, many things fall into place. Anyone who wants to live virtuously and be honest in their work—whether they are a laborer, a merchant, or anyone else—must be prepared for the fact that, having begun to work honestly, they may reach a point where, for example, they cannot afford to pay rent—if, say, they own a store. But in this way, God’s blessing will come to them. However, one should not strive [through honesty and low prices] to attract as many customers and clients as possible. That should not be the goal [of honesty]—in that case, God will give nothing. God will not forsake a person who says: “I will live according to God’s will. I will not act unjustly toward anyone. I will state the true price of every item: for example, this one costs fifty drachmas, and that one—two hundred.” He will act this way, while at the same time another merchant will sell the same item, which costs fifty drachmas, for five hundred—and grow rich. However, eventually the deceiver will be exposed, and he will reach the point where he has to close his shop because he won’t even be able to pay the rent. And the honest merchant will gradually reach a point where he’ll be swamped with customers, and to cope with the influx, he’ll be forced to constantly hire more and more salespeople! But first, he must go through trials. A good person is tested when he passes through the hands of the wicked—like wool in a carding machine.

If a person listens to the devil and lives by cunning and deceit, God does not bless his labors. What people do with deceit will not succeed. It may seem that the affairs of deceitful people are prospering, but in the end, they will still collapse. In any endeavor, the most important thing is to set out on it seeking God’s blessing. If a person lives righteously, God is on his side. And if, in addition, he has even a modicum of boldness toward God, miracles are performed. By living according to the Gospel, a person lives with Christ and is entitled to divine help. How could it be otherwise? After all, they have a right to it. This is the very foundation of it all. If this is present, there is nothing to fear. What matters is that every one of our actions be pleasing to Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints. Then the blessing of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints will remain upon us, and the Holy Spirit will rest upon us. A person’s honesty is the very best “Tree of Honesty.” If someone is dishonest and carries a fragment of the Tree of Honesty, it is as if they were carrying nothing at all. But even if an honest person lacks a fragment of the Tree of Honesty, they still receive divine help. Can you imagine if, in addition to their honesty, they also possessed a fragment of the Tree of Honesty!...

A righteous person receives their reward even in this life

I have seen souls who, though unjustly wronged, endured injustice with good intentions, and Grace washed over them in this life. Many years ago, I was visited by a devout Christian—a simple and kind man. He asked me to pray for his children, that Christ might enlighten them so that, when they reached maturity, they would not resent their relatives for the great injustice those relatives had done to them. Then he told me what the matter was, and I realized that he truly was a man of God. He was the eldest of his father’s five children, and after his father died unexpectedly, he took his father’s place for his

brothers and sisters. Like a kind father, he worked tirelessly, acquired property and land, and provided for the family. He saw two of his sisters off to marriage. His younger brothers also got married and took all the good farmland, olive groves, and so on for themselves, leaving him with the barren, infertile, sandy plots. Finally, he himself got married and had three children. He was no longer a young man and worried that when his children grew up, they might realize they had been treated unfairly and begin to grumble. “I am not upset by this injustice,” he told me, “because I read the Psalter—one kathisma in the evening and two before dawn. I’ve almost memorized the entire Psalter, and not a single psalm says that the unrighteous prosper, but it does say that God provides for the righteous. Father, I don’t regret the plots of land I’ve lost—I feel sorry for my brothers who are ruining their souls.” That blessed man left. The next time he visited me was about ten years later. He arrived looking very joyful and asked, “Do you remember me, Father, do you remember?”—“Yes,” I replied, and asked how he was doing. “Now,” he said, “I’ve become rich!” “How is that possible, brother? You’ve become rich?” “Here’s how: those worthless sandy plots of land I had have gone up in value a lot because they were located on the seashore. Now I have a lot of money, and I’ve come to you to ask what I should do with it.” — “Build,” I said, “a little house for your children and set aside some money for their education—until they can stand on their own two feet.” —“I’ve already set some aside for my children,” he said, “but there’s still a lot left.” — “Then help the poor—first your relatives, and then others.” —“I’ve already helped them, Father, but there’s still a lot left!” —“Donate the money toward building a church and chapels in your village.” — “I’ve donated to that as well, but there’s still plenty left!” Then I told him that I would pray for Christ to enlighten him to do good where it is most needed. Then I asked, “How are your brothers doing? Where are they?” He burst into tears and said through his tears, “I don’t know, Father; even their traces have been lost. They sold off their plots of land in the village, their olive groves, and their farmland. Where they are now—I don’t know. First they left for Germany, then for Australia, and now there’s no word from them at all.” I didn’t know he would be so upset about his brothers, and I regretted asking him about it. Afterward, I comforted him, and he left in peace. I said to him, “Let’s pray together that we may receive good news about them as well.” Then the following psalm came to mind: *“I saw the wicked boasting and towering like the cedars of Lebanon; but when I passed by, he was no more; I sought him, but found no place for him.”*⁵⁷ This is exactly what happened to his unfortunate brothers.

Therefore, there is nothing worse than injustice. So strive to have God’s blessing on everything you do.

Chapter 5.

***“Bless, and do not curse...”*⁵⁸**

One man asked me, “Why do we sing during Great Lent, ‘Bring evil upon them, O Lord, bring evil upon the glorious ones of the earth’?⁵⁹ After all, that’s a curse.” I replied, “When barbarians, for no reason at all, go to war against a certain people, seeking to destroy them, and the people pray that evil befall them—that is, that their chariots break down, their horses fall ill, or that something hinder them—is that good or bad? That is exactly what Scripture means—that they encounter an obstacle in their path. It is not a curse.”

— Geronda, when does a curse take effect?

⁵⁷ Ps. 36:35–36.

⁵⁸ See Rom. 12:14.

⁵⁹ Isa. 26:15.

— A curse takes effect when it is a reaction to injustice. For example, if one woman mocks another—who is suffering—or does her some harm, and the victim curses her, then the lineage of the one who acted unjustly is cut off. In other words, if I do harm to someone and they curse me, their curses take effect. God allows curses to take effect, just as He allows, for example, one person to kill another. However, if there was no injustice, the curse returns to the one from whom it originated.

— And how can one free oneself from a curse?

— Through repentance and confession. I know of many such cases. People who suffered from a curse, upon realizing that they had been cursed because they were guilty of something, repented, confessed, and all their misfortunes ceased. If the guilty person says, “My God, I have committed such-and-such an injustice. Forgive me!”—and with sorrow and sincerity confesses their sins to a priest—then God will forgive them, for He is God.

— Does punishment befall only the person at whom the curse is directed, or also the one from whom it originates?

— The one at whom the curse is directed suffers in this life. However, the one from whom the curse originates suffers in this life and will suffer in the next, because if he does not repent and confess, he will be punished there by God as a criminal. All right, maybe someone really did wrong you in some way. But when you curse the person who wronged you, it’s as if you’re taking a gun and killing them. By what right do you act this way? No matter what your offender has done to you—you have no right to kill him. If a person curses someone, it means there is malice within him. A person curses another when, with passion and indignation, he wishes him harm.

A curse uttered by a person who is in the right holds considerable power. A widow’s curse is especially potent. I remember an old woman who had a little horse; she would leave it to graze at the edge of the forest, and since the horse was restless, she would tie it up with a strong rope. One day, three neighbors from the same village went into the forest to chop firewood. One was wealthy, another was a widow, and the third was an orphan—and very poor. When they saw the tethered horse, they said, “Let’s take the rope and use it to tie up the firewood.” They cut the rope into three pieces, and each took a piece to tie up their bundles of firewood. Meanwhile, the horse wandered off. The old woman came back, couldn’t find the horse, and began to get upset. She searched everywhere—by the time she found it, she was completely exhausted. Finally, when she found it, she said indignantly, “Let them drag whoever took it away with that very same rope!” Some time passed, and one day the brother of a wealthy neighbor was playing around with a gun (left behind by the Italians)—thinking it wasn’t loaded. But it turned out to be loaded; a shot went off, and the bullet struck the wealthy woman in the neck. They had to take her to the hospital. They decided to carry her down the wooden staircase—as if on a stretcher—and to keep the wounded woman from falling, they had to tie her to the staircase. They found that stolen piece of rope, but it wasn’t long enough. They ran to the neighbors, brought back two more stolen pieces, tied the poor woman to the staircase, and carried her to the hospital. Thus the old woman’s curse came true: she, too, was “dragged along on that very rope.” In the end, the poor woman died—may God rest her soul. You see, the curse fell upon the rich woman, who was not in material need. The other two women were poor and therefore had some extenuating circumstances.

Illnesses and Accidents Resulting from a Curse

Many illnesses, the causes of which doctors cannot find, may have resulted from a curse. And what about doctors—can they even detect a curse? Once, a paralyzed man was brought to my hut. He was a burly fellow, yet he couldn’t even sit up! His torso wouldn’t bend; it was like wood. One man carried him on his back, while another supported him from behind. I set two logs for the poor man, and he managed to settle on them somehow. His companions told me that he had been in this condition since he

was fifteen and had been suffering for eighteen years now. “But can something like this just happen out of the blue?” I thought. “That can’t be; there must be some hidden reason.” I began to ask questions and learned that someone had cursed this young man. What had happened? Here’s what: one day he was on his way to school, got on the bus, and slumped into a seat. At one stop, an elderly priest and an old man got on the bus and stood next to him. “Stand up,” someone told him, “give your seat to your elders.” But he, paying no attention to anyone, slumped even further. Then the old man standing next to him said to him: “You’ll stay stretched out like this forever—you won’t be able to sit.” And that curse took effect. You see, the young man was quite insolent. “Why should I,” he said, “get up? I paid for my seat.” Yes, but the other man had paid too. There’s an elderly, respected man standing there, and you—a fifteen-year-old boy—are sprawled out in your seat. “That’s exactly why all this happened,” I told him. “To get well, try to repent. You need to repent.” And as soon as the poor fellow understood and realized his guilt, he immediately recovered.

And how many of today’s misfortunes stem from curses and resentment! Know this: if many people die in a family—or if the entire family perishes—the cause lies either in injustice, witchcraft, or a curse. There was a father whose son would constantly run away from home and wander off to who knows where. One day, in a fit of anger, his father said to him, “You’re driving me crazy—come home once and for all!” And that very evening, as the young man was returning home, he was struck and killed by a car right in front of their building. He fell and remained lying there; later, his friends picked up his body and brought him home. After that, his father came to the Holy Mountain and visited me in my kaliva. He was crying and said, “My child was killed right on the threshold of my house.” He began to tell his story, and then he said: “I had said something to him before that.” — “What did you say to him?” — “He used to wander around at night, God knows where; I got angry and told him, ‘You’ll come home to me once and for all!’ Maybe that’s what caused this tragedy?” — “Well, what else could it be?” I replied. — “Try to repent and go to confession.” You see how it is: he says, “This time you’ll come once and for all”—and the child is brought back dead. And then the father starts tearing his hair out and weeping...

A parental curse is very powerful

Know that a curse—and even [simply] the indignation of parents—is very powerful. And even if parents didn’t curse their children, but were simply outraged on their behalf, then the children have not a single bright day ahead of them: their whole life is one continuous torment. Such children then suffer greatly throughout their entire earthly life. Of course, their life in the hereafter is easier, because through their sufferings they pay off some of their earthly debts. What happens is what St. Isaac speaks of: “He tastes his own Gehenna,”⁶⁰ —that is, through suffering here in this life, a person lessens his torment in hell, because suffering in this life is a foretaste of hellish torment. In other words, when spiritual laws take effect, a person is somewhat freed from Gehenna, from torment.

But even those parents who, with their words, “send” their children to the devil, “dedicate” them to him. After that, the devil has rights over such children; he says, “You have dedicated them to me.” In Faras⁶¹, there lived a husband and wife. Their child was very fussy, and the father constantly said, “May the unclean one take you away!” And so it happened: the father spoke these words to the infant, and by God’s permission, the child began to vanish from the cradle. Then the distraught mother would go to Hajjefendi.⁶² “Bless us, Hajjefendi! The demons have snatched my child away.” Hajj Efendi would go

⁶⁰ “He who is punished here for his shame tastes his own Gehenna.” *From the Holy Writings of Our Father Isaac the Syrian*. Words of Asceticism. Moscow, 1993. p. 365.

⁶¹ The principal of the six Greek villages in Caesarea of Cappadocia. The birthplace of the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia and the Blessed Elder Paisius.

⁶² This was the name given to the Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia by the inhabitants of Faras.

to their house, recite prayers over the cradle, and the baby would return. And so it went on endlessly. “Hajj Efendi, bless him!” the poor woman would say again and again, and ask, “How will all this end?” “For me,” the saint replied, “it’s not hard to come to you. And is it really so hard for you to come and call for me? So, someday the devil will get tired of this, and he’ll leave your son alone.” From that very day on, the child stopped disappearing. But when he grew up, they nicknamed him “the devil’s spawn.” He stirred up trouble throughout the village—he gave no one any peace. How my father suffered because of this!⁶³ First, this boy would go to one villager and say, “So-and-so said such-and-such about you,” then he’d go to another and tell him the same thing. People quarreled among themselves; it even came to scuffles. Then, realizing that false accusations had been leveled against each of them, they agreed to catch the slanderer and deal with him. But he managed to turn things around so that in the end, both of them begged his forgiveness! That’s how skilled he was at deceit! A true “devil’s spawn!” God allowed this to happen so that, upon seeing how the story of the baby’s disappearance unfolded, people would come to their senses, restrain themselves, and be very careful. We won’t discuss here how God will judge this man. It’s clear that he has many mitigating circumstances.

The greatest treasure for people living in the world is their parents’ blessing. Just as in monastic life, the greatest blessing is the one bestowed upon you by your spiritual father. That is why they say, “Do not miss out on your parents’ blessing.” I remember a mother who had four children. None of them had married. The mother wept: “I’ll die,” she said, “of grief—none of my children has married. Pray for them.” She was a widow; her children were orphans. My heart ached for them. I prayed and prayed, but to no avail. “Something’s not right here,” I thought. “Someone,” her children said, “has put a curse on us.” “No,” I said, “it’s not a curse—a curse is obvious... But perhaps your mother cursed you?” — “That’s right, Father,” they replied, “when we were children, we were very mischievous, and she would constantly repeat to us from morning till night: ‘May you all be stumps!’”—“Go,” I said, “to your mother and tell her the true reason for your misfortune, so that she may come to her senses. Tell her to repent, go to confession, and from this day forward, without ceasing, bless you.” And within a year and a half, all four of them had started families! Apparently, this poor woman—not only was she a widow, but she also easily fell into states of irritation and despondency. The mischievous children drove her to distraction, and for that she cursed them.

— And if parents curse their children and then die, how can the children free themselves from their parents’ curse?

“Upon examining themselves, they will most likely admit that they caused trouble in the past, tormented their parents, and that is why their parents cursed them. If they recognize their guilt, sincerely repent, and confess their sins, then everything will work out for them. By thriving spiritually, they will also help their departed parents.”

— Geronda, when I entered the monastery, my parents cursed me, too...

— Such curses—and these alone—become a blessing.

“The Noble Curse”

— Geronda, is it right, when someone offends us, to say about the offender, “God will repay him for his evil”?

— Whoever speaks this way makes himself a laughingstock of the evil one. Such a person does not understand that, by speaking this way, he is “nobly” cursing others. Some people describe themselves as sensitive, loving, and spiritually refined, and as enduring the injustices others inflict upon them. But at the same time, they say of those who wrong them, “May God repay them for their evil.” In this life, all

⁶³ Elder Paisios’s father was the village headman.

people are taking exams to pass into another, eternal life—into Paradise. My conscience tells me that such a “noble curse” falls below the spiritual passing grade and is impermissible for a Christian. After all, Christ did not teach us this kind of love. “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (⁶⁴)—this is the kind of love He teaches. Moreover, the greatest blessing of all is when we are unjustly cursed, and we accept it silently and with kindness.

If superficial or deceitful people—those who harbor malice and distort the truth—slander us or treat us unjustly, let us try, if we can, not to seek justification for ourselves when the injustice concerns us personally. And we will not say, “May God repay them,” because that, too, is a curse. It is good if we forgive our offenders with all our hearts, ask God to strengthen us to bear the burden of slander, and continue our spiritual life as unobtrusively as possible. And let those whose habit is to judge and condemn others treat us unjustly—for in this way they are tirelessly preparing golden crowns for us for the true life. Of course, people who live with God never curse others, because there is no malice in them, only kindness. The evil that others hurl at these sanctified people is sanctified—whatever form it may take. And those who live with God, meanwhile, experience a great joy invisible to others.

The Evil Eye

Envy, which contains malice, can harm others. This is the evil eye—a demonic act.

— Geronda, does the Church recognize the evil eye?

— Yes, there is even a special prayer, “Against the Evil Eye.”⁶⁵ The “evil eye” harms others when a person says something out of envy.

— Geronda, many people ask us for amulets to protect babies from the evil eye. Is it okay to wear such amulets?

— No, you shouldn’t. Tell the mothers to put crosses on their little ones.

— Geronda, what if someone does something wonderful, another person praises them, the first person accepts the praise with pride, and then that thing gets damaged in some way—is that the evil eye?

— No, that’s not the evil eye. In this case, spiritual laws come into play. God withdraws His Grace from the person, and that is why harm occurs. The evil eye occurs only in rare cases. Especially people who are filled with malicious envy—and there are few such people—can cast the evil eye on others. For example, an envious woman sees a mother with an adorable baby and says with malice, “Why don’t I have a child like that? Why did God give it to her?” In this case, the baby may suffer: it won’t sleep, will start crying, and will be in distress because she said this with malice. And if that child were to fall ill and die, such a spiteful and envious woman would rejoice. Another, for example, sees someone else’s calf, passionately wants it to belong to her, and the animal soon dies.

However, often the mother herself is to blame for her child’s suffering. For example, a mother sees someone else’s skinny little baby and says, “How skinny! Nothing but skin and bones!” She admired her own child but looked down on someone else’s. Yet the words spoken with malice about another child strike her own child. And the child, though blameless, suffers because of the mother. The poor little one wastes away before our eyes—as a punishment for the mother, so that she may realize her guilt. But, of course, the child itself is counted among the martyrs in this case. God’s judgments are unfathomable.

⁶⁴ Luke 23:34.

⁶⁵ See Euchologion A’. Agiasmatarion. Mount Athos. 2001. p. 161. The Elder repeatedly emphasized that the prayer “From the blindness of the eyes” may be recited only by a priest.

A blessing that comes from the heart is a divine blessing

...Well, and now I, too, will “condemn you to a curse!” Here it is: “May God fill your hearts with His goodness and His abundant love to such an extent that you become mad, that your mind may be torn away from the earth and henceforth dwell close to Him, in Heaven. So become mad with the divine madness of God’s love! May God set your hearts ablaze with His love!...” This is the “curse” to which I consign you, and do not force me to repeat it—for my benevolent “curse” comes from my heart and therefore possesses power. Even while I was still at the sanatorium,⁶⁶ I felt sorry for you. Some of you waited eight years, saying, “We’ll set up a monastery,” but the monastery never materialized. You poor souls were completely worn out! Then I told you: “As soon as I’m discharged from the hospital, the monastery will spring up, as quickly as mushrooms grow after the rain. In just a year, you’ll be in the monastery!” And indeed: the monastery was built in a year. Back then at the sanatorium, I spoke from the heart, and you were well-disposed, which is why God did not abandon you. I can find no other explanation for this.

If you feel compassion for a person who is humble and sincerely asks you to pray, for example, that he might be freed from some passion that torments him, and you tell him, “Don’t be afraid; you will get better,” then [by doing so] you will give him God’s blessing. There is much love and much pain in this good wish, and that is why it possesses power. This is pleasing to God, and He fulfills the blessing. Therefore, the very pain that one person feels for another is, in itself, already a blessing.

Once, when I was a soldier, our commander sent me to fulfill a promise we had made to Saint John the Baptist after he had helped us in the war. We had vowed to buy two large church candlesticks for a small church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. So, I had to buy the candlesticks and, at the same time, escort one of our fellow soldiers to the city of Nafpaktos⁶⁷ to hand him over to the military tribunal. I remember the other officers saying to the commander: “What a great escort you found for him!” The poor man I was to escort was a native of Epirus,⁶⁸ a musician by profession, a poor man, married, with children. He was accused of self-inflicted injury—that is, of injuring himself in order to be sent to the rear. “Better,” he reasoned, “to live with one leg than to be killed.” First, we arrived in Agrinio,⁶⁹ where he had some acquaintances. “Let’s go,” he said, “and visit them.” “All right then,” I replied, “let’s go.” “Let’s go here, let’s go there”—what could I do? I had to go everywhere with him. Oh, what an ordeal! On top of that, he didn’t want me to turn him in to the court-martial. But I felt sorry for the poor fellow myself; I felt really bad for him, so I told him: “You’ll see—everything will work out for you, and you’ll end up better off than anyone else! Our commander will send a letter of explanation regarding your case, and they’ll assign you to some quiet place—so you’ll be able to help your children, and your life will be safe.” When we finally reached Nafpaktos, we learned that a letter from the commander had already arrived at the tribunal and the case against our accidental shooter had been closed. Yet he had been facing execution—those were wartime, harsh times. The commander took pity on him, since he was the head of the family, and assigned him as a cook at the Recruit Distribution Center. His family moved closer to that Center, and he got through the war better than anyone else; and since the soldiers sometimes didn’t come to the mess hall for lunch, he had food left over, which he used to feed his children. After the war, everyone told him, “You had it better than anyone else!” Because we were stuck in the mountains, in the snow. What I wished for him was pleasing to God, because I said it with pain, from the heart. That is why God granted this blessing.

⁶⁶ In 1966,

⁶⁷ A city and port in southwestern Greece—*Translator’s note*.

⁶⁸ Epirus—a region in western Greece—*Translator’s note*.

⁶⁹ A city in southwestern Greece—*Translator’s note*.

I remember another similar incident—during my time in Konitsa, at the Stomion Monastery. On September 8, the monastery celebrated its patronal feast—the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God. After the feast, the pilgrims left everything in disarray. I began quietly tidying things up. I noticed that my sister and another young woman had stayed behind to help me. This second young woman had two other sisters—one older, the other younger. Both sisters were already married, but she was still unmarried. What a selfless spirit she had! She stayed to help, and when we had cleaned and tidied everything up, she said: “Father, if there’s any other work to be done, we’ll stay and do whatever’s needed.”—“What a generous spirit!”—I thought to myself. I entered the church and said from the bottom of my heart: “Most Holy Mother of God, please take care of her Yourself. I have nothing to give her.” But even if I had had something, she wouldn’t have taken anything anyway. And so, she returned home, where one of my former colleagues was waiting for her—not just a nice guy, but a real gem, a very good man from a good family. They got married and lived happily ever after. See how the Most Holy Mother of God rewarded her!

Chapter 6. **On How Sin Brings Misfortune**

— Did you spray the trees with insecticide to get rid of the caterpillars?

— I did, Geronda.

— There are so many of you nuns—and you can’t even kill a few caterpillars! When locusts invaded the fields during the occupation, here in Chalkidiki,⁷⁰ they brought the holy belt of the Most Holy Mother of God from the Vatopedi Monastery⁷¹—and the locusts fell into the sea in whole swarms. And in Epirus, I remember, they covered the fields like snow. We all went out into the fields then—we gathered the locusts with sheets and carried them away. And what a famine there was back then! You’d better not even ask... The wheat recovered after the locusts, but it was already very, very weak.

Locust plagues, wars, droughts, and diseases—these are scourges. And it’s not that God wants to discipline people in this way; no, these misfortunes are the consequence of people’s estrangement from God. All this happens because people turn away from God. And God’s wrath comes—so that people will remember God and ask for His help. It’s not as though God orchestrates all this and issues commands for one misfortune or another to befall people. No, but God, seeing how far human wickedness will go and knowing that they will not change, allows misfortune to happen—to bring them to their senses. This does not mean that God orchestrates all this Himself.

God commanded Joshua⁷² not to exterminate one pagan tribe—the Philistines—so that when the Jews forgot God, the Philistines would become a scourge to them. So, when the Jews strayed from God, the devil asserted his authority, stirred up his “brothers”—the Philistines—and they went to war against the Jews. They took Jewish infants and dashed them against rocks to destroy [them all]. But when enemies attacked Israel through no fault of the Jews, God Himself fought on the side of the Jews. God struck the pagans with a hail of stones⁷³ and destroyed them, because in that case the Israelites were entitled to divine intervention.

⁷⁰ Chalkidiki—a peninsula and administrative unit in northeastern Greece. One of the tips of Chalkidiki is Mount Athos. —*Translator’s note.*

⁷¹ The Belt of the Most Holy Theotokos—one of the greatest Christian relics, kept at the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos. —*Translator’s note.*

⁷² See Joshua 13:1–2 and Judges 3:1–4.

⁷³ See Joshua 10:11.

How many promises did God make concerning Solomon's Temple! And yet, how many times was that Temple burned down and destroyed! When the people of Israel turned away from God, the prophets began to cry out to the people and urge them to come to their senses, but their efforts were in vain: it was like throwing peas against a wall. People reassured themselves with the following thought: "When Solomon built the Temple, God bestowed many blessings and said that from this place all people would be blessed and sanctified."⁷⁴ So all of this will remain unharmed—both our walls and our Temple. God made that promise." Yes, God did make such a promise, but on the condition that the Israelites themselves would live righteously. God bestowed His grace upon Solomon's Temple, but when the Israelites ceased to keep the commandments, by His permission the Temple was set ablaze or destroyed. But after repenting, the Israelites rebuilt the temple. For example, when they turned away from God during the reign of King Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar came, set the temple on fire, destroyed the walls of Jerusalem, and led the Jews away in chains into Babylonian captivity.⁷⁵ Of course, those who were innocent were also taken into captivity, but these people received a just retribution. Those whose guilt was great atoned for it. And those who suffered, whose guilt was not so great, received a lesser retribution. When someone provokes God's wrath and the innocent also suffer, then—even though a reward awaits the innocent sufferers—the one responsible for their suffering is still a criminal; for the innocent could have inherited the Kingdom of Heaven without suffering, whereas now they are suffering.

We must know that believers who keep God's commandments receive God's grace, and God—how best to put it—"without fail" helps them during these difficult years. I've heard that a new disease has appeared in America.⁷⁶ Many of those who live unnatural, sinful lives contract it and die. And now I've learned that this disease has appeared here as well. You see, it is not God who destroys people—people themselves are exterminating their own kind; they are destroying themselves. In other words, it is not God who punishes them, but through their sinful lives, they themselves bring about their own punishment. And it is evident that those whose lives lack meaning are being eradicated.

— Geronda, why can't they find a cure for cancer? Is God not allowing it, or are people themselves failing to seek divine help?

— The trouble is that even if a cure for cancer were found, some other disease would appear. First there was tuberculosis—they found a cure for tuberculosis—then cancer appeared. And if God helps us defeat cancer, another disease will appear. People themselves will be the cause of the emergence of new diseases, and there will be no end to it.

Everything God permits is for the good of humanity

— Geronda, why does God allow some misfortune to happen?

— There could be many reasons for this. In some cases, God allows misfortune to happen so that something better may come of it; in others, for "educational" purposes. Some receive their just reward, while others pay for their sins—nothing goes to waste. Know that everything God allows is out of love for humanity, even, for example, the death of people. After all, God is "compassionate." Remember how many the prophet Elijah put to death?⁷⁷ Three hundred priests of Baal! He said to them, "Pray, and I will pray as well. Whose fire ignites on its own—that one is the true God." Then the priests of Baal began to shout: "*Hear us, our god Baal, hear us!*" Not a word in reply. "Your god," the prophet Elijah told them, "is busy with something and cannot hear you. "Go on, shout louder!" They continued to shout and, as

⁷⁴ See 3 Kings 9:1–9.

⁷⁵ See 4 Kings 24 and following.

⁷⁶ The elder is referring to AIDS (spoken in November 1984).

⁷⁷ See 3 Kings 18:17–40.

was their custom, cut their bodies with knives so that the pain would make their cries louder and Baal would hear them. Finally, when they had achieved nothing, the prophet Elijah said, “Wet my wood,” then told them, “*Do it three times.*” They poured water over the wood and the offering—once, then again, and again! They poured so much that the wood became soggy and the water spread around the altar. As soon as the prophet Elijah prayed, fire rained down from heaven and consumed everything laid on the altar for sacrifice—along with the altar itself! “Seize the priests,” the prophet said to the people, “because they are leading the people astray into idolatry.” And then he put all those false prophets to death.

Many say, “Excuse me, but how could the prophet Elijah have put so many people to death?” God is not cruel, and neither was the prophet. However, by that time, the idolatrous priests had already led the entire nation astray. It had come to the point where the prophet was forced to say that he was the only one left! Just think about it! But besides that, the idolatrous priests suffered more from their own wounds than from the sword of the prophet Elijah, which put an end to their suffering. Their pain from self-torture was greater. You see: everything that God allows is out of love for humanity, whereas the wounds they inflicted on themselves were agonizing for them.

— And why, Geronda, did God’s punishment come so immediately in the Old Testament?

— The people of the Old Testament understood that language, that law. God was the same then as He is now, but the Old Testament law was intended for the people of that time, because they could not understand it any other way. Do not let the Old Testament law seem cruel to you or different from the Gospel. For that era, that law was beneficial. It was not the law that was cruel; it was that generation that was cruel. People today can, of course, commit even greater acts of cruelty, but now they are at least capable of understanding it. These days, all it takes is for a lamp to flicker, and people are filled with such awe! But in those days, God did all sorts of things! Consider this: He struck Pharaoh with ten plagues to bring the Israelites out of Egypt; He parted the Red Sea so they could cross it. By day He gave them a cloud to shield them from the sun, and by night a pillar of fire to guide them. And after all these miracles, they went so far as to ask for a golden calf to be made for them and began to worship it as God!⁷⁸ People today would never in a million years say that some calf or other could lead them to the Promised Land.

Today, God is pushed to the very back

The Good God bestows His abundant blessings upon us. Let us not be ungrateful or provoke His wrath, for “*the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of rebellion.*”⁷⁹ Let us not be such sons ourselves. People of our era have experienced neither war nor famine. “And we don’t need God either,” they say. They have everything and therefore value nothing. However, if hard times come—famine or something similar—and they have nothing to eat, then they will truly understand the value of a simple loaf of bread, a jar of jam, and everything else they will then be deprived of. If we do not glorify God, He allows some trial to come—so that we may appreciate what we have. But if we do appreciate what we have, God does not allow any evil to befall us.

In the old days, when there weren’t all these modern conveniences, when science hadn’t yet made such great strides forward, people had to turn to God in all their difficulties, and God helped them. But now that science has achieved great success, God is being pushed to the very back of people’s minds. Today, people go through life without God, making plans here and there, relying on the fire department one moment, on drilling wells the next, on this and that... But what can people do without God? They will only bring God’s wrath upon themselves. You see how it is: when there’s no rain, people don’t say,

⁷⁸ See Exodus 32:1–6.

⁷⁹ Eph. 5:6.

“Let’s pray to God,” but rather, “Let’s drill wells.” The trouble is that because of all these technological advances, it’s not just non-believers who think this way, but even believers—and they’re slowly beginning to forget about God’s power. Fortunately, God is patient with us. But people don’t even realize that God is providing for them.

Once, several people came to me and said, “We don’t need God: we have artesian wells.” And this at a time when, more than ever before, we need to ask God to perform a special miracle—because people have already distorted nature with the works of their own hands. Once I was watching the clouds—the wind was carrying them here and there; they would gather in one place, then drift to another, then rise up, then fall down... The wind picks up and begins to disperse the rain clouds, and people, instead of saying, “Now God must perform a true miracle to hold them back,” say, “We don’t need God.” Fortunately, God does not take our words seriously; otherwise, we would be in for a rough time.

In their search for water, people are drilling artesian wells to depths of 100–150 meters, but they aren’t finding any water. In Nafplio⁸⁰, they drilled a well 180 meters deep—and instead of fresh water, they struck seawater. Others decided to divert the Elenos River⁸¹ to Athens. But diverting it to Athens would take ten years of work and enormous expenses—and even then, that water would eventually run out. People don’t say, “*We have sinned.*” Recently, during a drought,⁸² a politician visited a remote village and told the residents that a wastewater treatment system would be installed in their village—so they would have water to drink. And they treated this idea as something extraordinary! Yet it’s indecent to even entertain such thoughts—! Look at what people have come to—drinking, pardon my language, their own urine! If something like this were happening in some big city, where people have strayed from the [true] path, then fine, there’s at least some justification for it, because the city has been swept up in a worldly spirit. But when the residents of a remote village are offered the solution of purifying and drinking their own urine, and they (instead of turning their gaze to God, saying the single word “*I have sinned,*” and receiving water from Him) consider the proposal a serious undertaking—that is terrifying.

And at one monastery on the Holy Mountain, they came up with the idea of planting pine trees and then selling them to the paper industry. And God punished them—all the trees they planted withered away. What on earth, my brother, is the Holy Mountain going to become a manufacturer of napkins and toilet paper? Do you understand what’s going on? So they toiled, planting trees, and everything they planted withered away. The wrath of God!...

— Geronda, did they realize their mistake?

— Ah, that’s just the point—they didn’t! After that, they brought in drilling rigs from Germany to pump water from deep underground. As a result, even the water that was there before disappeared. You see where a mercenary approach to things can lead if spiritual sensitivity is lost! That is why reverence is gradually disappearing from monastic life. They do not understand that if there is no rain, nothing will help—even the water that remains in the reservoirs will disappear. People rely solely on logic and push God to the very back of their minds.

The Old Testament describes such an incident.⁸³ During the Syrian siege of Samaria, the city even ran out of water. A terrible disaster ensued: famine struck, animals perished, and mothers went so far as to eat their own children. The prophet Elisha went to King Joram’s steward and said to him, “The animals have perished, and people are dying of hunger, but God will send us His help.” The steward approached everything from a logical standpoint. “How will He help?” he asked the prophet. “Will He send it from heaven, perhaps?” “Tomorrow,” the prophet replied, “God will send us help, but you will

⁸⁰ Nafplio—a city and port in the Peloponnese (southern Greece).—*Translator’s note.*

⁸¹ Elenos—a river in Central Greece. —*Translator’s note*

⁸² Delivered in November 1990.

⁸³ See 1 Kings 7.

not be the one to rejoice in it.” And indeed, the very next day, God brought terrible panic upon the enemy camp. The Syrians heard the pounding of horses’ hooves and the clatter of chariots; their ears rang, and they thought the Egyptians had come to the Israelites’ aid. They fled, leaving everything they had—tents, provisions, and weapons—behind in the camp. And when they reached their homeland, the tempter cast such terrible confusion among them that one hundred eighty thousand men killed one another. Meanwhile, the four lepers sitting at the gates of Samaria said to one another, “Why don’t we go into the enemy camp—perhaps we’ll find some food? After all, we’re going to die one way or another.” They approached one tent—no one was there. They approached another—no one! Not a single enemy in sight! They gathered food and supplies—filling whole sacks. Then they returned to the city and told the Israelites that the enemies had lifted the siege. But the Israelites decided it was a military ruse. “The enemy has gone into hiding,” they said, “to trick us into opening the gates so they can enter the city.” Then one of the commanders suggested, “We have five horses left. Perhaps we should send some soldiers on a reconnaissance mission to see what’s going on?” The soldiers set out in different directions and, upon returning, reported, “The enemies fled in panic, abandoning everything they had.” Then all the Israelites rushed to the city gates to leave the city and gather food and various items from the enemy camp. Meanwhile, the governor was standing at the city gates, trying to restore order there. And then, the crowd rushing through the gates trampled him underfoot. Everything turned out just as the prophet Elisha had foretold: the governor saw God’s help, but he did not get to rejoice in it. Do you see how God arranged everything?

May God have mercy on the world and send us rain

How wisely God has arranged everything! The snow melts—the springs fill up. But right now,⁸⁴ —there is neither snow nor rain. What will come of all this? What will people drink? May God have mercy on the world, may He be appeased toward us and send rain. For if the drought continues, even the leaves on the trees will gradually wither away. On the olive trees, not only will there be no green fruit to be seen, but not even a single green leaf. Whatever a person sows, if God does not sprinkle holy water from above—that is, rain—then everything planted will wither. Rain is holy water.

Poor people—what will they do when water is scarce, having grown accustomed to its abundance? God does not withhold water because of sins, but one can even reason simply from a human perspective: how can there be enough water if people waste it so recklessly? I can only imagine what will happen in the cities! After all, just one toilet flush requires a whole hefty tin can of water. Cities will be overrun with germs, and cholera will break out. People will die, left unburied, and their corpses will be sprinkled with some kind of disinfectant powder. Fortunately for us, God has not yet completely abandoned the world and still cares for it.

We are living in apocalyptic times. What do you think the droughts and lack of rain we endure year after year are? Have there ever been droughts like the current one before? Here in Chalkidiki, the river has dried up, the fish have died, and a foul stench has spread throughout the area. And in Thessaloniki, the water problem has become acute. In Lake Marathon⁸⁵, the water level has dropped significantly, and patches of dry land are already visible. In the Peneus River⁸⁶, the water level has also fallen. In the Evros River⁸⁷, there used to be at least a little water, but further upstream the Bulgarians have dammed it up, and it has dried up completely. If any trouble breaks out, tanks will easily cross the river. And in Cyprus—if there’s no rain again this year, the water problem will become very acute. And is that all?

⁸⁴ Delivered in November 1990 during a severe drought.

⁸⁵ A lake in southwestern Greece—Athens’s water source. – *Translator’s note.*

⁸⁶ A river in Thessaly. – *Translator’s note.*

⁸⁷ The Evros is a river in northern Greece (known as the Maritsa in Bulgaria). – *Translator’s note.*

There's so much more... Trees—some are drying up, others are diseased... People are getting sick and dying. If people don't repent, how can there be rain? Will God even send it? But do you know how everything changes when you put your trust in God? Having God as your ally—is that something to be taken lightly? For God, there are no difficult situations; it's not hard for Him to find a way out of any situation. For God, everything is simple. He doesn't use greater power for the supernatural and lesser power for the natural; He applies the same power to everything. As long as a person clings to Him—that's what matters most.

Do you pray for rain, or does this issue not concern you? Now is the very time for people to plow the land and begin sowing. The fields should already be sown, but people still cannot even manage to plow.⁸⁸ This drought is a trial from God. And praying in the face of such trials is the duty of a monk. I won't hide the fact that I am dissatisfied with you. During the last drought, when people were forced to cut the wheat for hay because of the lack of rain, you didn't even lift a finger to pray. Why? Is it because you yourselves are watering your vegetable gardens with a hose? Let this be the last time—you should feel pain for the people. When you learn of what is happening, offer a prayer about it. And write to me about what is happening. You have exams coming up. If you pass them—that is, if it rains—I will make you my fellow workers in prayer. And whatever God's Providence provides for us, we will share it among ourselves.

When, as I pray for rain, I see even a single cloud appear in the sky, I praise God for sending it—even if it doesn't rain. And my conscience reproaches me— —that within myself there are many spiritual clouds that drive away God's clouds. If we humbly ask for God's mercy, God will help. During a drought, the prayer of a humble person gathers rain clouds. Let us always pray that the rain sent by God may also have a spiritual effect, so that it may extinguish that spiritual fire which, through the devil's malice, rages in the world and scorches people's souls.

I was glad to hear some people say, "We are unworthy, but God has taken pity on us again: He has given us a little rain and snow." If we have such humble thoughts, God will give us more. At the very least, acknowledging our unworthiness is already repentance. Fortunately, there is still a little leaven left. Ask God to take a screwdriver and tighten the screws in people's minds. I see that some of those in high positions are well-disposed. They understand where we are headed.

Let us ask God to grant the world repentance

Oh, if only we realized God's long-suffering! It took a hundred years to build Noah's ark.⁸⁹ Do you think God couldn't have quickly built some ark or other? Of course He could have, but He let Noah suffer for a hundred years so that the rest would also understand what awaited them and repent. "Look," Noah told the people, "there's going to be a flood! Repent!" But they laughed at him. "What kind of box is he building?" Noah's contemporaries scoffed, and carried on as usual. And even now, God could shake the whole world in two minutes and force it to change—so that everyone would become believers, even "super-believers." How? Here's how: if He flips the switch to "earthquake" and begins to slowly turn the amplifier knob—first to "5 on the Richter scale," then to "6," then to "7"... At "eight," high-rises will start swaying like drunks and crashing into one another. At "ten," everyone will say, "We have sinned! We beg You, save us!" And maybe people will even vow to become monks—every single one of them! But as soon as the earthquake ends—even though people will still be swaying a little, they'll be able to stay on their feet—they'll rush back to the bars and nightclubs! Because in such a turn to God, there will be no true repentance; they'll utter words of repentance superficially, just to save themselves from evil.

⁸⁸ Because the soil is very dry. — *Translator's note.*

⁸⁹ See Gen. 5:32 ff.

— Geronda, what if, for example, a natural disaster occurs as God’s wrath and righteous people pray to God for mercy—does God hear their prayers?

— Do you know what the problem is here? People lack repentance, and that is why God does not hear the prayers of the righteous. If, having angered God, we acknowledge our guilt, that is an entirely different matter—then God is appeased toward us and helps us. But if a person does not admit that he has angered God and continues to go about his business as usual, how can God hear the prayers of the righteous? For God to forgive a person who has committed some transgression, that person must recognize the transgression. Furthermore, if spiritual people commit transgressions, they have no extenuating circumstances. *“For our sins and for human ignorance”*⁹⁰ — as it is said in one prayer. If the transgressions of unfortunate laypeople are “ignorance,” then the transgressions of spiritual people are already “sins.” Therefore, when spiritual people commit a transgression, it is no laughing matter. Laypeople have extenuating circumstances.

This year,⁹¹ when a fire raged on the Holy Mountain during the Dormition Fast, something terrible was unfolding. All the best firefighters gathered on Athos, but none of them could do anything; all they could do was watch as the flames raged. The firefighting aircraft seemed only to intensify and fan the fire even more. One monastery was surrounded by special firebreaks to prevent the fire from spreading through them, but the fire—defying all the firebreaks—leapt inside the monastery—into the archondarion—where no one expected it. The Holy Mountain burned for fifteen days—and on August 15,⁹² the fire went out on its own. Some said, “Why doesn’t the Mother of God put it out?” That is, we’ve already reached the point where we’re beginning to blaspheme the name of God. But when, six days later, the fire started again—this time in a different part of the Holy Mountain—it immediately began to rain and extinguished everything. One fire went out, but the other did not. Is it really not clear why?

Some people, unaware of the spiritual laws at work, pray with anguish but are not heard, since the misfortune that has befallen them is God’s wrath. Others, however, do not pray at all during a calamity—not even a single rosary—because they recognize the justice of God’s wrath, the purpose of which is to bring people to their senses. May God grant us, the monks, greater enlightenment, for for the most part we are “holy fools,”⁹³ and our lamps are filled with water—only the wick is slightly soaked with oil. Yet worldly people expect us to light their path so they will not stumble!

Let us therefore ask God to grant repentance to the world so that we may escape His righteous wrath. The coming wrath of God cannot be avoided except through repentance and keeping God’s commandments.

Part 2.

On Contemporary Culture

“Culture is a good thing, but for it to be beneficial, we must also ‘cultivate’ the soul.”

⁹⁰ The Prayer of the Offering during the Great Entrance at the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

⁹¹ Delivered in November 1990.

⁹² According to the Old Style calendar, i.e., on the very day of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos. – *Translator’s note.*

⁹³ See Matthew 23:1–13.

Chapter 1.

On God's Wisdom and the Environment

“With all wisdom You have created...”⁹⁴

— Geronda, can we destroy the swallows' nests? Swallows spread dirt, and bedbugs gather there.

— Can you yourself build even a single swallow's nest? Oh, what beauty God has created with just a single word! What harmony, what diversity! Wherever you look—God's wisdom and majesty are evident in everything. Look at the heavenly bodies, at the stars—with what simplicity His divine hand scattered them! He did not use the plumb line or level that craftsmen use. And how peaceful it is for a person to gaze at the starry sky! Whereas looking at worldly lamps arranged in neat rows tires a person greatly. With what harmony God has arranged everything! Just look at the forests planted by humans: the trees stand in military ranks—just like companies of soldiers. And how a real forest—not an artificial one like —restores a person's strength! Some trees are smaller, others larger; each tree differs from the next even in color. A single tiny flower of God's grace holds more grace than a whole armful of artificial paper flowers. They differ from one another just as the Spirit differs from spirits.⁹⁵

Everything created by God is amazing. Take the human body—it's a whole enterprise. God has wisely assigned a place for everything—the heart, the liver, the lungs. And plants—how wisely He has arranged them! During the occupation⁹⁶ we planted five stremas⁹⁷ of melons and watered them. One day, thinking I was doing the right thing to improve the melons, I cut off the large leaves near their roots. However, it turned out that these large leaves are a kind of “filter” or “kidney” for the plants, and they absorb all the bitterness. Oh, what melons we had back then! They practically burned our tongues!...

— You really do notice everything, Geronda!...

— Well, I find God in everything! In plants, in animals—in everything. And how could one not be amazed! A tiny little bird sets out on a journey, reaches Africa, then—without a compass—returns and finds its little nest! But people—even with maps and road signs—get lost. And after all, birds travel through the sky, not on land—so they don't leave any marks behind. They fly high above the sea! So tell me, please, where would you leave those marks up there? And there are even smaller birds that perch on storks' backs—just like on airplanes! Real airline passengers! Birds flying over the sea land on an island or another to rest. Once, while living in the village of the Holy Cross, I saw birds flying in from the east that looked like sparrows, only larger and more beautiful. There was a whole flock of them. But four or five of them had apparently run out of strength and could not fly any further. Then about fifteen more birds broke away from the flock—the rest continued flying—and landed on a tree alongside the exhausted birds. They sat there, rested a little, and then all soared into the sky together and continued their flight. And the first thing they did was fly very high to get their bearings and catch up with the rest. I was struck by the fact that the flock didn't leave the exhausted birds alone, but assigned them another fifteen companions—a “support group.”

How beautifully God has created everything! Just look at the kittens: how colorful they are! And what beautiful fur coats they have! We humans should be envious of the animals' coats! Not even a queen herself has ever worn a fur coat like that! Wherever you turn, you'll see God's wisdom in everything. And what beauty there used to be, when everything was natural! Look at that little rooster—he crows no matter what the weather is like. He stands on one leg, and as soon as it goes numb, he cries

⁹⁴ Ps. 103:24.

⁹⁵ The Greek text contains a remarkable play on words: διαφέρουν ὅσο διαφέρει καὶ τὸ αἶλον ἀπὸ τὸ νάυλον (lit. – they differ from one another just as the immaterial differs from polyethylene). – *Translator's note.*

⁹⁶ The occupation of Greece in 1941–44 by Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria. – *Translator's note.*

⁹⁷ Stremma—a unit of area equal to 1,000 m². – *Translator's note.*

out, “Cock-a-doodle-doo!”—“So many hours have passed,” he says. Then he stands on the other leg, and when that one goes numb too—again: “Cock-a-doodle-doo!” And look, he crows at midnight, at three, and at six in the morning. Invariably every three hours. Yet the rooster has neither an alarm clock nor batteries. And there’s no need to wind him up either...

Use everything you see and hear as a means of communication with the Heavenly Realm. Everything should lead you to Heaven. Thus, from creation, a person gradually ascends to the Creator. The Americans, having flown to the moon, at least left a plaque there inscribed with the words: “*The heavens declare the glory of God.*”⁹⁸ The Russians also flew into space, but Gagarin said he didn’t see God. Well, that’s right—how could you have seen Him? After all, you weren’t flying with your hands raised toward Heaven, but with your legs sticking straight up ... And then, from all this, they end up saying, “Nature created the universe.” The whole universe... How about that? Here, if some old car breaks down, a whole bunch of mechanics and specialists gather to fix it. They think, they try—and that’s just for one old car. Whereas God, without any electricity whatsoever, spins the entire globe, and neither the batteries run out nor the motor stops. At what speed does He spin it—and people don’t even feel it! It’s incredible! If the Earth spun any slower, people would be tumbling around. The Earth rotates at such a [high] speed, yet the water from the sea doesn’t spill out, even though there’s so much of it. And the stars, so enormous, move at a dizzying speed, yet they don’t touch one another—and from afar, they don’t let other stars come near them. And humans, having created some kind of airplane, marvel at it and take pride in it. But as soon as their minds become even slightly clouded, they start spouting all sorts of nonsense without even realizing it.

What have people managed to achieve today?

Culture is a good thing, but for it to be beneficial, the soul must also be “cultivated.” Otherwise, culture will end in disaster. “Evil,” said Saint Cosmas of Aetolia, “will come from educated people.”⁹⁹ Despite the fact that science has advanced far and achieved such great successes, people, in their efforts to help the world, do so in a way that destroys it, without even realizing it. God allowed man to do everything according to his own understanding, but by not listening to God, man is destroying himself. Man destroys himself through what he creates.

The people of the 20th century—what have they achieved with their culture and civilization! They have driven the world mad, they have polluted the atmosphere, they have ruined everything under the sun. If a wheel comes off its axle, it continues to spin aimlessly. So it is with people—having strayed from God’s axis of harmony, they suffer. In the old days, people suffered from war; today they suffer from civilization. Back then, because of war, people moved from cities to villages and lived off a small vegetable garden. But now people will be unable to live in cities and will leave them because of the onslaught of civilization. Back then, war brought death to people; now, civilization brings them disease.

— Geronda, why has cancer become so widespread?

— Chernobyl and all such things—do you think they’ve passed without a trace? That’s where it all comes from. Look at people—all this is the fruit of their actions... People are horribly disfigured. In what era were there so many sick people? In the old days, people weren’t like that. But now, no matter which letter I open from among those sent to me, I’m bound to come across either cancer, a mental illness, a stroke, or broken families. Cancer used to be rare. After all, life was natural back then. I’m not talking now about what God allowed. People ate natural food and enjoyed excellent health. Everything was pure: fruits, onions, tomatoes. But now even natural food is harming people. Those who eat only fruits

⁹⁸ Ps. 18:2.

⁹⁹ St. Cosmas’ prophecy refers to educated people who lack the fear of God. See: The Life and Prophecies of Cosmas of Aetolia. — Moscow: Holy Mountain, 2007.

and vegetables suffer even greater harm, because everything is contaminated. If things had been like this in the past, I would have died at a young age, because as a monk I ate what the garden provided: leeks, lettuce,¹⁰⁰ regular onions, cabbage, and the like—and I felt wonderful. But now—they use fertilizers, they spray pesticides... Just think about it—what people today are eating!... Mental unrest, processed foods—all of this brings illness upon a person. By applying science without discernment, people are ruining themselves.

— Geronda, why were people in the past more resilient in their ascetic practices and in better health than we are? Did what they ate make a difference?

— Yes, because in those days, food was pure. In my opinion, this is obvious without any explanation. Everything people ate was fully ripe. But now, to keep vegetables and fruits from spoiling, they're picked unripe and stored in the refrigerator. They pick unripe, green fruits from the tree and leave them to ripen in crates. In the past, once a fruit was ripe, it would fall from the tree on its own or break off the branch as soon as you touched it with your hand. Children ate bread with butter or milk, and that kept them healthy. But people, in addition to eating good, healthy food, also used their brains; and when they got sick with something, they could tell whether it was caused by their food or not. But now, the food is unnatural, and people don't use their brains.

Just look at all the shoddy stuff people produce these days! Wool is gradually being phased out. Finding a wool undershirt that absorbs sweat is a real challenge. As soon as I put on an undershirt, I can tell right away if it contains synthetic fibers. If it does, I can't breathe; I get all worked up and suffer terribly! And yet they believe that such undershirts are more durable and better than natural ones. They consider this progress! But are they good for your health? No, on the contrary, by manufacturing such items, people are harming their own health. And they slap on a label: "Made from virgin wool!" Yes, I suppose they'll come up with other catchy phrases for advertising—even "purer" ones! We only keep sheep for meat now, because we make wool out of oil. And the silkworm caterpillars say, "Well, if you want silk better than ours, then make it yourselves!.."

People have lost their patience

— Geronda, why do we lack patience today?

— Everything that's happening today is not good for people. In the past, life was peaceful, and people themselves were peaceful and very resilient—capable of enduring. Today, all this rush that has taken over the world has made people impatient. In the old days, people knew they would start eating tomatoes at the end of June. It never even occurred to them to eat tomatoes before their time. People waited until August to eat watermelon; they knew when it would be time for figs and when for melons. But what's happening now? Merchants travel to Egypt and buy tomatoes there before they're in season, even though, until the tomatoes ripen, there are oranges in Greece—with the very same vitamins. No, you see, people don't want oranges! Come on, my friend, be patient for just a little while and eat something else in the meantime! No—come what may, they'll go to Egypt and bring back tomatoes. In Crete, they took a good look at this situation and started building greenhouses so their tomatoes would ripen earlier, too. And it ended up with greenhouses being set up all over Greece so they could eat tomatoes even in winter. They're working themselves to the bone building greenhouses for all kinds of vegetables, so they can have whatever their hearts desire on the table at any time of year, without having to wait for the natural season.

That would be fine, all things considered. But they're taking it even further. The tomatoes are green in the evening, and by morning they're already being delivered to stores—red and plump! I even had a

¹⁰⁰ Lettuce (latuk) – a type of edible salad. – *Translator's note.*

few friendly words with one minister about this. “Greenhouses,” I said, “are one thing—that’s still tolerable. But they’re growing fruits, tomatoes, and other produce using hormones! The fruit ripens overnight, but do they just not care about those poor souls who are hypersensitive to hormonal drugs? Let them get sick, right...?” They’ve ruined the animals, too. Take chickens, for example, or calves. Forty-day-old chicks are pumped full of hormones until they reach the weight of six-month-olds. People eat their meat, but what good does it do them? To make cows produce more milk, they’re also stuffed with hormones. The cows produce more milk, but then the producers can’t sell it! Strikes break out, milk prices plummet, it’s poured onto the streets, and people drink milk— —that’s stuffed with hormones! But if they’d left things as God intended, everything would have gone its natural course, and people would be drinking pure, fresh milk! And besides, these injections make everything tasteless. Tasteless food, tasteless people—everything has become tasteless. Even life itself has lost its flavor for people. You ask young guys, “What do you like?”—“Nothing,” they reply. And these are strapping young men! “Well, at least tell me what you like to do?”—“Nothing.” That’s what people have come to! With their own hands, they think they can “correct God’s mistakes.” To make the hens lay eggs, they turn night into day. Have you seen the eggs laid by such hens? After all, if God had made the moon shine like the sun, people would have gone mad. God created night so that people could rest, but look where they’ve ended up now!

People have lost their sense of peace. All these greenhouses, vegetable supplements, and similar things have also made people impatient. In the old days, people knew that it would take them a few hours to walk from one place to another. If someone had stronger legs, they’d get there a little faster. Then they invented carts, then cars, then airplanes, and so on. They’re constantly trying to find newer and faster modes of transportation. They’ve built airplanes that can fly from France to America in three hours.¹⁰¹ But if a person flies from one climate zone to another at such a tremendous speed, even the sudden change in climate will harm them. It’s all rush, rush, rush... Soon enough, they’ll get to the point where a person climbs into a flying projectile, then—a blast, a flight, an impact, an explosion—and a dazed traveler appears before the public’s eyes. What did you expect? It’ll come to that. A real madhouse!

They’ve polluted the entire atmosphere—that’s one thing—but their bones got in the way

— Geronda, I hear they’re planning to cremate the dead—as they say, “for hygiene reasons and to save land.”

— For hygiene reasons? Just listen to that! Aren’t they ashamed to say such things? It’s no big deal that they’ve ruined the whole atmosphere, but the bones, you see, got in their way! But the remains, among other things, are even washed. And as for “saving land”—is it really impossible to find a place for cemeteries in all of Greece, with all its forests? I said a few kind words to a university professor about all this. How can this be: they find so much space for trash, but none for sacred remains? Is there a shortage of land or something? And how many saints’ relics could there possibly be in cemeteries? Didn’t they think about that?

In Europe, they cremate the dead not because there’s nowhere to bury them, but because cremation is considered a progressive practice. Instead of cutting down a small grove to make room for the dead, they’d rather clear the space of the dead themselves by burning them and turning them into ashes. Then they put those ashes in a tiny little box and consider the whole thing a progressive act. The dead are cremated because nihilists want to destroy everything—including human beings. They want to ensure that nothing remains to remind a person of their parents, their grandparents, or the lives of their ancestors. They want to sever people from Tradition; they want to force them to forget about the life to come and bind them to this life.

¹⁰¹ The Elder is referring to supersonic long-range passenger aircraft such as the “Concorde.”

— However, Geronda, they say that in some municipalities of Athens, such a problem has indeed arisen—there is nowhere to bury the dead.

— But there's so much empty space! Is it really impossible to find a little land? There are many vacant lots around Athens that belong to the city. And I know people in the government who own a lot of land in the suburbs of Athens. What, can't they set up a cemetery there? Besides, most of Athens' residents are originally from the provinces. Why not transport the deceased back to their hometowns and villages for burial? Let each person be taken to their homeland and buried there. There, in the provinces, funerals won't cost much—all that's needed is to pay for transporting the body. Let them announce that those who have moved to Athens in recent years should, upon their death, be buried where they came from. That would indeed be for the best. As for those families who have lived in the capital for at least three generations, a place should be found for them within the city. When, three years after the funeral, the remains are exhumed from the grave, let them be placed in deeper communal burial pits.¹⁰² Is that really so difficult? Look how deep people dig into the ground to mine coal. Let them build some kind of large repository for the remains and store them all together there.

Respect has completely vanished. Just look at what's going on now! Children are sending their own parents to nursing homes! But in the old days, they even took care of aging oxen—they didn't slaughter them, but said, "After all, they're our providers." And how they honored the dead!... I remember the war: what a risk we took to go bury the fallen! The priest, of course, was obliged to go. But the soldiers went with him—carrying the bodies of their fallen comrades—through snowdrifts, in the freezing cold, under a hail of bullets. During the Civil War in 1945, before being drafted into the army, I helped our church sexton gather and bury the fallen. The priest led the way with a censer. As soon as we heard the whistle of a shell, we would throw ourselves to the ground. Then we'd get back up. Another shell whistled—back to the ground again. Later, when I was already a soldier and we were sitting barefoot in the snow, we were told that anyone who wanted to could go and remove the shoes from the dead. No one even moved from their spot. Ah, those were the good old days!

The problem is that those in power remain silent and acquiesce to what is happening. From the moment this problem with the deceased arose, the Church should have taken and expressed a clear position so that the problem could be resolved, because [through its silence] the Church gives the people of this world the opportunity to interfere in spiritual matters and say whatever comes into their heads. But this is godlessness. And how will the present world receive God's blessing? What have we come to! They are gradually trying to strip people of their dignity. Ah, that is why there are now plenty of places for the dead—even more than enough...

Environmental Pollution and Destruction

The sun beats down like on Mount Sinai—even in winter, because ozone holes have opened up in the atmosphere. If there's no north wind blowing, it's impossible to stand in the sun.

— Geronda, how will this ozone problem end?

— We'll just have to be patient a little while longer, until the scientists grab five kilograms of putty and patch up the hole! Yes, yes, let them go and fix the ozone holes in the atmosphere. They'll see that God created everything with great wisdom and harmony, and they'll say, "We're sorry for messing things up." As for this hole in the atmosphere—pray that it closes. You see, one of the "bowls"¹⁰³ has opened there as well. Trees and plants are withering. However, God can set everything right again.

¹⁰² On Mount Athos and throughout Greece in general, the remains of the deceased are exhumed from the grave 3–4 years after death, washed, and placed in special burial chambers. If the body of the deceased has not decomposed, it is reburied in the grave, and prayers for the repose of the departed are intensified. – *Translator's note.*

¹⁰³ See Rev. 15:7.

And just look at how cunning some of those charlatans have become, fleecing the wealthy who have nowhere else to spend their money. “An ozone hole,” they say, “has opened in the atmosphere. The world will perish. How can we save the world? Here’s how—science is developing plans for deep mines and relocating people underground to protect them from the sun.” Finally, when it became clear that “relocating underground” was impossible, they started saying something else: “Housing construction will be launched on the Moon; restaurants, hotels, and homes will be built, and people will move there. Those wishing to go to the Moon with a guarantee are asked to make contributions!” But there isn’t a shred of truth in any of this, by the way! What “housing construction” are they talking about when humans aren’t even capable of living there at all! Well, a couple of people climbed into “cans,” flew up there, and came back. And some people believe all these fairy tales and hand over their money.

— Geronda, many people are concerned about exhaust fumes and industrial emissions.

— We need to make sure certain factory directors install purification filters on their chimneys so that people who are choking on industrial fumes can at least breathe a little easier. Instead of bribing members of parliament and looking out for their own interests, every factory director should spend a little more money and buy a purification system. In the old days, there were no germs or soot like this. But now they’ve ruined everything and still call it progress. And where does such “progress” lead? It destroys people. You step outside, and the air reeks of soot. You sit at home, and the moment you crack open a window, the soot from the street creeps inside. And when you wash your hands, this soot doesn’t wash off—which means it’s not harmless. Soot from a stove doesn’t contain any oils, so as soon as you cough, it comes right out of your lungs. But this industrial soot doesn’t leave your lungs—it sticks to them.

In high-rises, people are crammed together like sardines in a can—one on top of the other. Someone beats out rugs on their balcony, and all the dust flies onto the balcony of their neighbor below. How those poor souls on the lower floors suffer! All the dust and debris from the upper floors flies down to them. A person hangs laundry on their balcony or opens a window, and from above they start shaking out rugs without a second thought for them. Back in the old days, they would have turned such high-rises into prisons—Iendi-Kule.¹⁰⁴ It’s just awful! After all, back then, the buildings had courtyards where animals grazed, and nearby there was a little garden with trees where whole flocks of birds would gather...

— But now, Geronda, people don’t even see swallows.

— What do you mean, swallows? Have they gone mad, flying into high-rises? It’ll gradually come to the point where people won’t even know what a swallow is. In America, at one university, there’s a department where the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are studied from a historical perspective. So, to help students understand what “wheat” is, they have a field planted with wheat. And to help them understand what a “shepherd” and “sheep” are, they have a small flock of sheep and a shepherd with a staff. And this is happening at a university!

People have already polluted the entire atmosphere. It’s winter outside, yet the air reeks of garbage. Just imagine what it’s like in the summer! And yet they don’t send in a plane to spray the garbage dumps with some kind of disinfectant solution. Fortunately for us, God created fragrant flowers. All these many flowers—both large and small—all this floral diversity neutralizes the stench of the garbage. And what would happen if this floral fragrance weren’t spread throughout the atmosphere? Just think—if there’s carrion lying around somewhere, the stench spreads throughout the whole neighborhood. How God cares for us! And how miserable we would be if He didn’t care for us! Think about it: if there were no flowers, no plants... After all, it is their fragrances that cover and dispel our stench.

¹⁰⁴ Prisons that were located within the fortress walls of Thessaloniki in ancient times.

Once, a layperson came to my hermitage and asked, “Listen, what are you doing here? What do you do all day and all night?” And just at that moment, clusters of small shrubs were blooming all around, and the hillside adjacent to the hermitage was full of wildflowers. Everything was fragrant. “Well,” I said, “I don’t even have time to stretch my back! All day long, I water and tend to all these flowers and plants that you see. And at night— —did you see how many little lamps are burning in the sky? Try to light them all in time!” He started looking at me strangely, but I continued my explanation: “Come on, haven’t you seen how those little lamps burn in the sky at night? Well, I’m the one who lights them! Try to do it yourself! Do you think it’s easy to adjust the floats and wicks and refill all those lamps with oil...?” After hearing this, the poor fellow was seriously flustered.

And spraying—that’s poison, too. It’s not just pests that die from the sprays, but poor birds as well. To cure trees of diseases, they’re sprayed with toxic chemicals, and then people get sick. Everything is being poisoned. Wouldn’t it be wiser to use fewer chemicals and bury rotten plants in the ground—instead of burying good fruit, as they do now [so that it doesn’t lose value]? A whole cloud of toxic chemicals—is that harmless to humans? Especially for small children—for them, all these toxic chemicals are simply deadly. That’s why children are born already sick. I said to one agronomist: “What on earth is going on! You’ve wiped out the insects, and now people are dying.” To kill the insects, they spray the flowers, and afterward people get sick. And then they’ll invent even more toxic chemicals—stronger than the current ones—but what good will that do us?

It has already been proven that some of the insects killed by spraying were preying on other insects. Now, to get rid of the others, we’ll have to artificially breed the very ones we killed before. How wisely God has arranged everything! Where there are crickets, there are no mosquitoes. Once, a man came to my hut and showed me a small device that repels mosquitoes with sounds resembling the chirping of a cricket, only coarser. People kill the crickets that delight us with their music, and then they want to use batteries to reproduce what God has already created. We’ve wiped them all out—crickets and doves alike... It’s even rare to spot a crow these days. Soon we’ll be catching crows and putting them in cages.

And you, when you spray the trees, leave something for God, so that He may help you. And if the chemical doesn’t get on a single leaf, there’s nothing wrong with that. All of today’s technological tools do not support a person in their faith. Once, while visiting someone, I heard people say, “Has a new pesticide for such-and-such a pest really come out? Where? Abroad?” And right away they started calling to order it. Gradually, both laypeople and monks are pushing God to the very back. People do not give primary importance to spiritual evolution—so that everything may be sanctified. The problem is that even we, the monks, are not leading the way in spiritual evolution ahead of laypeople.

— Geronda, however, the olive trees are really being ruined by the dakos—the olive pest.

— Pray with your rosary for the dakos to go away. Don’t fight pests with just spraying; ask Christ for help as well. Besides, we want to do everything just as well as laypeople do. We forget that monks are supposed to have a different kind of life. Don’t strive to do the same things as laypeople—or even more than they do. Have you forgotten about Christ? I’m not saying you shouldn’t spray the trees at all, but some people are conducting real experiments with these toxic chemicals. And when there really is a need to spray the trees, wear respirators.

It is better to eat fruit that has been slightly nibbled by a bug than [fruit that looks beautiful but is] sprayed with poison. Do not get carried away with spraying—cut back on it. Pray with reverence—read Psalm 1¹⁰⁵ and sprinkle the trees with holy water. If you live righteously, then the rains will pour down, and the caterpillars¹⁰⁶ will perish. God will provide for you—you must have reverence and trust in Him.

¹⁰⁵ The Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia would recite the first psalm while planting trees and plants—so that what was planted would bear good fruit.

¹⁰⁶ Spoken during a severe drought in November 1990. In June of that same year, there were many caterpillars in Greece.

Chapter 2.

On how an era of many conveniences is equivalent to an era of many problems¹⁰⁷

People's hearts, too, have turned to iron

Human comforts have crossed all boundaries and have therefore turned into hardships. As machines have multiplied, so have our troubles. Machines and metal contraptions now command people, turning them into machines themselves. That is why people's hearts have turned to iron. Despite all the existing technological means, human conscience remains uncultivated. In the past, people worked with the help of animals and were characterized by compassion. If you loaded a poor animal with a burden heavier than it could bear, it would sink to its knees, and you would feel sorry for it. If it was hungry and looked at you pitifully, your heart would bleed. I remember how we suffered when our cow fell ill—we considered her a member of our family. But today, people deal with pieces of metal, and their hearts are just as hard as iron. Did some piece of metal break? Send it to be welded. Did the car break down? Take it to the repair shop. Can't be fixed? Off to the junkyard—no hard feelings. "Metal," they say, "is just metal." People's hearts don't beat at all, and yet this is how self-love and selfishness take root in a person.

Today, people don't think about one another. In the old days, [when there were no refrigerators], if food was left over for the next day, it would go bad. So people thought of the poor and said, "It's going to go bad anyway, so I'd better take it to some beggar." And those who were spiritually advanced would say, "Let the poor person eat first, and then I will." Nowadays, leftover food is put in the refrigerator, and people don't think about their neighbors in need. I remember how, back in those days, when we had a good harvest of vegetables and other fruits, we would give vegetables to our neighbors—we would share them. What were we going to do with so much? The surplus would have gone bad anyway. Nowadays, people have refrigerators, and they say, "Why give the surplus to others? We'll put it in the fridge and eat it ourselves later." I won't even mention that tons of food are thrown away or buried in the ground—while millions of people are starving elsewhere.

People Have Gone Mad Because of Machines

Modern technology keeps developing and developing—endlessly. It develops faster than the human mind because the devil is helping in its development. In the old days, without all these devices, all these phones, fax machines, and all this pile of gadgets, people had peace and simplicity.

— Geronda, they rejoiced in life!

— Yes, but now, because of cars, people have gone mad. Many of these conveniences cause them suffering; they're suffocated by anxiety. I remember the Bedouins I knew during my time in Sinai,¹⁰⁸ — how joyful they were! They had just one tent, and they lived simply. They couldn't live in Alexandria or Cairo—life in tents in the desert suited them perfectly. If they had just a little tea, they were overjoyed and praised God. But now civilization has reached them too, and they, too, have begun to forget God.

¹⁰⁷ A reading of this chapter allows one to sense the highly ascetic spirit that characterized Elder Paisios himself, as well as the concern he felt that the ascetic spirit of the entire monastic community might be subject to change. The Elder is not opposed to culture, but he wishes to emphasize that it is not culture that should govern man, but man who should govern culture. The Elder said that monks, in particular, should avoid becoming dependent on modern technology and should use it judiciously so that they may direct their energies toward the spiritual struggle.

¹⁰⁸ In 1962–1964,

Even the Bedouins have fallen under the influence of the European spirit! First, the Jews built shacks for the Bedouins, then sold them old cars from all over Israel.¹⁰⁹ Oh, those Jews... Now every Bedouin has a shack, a broken-down car in the yard, and a heart full of anxiety and worry. Cars break down, and the Bedouins struggle to fix them. And if you really think about it, what have they gained from all this? A headache and nothing more.

Back in the old days, things were at least sturdy; they lasted a long time. But now—you pay a fortune and buy things that break right away. And that plays right into the hands of companies—they ramp up production and make a killing off of it. Then people run out of money, and, trying to earn more, they work themselves to the bone. All these machines and mechanisms are the domain of Europeans, who sit around all day with screwdrivers in their hands. First they make, say, some kind of lid. Then they add a screw thread to it, then a button—they keep improving that poor lid more and more... In other words, new machines and gadgets are constantly appearing, and these unfortunate people are always craving something more sophisticated. Before they've even finished paying off the old one, they buy something new, which is why they're in debt and exhausted. Take a poor man, for example: he wants a car too, so he goes out and buys one of the cheapest models available. And to buy it, he sells his oxen, his horses—he sells everything he has left. It's coming to the point where soon they'll even put donkeys in shop windows and charge people just to look at them! So there you have it: the poor man buys himself some cheap little car. The car breaks down. "But for cars like that," they tell him, "there are no spare parts." The poor fellow is forced to buy another car. However, the latest model is beyond his means, so he buys one that's just a little better than the one he had before, and sets the old one aside. Then the new one breaks down too, and so on... We need to be careful not to get swept up in this trendy pursuit of something ever more perfect.

Television has caused people enormous harm

— Geronda, there are now such means of television communication that one can observe what is happening on the other side of the world at that very moment.

— People see the whole world, yet fail to see themselves. It is not God who destroys people; no, people are now destroying themselves with their own minds.

— Geronda, television brings a lot of evil.

— "A lot of evil!..." What are you talking about!... One man told me, "Father, television is a good thing." — "Eggs," I replied, "are also a good thing, but if you mix them with chicken droppings, they become good for nothing." That's exactly what happens with television and radio. Today, when you turn on the radio to listen to the news, you have to accept that, in addition to the news, you'll have to listen to some song. The news will start as soon as that song ends. It used to be different. Back then, people knew exactly when the news would be broadcast on the radio. People would turn on the radio at a specific time and listen to the latest news. But now you're forced to listen to a song as well, because if you turn off the radio without wanting to hear it, you'll miss the news too.

Television has done people a great deal of harm. It has a particularly destructive effect on young children. Once, a seven-year-old boy came to my hut with his father. I saw the television demon speaking through the child's mouth, just as a demon speaks through the mouths of the possessed. It's as if a baby were born with teeth. These days, you don't often see normal children—children have turned into monsters. Children don't think for themselves; they simply repeat what they've seen and heard. In this way, through television, some people want to brainwash the world. That is, [according to their plans], everyone else is supposed to believe what they've heard [on TV] and act accordingly.

¹⁰⁹ Mount Sinai, which is currently part of Egypt, was under Israeli control at that time.

— Geronda, mothers are asking us: how can we wean our children off television?

— Let them explain to their children that watching TV will dull their minds and rob them of their ability to think. I won't even mention how TV damages their eyesight. The television we're talking about now is a human creation. But there is another kind—spiritual television. When the spiritual eyes of a Christian are cleansed by the shedding of the old self, he can see far distances even without technical aids. Haven't mothers told their children about this kind of television? It is precisely this—spiritual television—that children need to understand. But when sitting in front of the “box,” children simply become dull-witted. The first humans possessed the gift of discernment, which they lost after the Fall. If, however, children preserve the Grace they received in Holy Baptism, then they too will possess the gift of discernment—spiritual television. One must be attentive and engage in spiritual labor. Today's mothers ruin themselves with useless pursuits, and then they begin to lament: “What am I to do, Father? I'm losing my child!..”

The Monk and Modern Technological Advances

— Geronda, how should a monk use modern technology?

— A monk should strive to ensure that the tools he uses are always simpler than those used by people in the secular world. For example, I like firewood: to heat the stove, cook food, and kindle the fire needed for handicrafts. However, if this whole trade in Athos timber continues for some time in the same vein as it is now, and firewood runs out or becomes hard to come by, then I will use some simpler means than those used by people in the secular world. For heating—a kerosene stove or something else, cheaper and more humble; for handicrafts—a primus stove, and so on.

— And how can one determine to what extent something is necessary in a communal monastery?

— If one thinks like a monk, this can be determined. But if one does not think like a monk, then whatever one takes will become a necessity, and eventually the monk himself will become a layperson—or even worse. We monks should live at least a little more simply than people in the world do, or—at the very least—the way we ourselves lived before entering the monastery. We must not possess things better than those we had at home before. The monastery must be poorer than the secular home from which I came. This helps both the monk and the world inwardly.

God has arranged everything so that people do not find rest in perishable things. If this worldly progress torments even laypeople, what can be said about monks! If I were to find myself in some wealthy home and the host asked me, “Where shall I prepare a place for you to spend the night? I can make up a bed for you in the lavishly furnished living room or in the goat shed, where I keep the goats at night. Which would you prefer?”—I give you my word, my soul would be more at peace in the goat shed. After all, when I became a monk, I left the world not to find myself some better house or palace. I became a monk in order to find something more austere than what I had while living in the world. Otherwise, I'm doing nothing for Christ. But people who live by the laws of modern logic would say to me: “Listen, how could living in a palace possibly harm your soul? After all, it smells so bad out there in the barn, whereas in the palace the smell is pleasant, and you can have admirers.” We must have a sense of the spiritual. Just like a compass—both needles are magnetized, and that is why one needle points north. Christ is “magnetized,” but in order to turn toward Him, we, too, need to become a little “magnetized.”

And what difficulties there used to be in communal monasteries! I remember there was a huge cauldron in the kitchen that was lifted using a special lever. We built a fire with firewood to cook. The flames would flare up and then die down, and the food would burn. If the fish burned, we'd scrub the baking sheets with a metal brush. Then we'd take the ashes from the stove, fill a large clay vessel with a hole in the bottom with them, and pour water over the ashes. Lye would flow out of the hole at the

bottom, which we used to wash the dishes. The lye corroded our hands. And we drew water up into the archondarik using a rope and a pulley.

Some of what is happening in monasteries today cannot be justified. I saw how, in one monastery, they cut bread using an electric bread slicer. What kind of nonsense is that? If the baker is sick or weak and can't cut bread with a knife, and there's no one to replace him, then fine—an electric bread slicer is somehow justified. But now you can see a strapping young man cutting loaves with a circular saw! He might as well be working as a compressor himself, yet he uses machinery to slice bread and even considers it an achievement!...

Strive to move forward spiritually. Do not take delight in all these machines, conveniences, and the like. If the spirit of asceticism departs from monastic life, then the monks' lives have no meaning. We will not succeed if we place conveniences above the monastic life. A monk avoids conveniences because, spiritually speaking, they do not help him. Even in secular life, people are weighed down by an abundance of comforts. For a monk—even if his soul were to find peace in worldly things—comfort is all the more unbecoming. Let us not seek it, then. In the time of the Venerable Arsenius the Great, there were no “luxury” kerosene lamps,¹¹⁰ nor any other lighting devices. In palaces, lamps fueled by very pure oil were used. Couldn't Arsenius the Great have taken such a lamp with him into the desert? He could have, but he did not. In the desert, he used a wick or a piece of cotton wool soaked in ordinary vegetable oil, and that was sufficient for his lighting.¹¹¹

Having various tools, technical aids, and other conveniences at our disposal in our daily duties, we often justify ourselves by saying that all of this is necessary for us to get the work done quickly, and that we would supposedly use the time freed up for spiritual pursuits. But, in the end, we lead a life full of worries and mental agitation—not as monks, but as people of this world. When a new community of young monks arrived at a certain monastery, the first thing they did was buy pressure cookers—so that they would have more time to follow the monastic rule. Then these monks would sit around for hours doing nothing and engaging in various conversations. So, using various conveniences to save time and devote it to something spiritual doesn't work out. Today, with the help of these conveniences, monks gain time, but they have no time left for prayer.

— Geronda, I've heard that even the Venerable Athanasius of Mount Athos¹¹² is called a man of progressive views!

— Yes, very progressive! Just as progressive as today's “progressives”!... If only they would read even a little of the life of the Venerable Athanasius! The number of monks in his monastery reached eight hundred, even a thousand, and how many other people came to him for help! How many beggars, how many hungry people came to the Lavra for a piece of bread and in search of shelter! And so the venerable one, striving to help everyone, bought two oxen for the monastery mill. Let today's “pioneers” buy themselves some oxen too! In order to feed people bread, Saint Athanasius was forced to set up a bakery at the Lavra—a modern one by the standards of that era. Byzantine emperors bestowed property and lands upon monasteries because, at that time, monastic communities also served as charitable institutions. Monasteries were established to help the people both spiritually and materially. That is why the emperors gave them gifts.

¹¹⁰ A specially designed kerosene lamp that gives off a very bright light. — *Translator's note.*

¹¹¹ St. Arsenius the Great was born in Rome around 354. He was renowned for his wisdom and virtue. He was called the “father of kings” because Emperor Theodosius entrusted him with the upbringing of his two sons. In 394, following a divine calling, he withdrew to the Egyptian desert. Despite his former life in palaces, as a monk he was distinguished by extraordinary austerity and asceticism.

¹¹² The Venerable Athanasius of Athos (†1000)—founder of the Great Lavra on Mount Athos, father of communal monasticism on the Holy Mountain, and a grace-filled ascetic who was granted the gift of performing miracles both during his lifetime and after his death.—*Translator's note*

We need to understand that everything will disappear, and we will stand before God as debtors. It would be right for us monks to make use not of the things that people today throw away, but of those that the wealthy of former times discarded in landfills as unnecessary. Remember two things: first, that we will die, and second, that we may not die a natural death. You must be prepared for a violent death. If you keep these two things in mind, then all other matters will go well—both in spiritual matters and in any other regard—and everything will then fall into place.

Deprivation helps people a great deal

— Geronda, why do people suffer so much today?

— Because they avoid hard work. Comfort—that is what brings people illness and suffering. In our age of convenience, people have become dull-witted. And softness and pampering have also brought many illnesses. How people used to toil, threshing wheat! What hard work that was—but think of the bread—how sweet it was back then! Could you ever have seen a piece of bread thrown away anywhere? When people saw a piece of bread that had fallen, they would pick it up and kiss it. Those who lived through the occupation see an extra slice of bread and carefully set it aside. The rest, however, throw away extra bread—they don't understand the price at which it is obtained. They don't value bread—they toss whole pieces into the trash. God gives people His blessings, but most people don't even say, "Glory to You, God," in response. Today, everything comes easily to people, without effort.

Deprivation is very helpful to people. By experiencing a lack of something, by being deprived of something, people become able to recognize the value of what they have lost. And those who consciously, thoughtfully, and humbly deprive themselves of something for the sake of Christ's love experience spiritual joy. If, for example, someone were to say, "So-and-so is sick, and so today I will not drink any water. My God, this is the most I can do." And if a person does this, then God will quench their thirst not with water, but with a sweet, refreshing drink—divine consolation.

People who are suffering feel a deep sense of gratitude for even the smallest act of kindness shown to them. But a spoiled child of wealthy parents is never satisfied—even if his mother and father fulfill his every whim. Such a child may have everything and yet be tormented, lose his temper, and climb the walls. Meanwhile, some unfortunate children feel immense gratitude for even the slightest help they receive. If some kind person pays for their trip to Mount Athos, how they thank both him and Christ! But from many rich children you hear: "We have everything—why do we have everything?" Lacking nothing, they whine instead of thanking God and helping the poor. This is the greatest ingratitude. They lack nothing materially, and that is why they feel a void within themselves. Parents give their children everything on a silver platter, and because of this, the children rebel against them, leave home with just a backpack, and wander aimlessly around the world. Parents even give them money so they can call home and let them know they're doing fine, but the kids couldn't care less about their parents' requests. Then the parents start looking for them. One young man had everything, but nothing brought him joy. And so, just to have some fun, he ran away from home and slept on trains—even though he came from a good family. Whereas if he'd had some kind of job and earned his bread by the sweat of his brow, his labor would have had meaning, and he himself would have found peace and praised God.

Today, most people do not experience hardship. That is precisely why they lack love. If a person does not work himself, he cannot appreciate the labor of others. It's a piece of cake to find a job, earn money, and then go looking for hardship—what's the point in that? Take the Swedes, for example, who receive government benefits for everything they need to live and therefore do not work—[out of idleness] they loiter on the streets. All their labor goes to waste; they are restless inside because they have strayed from the spiritual path. They roll aimlessly [through life], just as a wheel that has come off its axle rolls down the road—until they fall into the abyss.

An abundance of comforts renders a person good for nothing

Today, people strive for beauty and are beguiled by it. This plays right into the hands of Europeans¹¹³—they keep tinkering away with their screwdrivers, crafting something new—beautiful and supposedly more practical—so that people don’t even have to lift a finger. In the old days, working with traditional tools, people actually became stronger themselves. But after working with today’s machines and devices, they have to resort to physical therapy and massage. Just think—doctors are now giving massages! Today you see carpenters with bellies hanging down just like that! But could you ever have seen a potbellied carpenter in the old days? How could a carpenter who spent all day planing wood with a plane ever develop a belly?

When conveniences become excessive, they render a person useless. A person turns into an idler. He can flip something over with his hand, but he says, “No, I’d better just press the button and let it flip itself!” If a person gets used to things being easy, then he wants everything to be easy. People today want to work as little as possible while earning a lot of money. And if they can get by without working at all, so much the better! This mindset has also seeped into our spiritual lives—we want to be sanctified without effort.

And this is precisely why most people have become so frail—because of their easy lives. If a war were to break out, how could people endure it, being so spoiled? In the past, people were, at the very least, toughened by hardship and could withstand difficulties—even children. But now—it’s nothing but vitamins B, C, and D, and “Mercedes” limousines—people can no longer live without all of that. Take any frail child, for example—if he works, his muscles will strengthen. Many parents come and ask me to pray for their children, saying, that they are paralyzed. But in reality, they aren’t paralyzed—they just have some weakness in their legs. The parents keep feeding and feeding such a child, and he just sits and sits. But the more he sits, the more his legs atrophy. And then the parents put the child in a wheelchair and ask me, “Pray for us—my child is paralyzed.” But who is really paralyzed—the child or the parents? I advise such parents to feed the child something light that doesn’t cause weight gain and to encourage him to walk little by little. Gradually, these children lose weight, their movements become more and more natural, and then, before you know it, they start playing soccer! But for children who are truly paralyzed—those whom we cannot help through human means—God will help them. There was a boy in Konitsa who was very restless and stepped on a landmine. His leg was so twisted that he couldn’t straighten it. However, this disability didn’t make him any calmer. Because of his liveliness, he constantly moved his crippled leg; the tendons strengthened, and his leg became healthy. And later, he even fought as a partisan in Zervas’s unit.¹¹⁴

And when sciatica twisted my leg,¹¹⁵ I prayed with my rosary, walking slowly back and forth, and my leg grew stronger. Movement often helps. If I get sick and after two or three days the illness doesn’t go away—so that I can’t even move—then I ask God: “My God, just help me get up a little and move from where I am, and then I’ll manage on my own. I’ll go chop some firewood.” If I stay lying down, I’ll feel even worse. So I gather my courage and, even when I have a cold, force myself to get up and go chop firewood. I wrap up tightly, work up a sweat, and the whole cold just comes out. You’d think I didn’t know that lying in bed is more comfortable! But I force myself to get up—and who knows where it all goes! When I’m receiving visitors, I know in advance that sitting on a stump will make my whole body

¹¹³ When speaking of Europeans and the West, the Elder does not disparage the peoples of America and Western Europe, but seeks to denounce the godless and rationalistic spirit that prevails in those countries.

¹¹⁴ Napoleon Zervas (1891–1957)—leader of the anti-fascist movement “National Greek Democratic Union,” which fought against the Nazis in Epirus and certain other regions of Greece. —*Translator’s note.*

¹¹⁵ Inflammation of the sciatic nerve. — *Translator’s note.*

go numb. Of course, I could lay a mat on the stump, but then I'd have to lay them out for others too—and where would I get that many mats? So at night, I walk around for an hour and pray with my rosary. Then I stretch out my legs for a while so the blood doesn't pool in them—I have problems with that, too. If I were to just leave myself alone, I'd need to be taken care of. Whereas now [on the contrary], I'm serving others. Do you understand that? So let a person not take pleasure in lying in bed—there's no benefit in it.

— Geronda, are comforts and physical comfort harmful to a person in every case?

— Sometimes they're necessary. For example, if something hurts—well, then don't sit on a hard surface, but on something soft. But “soft” doesn't mean velvet. Just put down a simple piece of cloth. If you have the courage, though, don't put anything down at all.

— Geronda, there are people about whom people say, “He's a tough old bird.”

— Yes, there are such people. On Mount Athos, not far from my kaliva, there lives a Cypriot monk—Elder Joseph, a native of Karpasia.¹¹⁶ The elder is one hundred and six years old,¹¹⁷ and he takes care of himself. Would you find anything like that in the secular world today? Some of today's retirees can't even walk; their legs are getting weak, and from sitting around, they're getting fat and becoming good for nothing. But if they were kept busy with some kind of work, they would benefit immensely from it. Once, Elder Joseph was taken to the Vatopedi Monastery. They washed all his clothes, bathed him, and showered him with care. But he said to them, “As soon as I arrived here, I fell ill. And it's all because of you. Take me back to my hermitage to die.” They had no choice but to take him back. One day I came to visit him. “So,” I said, “I heard you moved to the monastery.” “Yes,” he replied, “that's right. They came by car, took me to Vatopedi, washed me, cleaned me up, and took care of me, but I got sick and told them, ‘Take me back.’” No sooner had I returned than I was cured!” He can't see anymore, but he weaves rosaries. Once I gave him some vermicelli, and he even took offense: “Does Elder Paisios really think I'm a consumptive, sending me vermicelli?” Just imagine—he eats beans, lentils, and broad beans—he's so healthy you'd think he were a young man. He walks leaning on two canes, and still manages to gather herbs, which he boils and eats. He plants onions in his garden! He carries water himself to wash his clothes and wash his hair! And then he also conducts the divine service, reads the Psalter himself, follows his monastic rule, and prays the Jesus Prayer. He hired two roofers to re-thatch the roof and, with his canes in hand, climbed the ladder to see how they were working. “Come back down,” the workers told him. “No way,” he replies, “I'll climb up and take a look—see how you're roofing it.” Of course, he suffers greatly. But do you know what joy he feels? His heart soars upward like a bird! The other monks secretly take his clothes and wash them. Once I asked him, “What do you do with your clothes?” “Well,” he says, “they often take them to wash—without my knowing. But I wash them myself, too: I put them in a trough, pour water over them, and then give them a good beating with a ‘wedge’ on top!”¹¹⁸ After a few days, they come out as good as new!” See what trust he has in God! Others have everything their hearts desire, yet they're plagued by fear and the like. He, on the other hand, fell ill from worry, but as soon as they left him alone, he recovered.

An easy life is no good for a person. Comfort has no place for a monk; convenience brings dishonor to the desert. You may have been spoiled by your former life, but if you're healthy, you need to toughen yourself up. Otherwise, you're no monk.

¹¹⁶ A city in Cyprus. – *Translator's note.*

¹¹⁷ In November 1990

¹¹⁸ Elder Joseph was referring to the “CLEAN” laundry detergent.

Chapter 3.

On the Need to Simplify One's Life in order to rid yourself of mental anxiety

Worldly success brings worldly anxiety to the soul

The more people stray from a natural, simple life and prosper in luxury, the more their inner anxiety grows.

And because they are drifting farther and farther away from God, they find no peace anywhere. That is why people spin restlessly—like a machine's drive belt around a "mad wheel."¹¹⁹ They are already spinning around the Moon, because the entire Earth cannot contain their great restlessness.

Worldly ease and worldly success bring worldly anxiety to the soul. External education, combined with inner anxiety, drives hundreds of people—even young children who have lost their peace of mind—to psychoanalysis and psychiatrists every day. More and more psychiatric hospitals are being built, and continuing education courses for psychiatrists are being launched, even though many of these psychiatrists neither believe in God nor acknowledge the existence of the soul. How, then, can these people—who are themselves filled with inner anxiety—help other souls? How can a person who does not believe in God and in true, eternal life after death be truly comforted? If a person comprehends the deepest meaning of true life, all anxiety vanishes from his soul, divine comfort comes to him, and he is healed. If the patients in a psychiatric hospital were read aloud the writings of Abba Isaac the Syrian, those who believe in God would be healed, because the deepest meaning of life would be revealed to them.

At any cost—through sedatives and various practices like yoga—people strive to find peace, but they do not seek the true peace that comes to those who have humbled themselves and brings them divine consolation. Just think how all these tourists, coming here from other countries, are tormented—under the scorching sun, in the heat and dust, amid the noise and commotion, wandering the streets! What a burden, what inner restlessness oppresses and torments their souls, if they consider all that they have to endure to be rest! How must their own "ego" be weighing down these people's souls, since they think they are resting while experiencing such torment!

If we see a person suffering from intense emotional distress, grief, and sorrow, even though they have everything their heart could desire—then we must realize that they do not have God. After all, people suffer because of their wealth, too. Material possessions leave them feeling empty inside, and they suffer all the more. I know such people—those who have everything, yet have no children and are tormented. It is a burden for them to sleep, a burden to walk; whatever they do is torture for them. "Well, then," I said to one of them, "since you have free time, devote yourself to your spiritual life. Say your prayers,¹²⁰ read the Gospel."—"I can't."—"Well, then do something good—go to the hospital, visit someone who's sick."—"Why should I go there," he says, "and what good will it do?"—"Then go help some poor person in the neighborhood."—"No—that's not my thing either." To have free time, several houses, all the comforts of life, and yet to be tormented! And do you know how many people are just like him? There they are, tormenting themselves—until they go mad. How terrifying that is! And the most tormented and miserable of all are those who don't work but live off the income from their property. For those who at least work, things are still a little easier.

¹¹⁹ In the old days, in manufacturing, a "crazy wheel" was the term for a non-working wheel onto which a drive belt was placed in order to stop the machine without turning off the motor.

¹²⁰ The Hours (First, Third, Sixth, and Ninth) – a separate brief liturgical service that is part of the daily liturgical cycle. – *Translator's note.*

Life today, with its nonstop rat race, is a living hell

People are always rushing and hurrying somewhere. At such-and-such a time they need to be in one place, at another time in another, then in a third... To make sure they don't forget what they need to do, people are forced to write it all down. It's a good thing that, amid all this running around, they haven't forgotten their own names! They don't even know themselves anymore. And how could they recognize themselves—can you really see your reflection in murky water as if in a mirror? May God forgive me, but the world has turned into a veritable madhouse. People don't think about any other kind of life—they're only seeking more and more material possessions. And that's why they find no peace and are constantly rushing off somewhere.

Fortunately, there is another kind of life. People have made their earthly life such that, even if they lived here forever, there could be no greater torment than this. If, with this anxiety in their souls, they were to live for eight hundred or nine hundred years—as in the time of Noah,¹²¹—then their life would be one long, hellish torment. In those days, people lived simply. And their lives were so long so that the Tradition might be preserved. But now what is happening is described in the Psalter: "*The days of our years are seventy years, or eighty if we are strong; yet their span is but toil and sickness.*"¹²² And seventy years is just enough time to raise one's children—it fits perfectly.

Once, a doctor from America stopped by my hut. He told me about life over there. People there have turned into machines—they devote their entire days to work. Every family member must have their own car. On top of that, to make everyone feel comfortable, there must be four televisions in the house. So go ahead and work, wear yourself out, earn a lot of money, only to say later that you're well-off and happy. But what does any of this have to do with happiness? Such a life, filled with anxiety and a never-ending rat race, is not happiness—it's hellish torment. Why would you want a life filled with such anxiety? I wouldn't want such a life, even if the whole world had to live that way. If God were to say to these people, "I will not punish you for the life you lead, but I will let you live this way for all eternity," that would be a great torment for me.

That's why many, unable to endure life under such conditions, leave the cities and wander aimlessly—just to get away. They gather in groups and live in the wilderness—some focus on physical fitness, others on something else. I've been told that some of them go running, while others head into the mountains and climb to an altitude of 6,000 meters. First they hold their breath, then breathe normally for a while, then take another deep breath... They're engaging in such nonsense! This shows that a heavy burden of anxiety weighs on their hearts, and their hearts are searching for some kind of escape. I said to one such person: "You're digging a hole, digging it deeper and deeper, then marveling at this hole and its depth, and then... you fall into it and plummet downward. Whereas we [aren't just digging a hole, but] are mining a vein and finding minerals. There is meaning in our asceticism, since it is done for the sake of something higher."

Mental anxiety comes from the devil

— Geronda, laypeople who live a spiritual life get tired at work and, when they return home in the evening, don't have the strength to perform Vespers. And this causes them distress.

— If they return home late at night and are tired, they should never force themselves with mental anxiety. One should always say to oneself with love: "If you cannot read the Evening Prayer in its entirety, then read half or a third." And next time, one should try not to tire oneself out too much during

¹²¹ See Gen. 5.

¹²² Ps. 89:10.

the day. One should strive as much as possible with love and rely on God in everything. And God will do His work. The mind must always be close to God. This is the best deed of all.

— Geronda, what value does excessive asceticism have in God’s eyes?

— If it is done out of love, then both the person himself and God—over His loving child—rejoice. If a person mortifies himself out of love, it pours honey into his heart. But if he mortifies himself out of selfishness, it brings him torment. A certain man, who struggled out of selfishness and mortified himself with inner turmoil, once said: “O my Christ! The gate You have made is too narrow! I cannot pass through them.” But if he had struggled with humility, these gates would not have been narrow for him. Those who struggle selfishly through fasting, vigils, and other ascetic practices torment themselves without spiritual benefit, because they are fighting the air rather than demons. Instead of warding off demonic temptations, they accept them in ever-greater numbers and—as a result—encounter many difficulties in their spiritual struggle, feeling as though they are being suffocated by inner turmoil. Meanwhile, for those who strive earnestly with great humility and great trust in God, their hearts rejoice and their souls are uplifted.

Spiritual life requires attention. When spiritual people do anything out of vanity, they are left with a void in their souls. Their hearts are not filled, nor are they uplifted. The more they feed their vanity, the greater their inner emptiness becomes, and the more they suffer. Where there is mental anxiety and despair, there is a demonic spiritual life. Do not let your soul be troubled by anything. Mental anxiety comes from the devil. When you see mental anxiety, know that the devil has stirred things up there with his tail. The devil does not stand in our way. If a person is inclined toward something, the devil pushes him in that same direction to wear him down and seduce him. For example, he makes a sensitive person excessively sensitive. If an ascetic is inclined to perform prostrations, the devil also pushes him toward prostrations that exceed his strength. And if your strength is limited, a certain nervousness sets in at first, because you see that your strength is insufficient. Then the devil brings you into a state of mental distress, with a slight—at first—sense of despair, and then he intensifies this state more and more... I remember the beginning of my monastic life. For a time, as soon as I lay down to sleep, the tempter would say to me: “What, are you sleeping? Get up! So many people are suffering; so many need help!..” I would get up and bow as much as I could. As soon as I lay down again, he would start all over: “People are suffering, and you’re sleeping? Get up!”—and I would get up again. It got to the point where I once said, “Oh, how wonderful it would be if my legs were taken away from me! Then I would have a valid reason not to bow.” One Lent, while facing such a temptation, I barely managed to endure it, because I wanted to impose hardships on myself beyond my strength.

If, while striving, we feel inner turmoil, we must realize that we are not striving in God’s way. God is not a tyrant who seeks to suffocate us. Everyone should strive with love, in accordance with their own strength. We must cultivate love within ourselves so that our love for God may grow. Then a person will be driven to spiritual struggle by love, and the struggle itself—that is, prostrations, fasting, and the like—will be nothing other than an overflow of his love. And then he will press forward with spiritual courage.

Consequently, there is no need to struggle with painful scholasticism, only to later, while fending off thoughts, suffocate from spiritual anxiety. One must simplify one’s struggle and trust in Christ, not in oneself. Christ is all love, all goodness, all comfort. He never suffocates a person. He has spiritual oxygen in abundance—Divine consolation. Subtle spiritual work is one thing, but painful scholasticism—which, through unwise self-compulsion toward outward feats, suffocates a person with mental anxiety and tears his head apart with pain—is quite another.

— Geronda, what if a person is, by nature, a heavy thinker and his mind is overwhelmed by many thoughts? How should he approach a particular problem so as not to exhaust himself?

— If a person behaves simply, he won't exhaust himself. But if even a tiny bit of selfishness creeps in, then, fearing he might make some mistake, he strains himself and exhausts himself. Even if he does make a mistake—well, they'll scold him a little; there's nothing terrible about that. The state of mind you're asking about might be justified, for example, in the case of a judge who, constantly faced with complex cases, fears rendering an unjust verdict and causing innocent people to be punished. In the spiritual life, however, a headache arises when a person in a position of responsibility doesn't know how to act because they must make a decision that will disadvantage someone in some way, yet failing to make that decision would be unfair to others. Such a person's conscience is in a constant state of tension. That's how it is, sister. And you, be careful to labor spiritually—not with your mind, but with your heart. And do not undertake any spiritual work without humble trust in God. Otherwise, you will worry, tire your mind, and feel unwell in your soul. Unbelief usually lies behind mental anxiety, but one can also experience such a state because of pride.

Simplicity is a great help in monastic life

— ...Do you see how cozy your living room has become with those simple gray blankets? Now it looks at least a little bit like a monastery.

— Geronda, how can a monk understand what is fitting for a monastery and what is not?

— You must begin by asking yourself the following question: “Who am I, and what are my responsibilities in the life I lead?” Khaki does the army honor. Black does the monastery honor. If the army were dressed in black, and monasteries in camouflage, it would not be fitting for either the army or monastic life. Can you imagine if you were to change into white coats right now, just like nurses? Are you nurses or not? Well, there you go... And what if nurses put on black robes, just to drive the patients to despair with their very appearance! “It's clear,” the patients would then say, “that our days are numbered, but they just won't tell us so directly.” You see, such a change of attire would be inappropriate. Would we really do that in reality? Something may be truly beautiful, but it is not fitting for monastic life. For example, velvet is a beautiful fabric, but if I were to wear a velvet cassock, it would be an insult rather than an honor. Do not use anything red or colorful in the monastery. It is not appropriate.

— So, Geronda, does that mean everything has to be colorless and tasteless?

— That's precisely when spiritual taste will reveal itself! However, this must be understood. People have not yet grasped the joy that simplicity brings. In my kaliva, I dampen a broom with water and sweep away the soot-blackened cobwebs from the corners. And I do this only once a year. You wouldn't believe what beautiful black-and-white streaks the wet broom leaves on the ceiling! Real patterns! When people see my ceiling, they think I painted it that way on purpose! And you know how happy that makes me!

I know monks who found joy not in the spiritual life, but in worldly things. They never experienced the joy that simplicity brings. Simplicity is a great help in monastic life. A monk should have only the things he needs and that are fitting for him. Let him limit himself to what will only slightly ease his life, and not strive for more—for worldly things. For example, a soldier's blanket is enough to keep out the cold—there is absolutely no need for a lace or colorful blanket. In this way, simplicity and spiritual courage arise.

By bringing a monk many possessions, you ruin him. Whereas if a person frees himself from [superfluous] possessions, it restores his strength. And if a monk gathers possessions for himself, he ruins himself. When people send me things, I feel a burden and want to be rid of them. Having something unnecessary in my cell makes me feel as if I were wearing a shirt that's too small for me. And if there's nowhere to give these things away, then, in my opinion, it's better to throw them away. But as soon as

I give them away, I feel relief and liberation. Once, an acquaintance came to me and said, “Geronda, so-and-so gave me these things to pass on to you. And he also asked me to pray that his anxiety might leave him.”—“So that it leaves him and comes to me?” I replied. “You’d better just take these things and leave. I’m an old man now: going from house to house and handing out gifts is beyond my strength.”¹²³

All the comforts that people enjoy are of no help to a monk; on the contrary, they enslave him. A monk must strive to reduce his needs and simplify his life; otherwise, he will never be free. Cleanliness is one thing, but excessive adornment is quite another. If you use just one item for many purposes, it really helps to curb your desires. On Mount Sinai, I had a single tin can—I used it to make both tea and porridge. And what, do you think, does a person really need to live? Back in the day, people in the desert used to survive on nothing but dates. They didn’t even light a fire or need firewood. I recently took a condensed milk can, cut it open, and attached something like a handle. You can make coffee or tea in a can like that better than in all those coffee pots! You just put it on the alcohol stove, and the water boils right away. After all, by the time a coffee pot heats up, you’ve already burned through a lot of alcohol. But if you put a cotton ball soaked in alcohol under the can, there you go: the coffee’s ready. And I don’t have a lamp either. I spend my nights by candlelight.

In general, simplicity is very helpful. Keep your belongings simple and durable. Even laypeople treat everything that is humble and simple with respect. And all of this is very helpful to a monk. These things help us remember poverty, suffering, and the monastic life. When King George visited the Great Lavra on Mount Athos,¹²⁴ the fathers found a silver tray and served him refreshments on it. But as soon as the king saw the tray, he said, “I was expecting something different from you—some kind of wooden tray. I’m sick and tired of such expensive trays.”

You haven’t yet tasted the sweetness of simplicity. Simplicity restores a person’s strength. Look what a wonderful coat hook you can make from a spool of thread. It’s a very handy thing. But you struggle to hang your cassock on that thin little nail. If the plaster starts to crumble, you’ll have to dust it off and clean it every time you take the cassock off the nail. Why not hammer a few large nails into the wall? It’ll be more convenient for you.

A wall like that—and not a single nail! Or else you’ll go and set up a wooden coat rack. But then you’ll have to scrub it and blow the dust off it. You need to simplify things and save time, but instead you’re wasting it. You’re striving for perfection and making things hard on yourself. Strive for perfection in the spiritual life. Devote all your potential not to external arts, but to the art of cultivating the soul. Dedicate your days and nights to perfecting your soul. By turning your love of beauty to the benefit of spiritual endeavors, you will rejoice in the beauty of your own small spiritual sanctuary.

— Geronda, some people say that the most magnificent things were kept in monasteries and that, thanks to them, culture was preserved in the world.

— Perhaps they are referring to precious vessels, jewelry, and the like. But do you know when most of these valuables came to be concentrated in the monasteries? After the fall of Constantinople.¹²⁵ Previously, all these treasures were kept in palaces, but then they began to be given to monasteries for safekeeping. For example, Queen Maro¹²⁶ gradually took various treasures away from the sultan and donated them to monasteries. Or people, on their deathbeds and not wanting their valuables to be lost, donated them to monasteries. It was not the monasteries that sought to acquire these treasures, but the

¹²³ Elder Paisios distributed the items that were brought to him to other monks who needed them.

¹²⁴ George II (1890–1947) was King of Greece from 1922 to 1929 and from 1935 to 1947.

¹²⁵ In 1453

¹²⁶ Queen Maro (1418–1487)—daughter of the Serbian despot George Branković (1375–1456), who was the second founder of the Monastery of St. Paul on Mount Athos. Maro was married to Sultan Murat—the father of Sultan Mehmed, the conqueror of Constantinople. After the fall of Constantinople, Queen Maro donated to the Monastery of St. Paul the precious gifts of the Magi, numerous holy relics, and the remains of God’s saints.

owners themselves, realizing that these items would be safe in a monastery, who gave them there. And the wealthy made various donations to the monasteries of the Holy Mountain so that there would be enough to feed the people. After all, there were no nursing homes, orphanages, psychiatric hospitals, or various charitable institutions in those days. A great deal of land was also donated to the monasteries so that they could help laypeople in need. In other words, during those difficult years, people knew how to look ahead: they provided material assistance to the unfortunate so that they could later help them spiritually. When the poor came to the monasteries, they were given financial aid as a blessing, and the needy were able to marry off their son or daughter. In other words, the monasteries acquired their wealth in order to help the poor. And they built large structures for that very same purpose. Do you know how many people the monasteries helped during the occupation? A great, great many. Many laypeople even had the nickname “Caracalla” back then, because if someone’s home was hospitable, people would say it was just like the Caracalla Monastery.¹²⁷ And the solemn patronal feasts in honor of the saints were organized in the monasteries so that the poor could eat some fish, enjoy themselves, and at the same time receive spiritual help. And why are patronal feast celebrations held today? People who lack for nothing gather and eat fish. And for what purpose?

Luxury worldliness corrupts the monks

— Geronda, to what extent is it permissible to decorate the church?

— In our time, the simpler everything is—even in the church—the more benefit we derive from it, because we no longer live in Byzantium.

— Well, for example, the iconostasis—what kind of ornamentation should we choose for it?

— Monastic, of course! What else? Let everything be as modest and simple as possible. The Venerable Pachomius¹²⁸ bent a column in the church so that people would not admire the work of his hands. Do you remember that story? In his monastery, the Venerable One built a church with brick columns with great care. Seeing how beautiful the church had turned out, the reverend rejoiced, but then he thought that taking pleasure in the beautiful creation of his own hands was not in accordance with God’s will. So he tied ropes around the columns and, after praying, ordered the brothers to lean on them and pull—so that the columns would become crooked.

Every year in my cell on Mount Athos, I cut sheet metal and patch up the roof and windows. Both have sprung leaks, and the wind blows through the cracks. So I keep putting on more and more patches—made of sheet metal, planks, and polyethylene. You might ask me, “So why don’t you install double-paned windows?” Do you think I don’t realize myself that this is possible? I’m a carpenter, after all, and if I wanted to, I could even make windows with three frames. But then the monastic spirit would be lost. The wall of my cell is in a state of disrepair. I could ask someone to help me with the repairs, but I’m content with what I have. How could I dare spend that kind of money on repairing a wall when other people are in such need? It wouldn’t do me any good. If I happen to have five hundred drachmas to spare, I’d rather use them to buy crosses and icons and give them to some suffering soul so that they might find relief. I find joy in giving. And even if I were to need that money myself, I wouldn’t spend it on myself.

Once a person begins to live spiritually, they are never satisfied. Similarly, a person is never satisfied if they start chasing after beauty. Do you know how we should live now? We must set aside concerns for beautiful buildings, limit ourselves to the essentials, and devote ourselves to the misfortune

¹²⁷ One of the twenty communal monasteries of Mount Athos.

¹²⁸ The Venerable Pachomius the Great was born around A.D. 280 in Thebaid (Upper Egypt). After completing his military service, he settled in an abandoned pagan temple and began to lead a life of asceticism. Feeling the need for a spiritual guide, he turned to the Thebaean hermit, the Venerable Pamon, and was accepted by him as a disciple. Around 320, following a divine vision, the Venerable Pachomius founded the first monastery of the Tavennotes in Upper Thebaid. In total, the Reverend founded 9 men’s and 2 women’s communal monasteries, with a total of about 7,000 monks. He was graced with divine gifts. He fell asleep in the Lord in 346.

of others—helping them through prayer if you have nothing else to give, and through alms if you have the means to help them materially. Devote yourselves to prayer, and as for work, do only what is absolutely necessary. Everything we do here is fleeting. And is it worth devoting one’s life to all this, knowing that others can barely make ends meet and are dying of hunger? Simple structures and humble possessions mentally transport the monks to the caves and unpretentious hermitages¹²⁹ of the holy fathers, from which the monks derive spiritual benefit. Whereas everything worldly reminds the monks of the world and makes them worldly at heart. Recently,¹³⁰ in Nitria¹³¹, excavations were carried out and the first monastic cells—truly ascetic ones—were discovered. Later, monastic cells from a later era were found—their appearance was already somewhat worldly. Finally, the most recent monastic dwellings were found, resembling the salons of the wealthy people of that time—the walls were adorned with various framed paintings, patterns, and other decorations. All of this brought God’s wrath upon the monks, and their dwellings were plundered and destroyed by evildoers.

Christ was born in a manger. If worldly things bring us comfort, then Christ, Who rejects no one, will easily reject us. He will say: “I had nothing. Does the Gospel say anything anywhere about all these [worldly things]? Have you seen anything like this with Me? You are neither worldly nor monks. What am I to do with you, where am I to place you?..”

Beautiful and perfect things are worldly. They offer people no spiritual comfort. After all, all walls will crumble to dust. But the soul... A single soul is worth more than the whole world. And what are we doing for the soul? Let us begin our spiritual work; let us become genuinely concerned. Christ will demand an answer from us regarding how we have spiritually helped people and what spiritual work we have done. He will not even ask what kind of walls we have built. We will be held accountable for our spiritual progress.

I want you to understand my point: I’m not saying that we shouldn’t engage in construction and similar activities, or that buildings should be erected haphazardly. No. But the spiritual must come first, and then, guided by spiritual discernment, everything else.

Simplify your life

“How fortunate are those who live in palaces and enjoy all the good things in life,” say the people of this world. However, blessed are those who have managed to simplify their lives, free themselves from the stranglehold of this worldly “progress”—from the multitude of conveniences that are matched by a multitude of difficulties—and rid themselves of the terrible mental anguish of the present age. If a person does not simplify his life, he will suffer. Whereas, by simplifying it, he will also rid himself of this mental anguish.

Once, on Mount Sinai, a German visitor said to a very bright Bedouin boy: “You are a smart child and capable of getting an education.”—“So what then?” the boy asked him. “Then you’ll be an engineer.” — “And then?” — “Then you’ll open a car repair shop.” — “And then?” — “Then you’ll expand it.” — “And what then?” — “Then you’ll hire other mechanics—you’ll build up a large workforce.” — “So, what does that mean,” the boy said, “first I’ll have one headache, then I’ll add another one to it, and then another? Isn’t it better to keep my head clear, just as it is now?” Headaches, for the most part, stem precisely from such thoughts: “We’ll do this, we’ll do that.” But if thoughts were spiritual, a person would experience spiritual comfort and would not suffer from headaches.

¹²⁹ Asceticon (Greek: Ἀσκητήριον) – a secluded monastic dwelling, a place of ascetic practices. – *Translator’s note*

¹³⁰ Delivered in 1986.

¹³¹ Nitria—a mountain and the adjacent desert in northwestern Egypt. Beginning with St. Macarius the Great (4th century), it has been a favored place for monastic asceticism. – *Translator’s note.*

Now, in conversations with worldly people, I also emphasize the importance of simplicity. Because most of what they do is unnecessary, and they are consumed by anxiety. I tell people about simplicity and asceticism; I never stop urging them: “Simplify your lives so that your inner anxiety will disappear.” And most divorces begin precisely with this. People have a lot of work; they have so much to do that their heads spin. Both the father and the mother work, while the children are left unattended. Exhaustion, frayed nerves—even the smallest trifle leads to a huge row, and divorce automatically follows. People have already reached this point. However, by simplifying their lives, they will be full of energy and joy. Yes, mental anxiety is sheer ruin.

Once, I happened to find myself in a most luxurious house. During our conversation, the hosts told me, “We live in nothing less than paradise, yet other people are in such need.” “You live in hell,” I replied. “*‘Truly, this very night your soul will be required of you,’*¹³² — said the Lord to the foolish rich man. If Christ were to ask me, ‘Where shall I place you—in some dungeon or in a house like this one?’—I would answer, ‘In some gloomy dungeon.’ Because a dungeon would be good for me. It would remind me of Christ, of the holy martyrs, of the ascetics who hid in “*the depths of the earth,*”¹³³ it would remind me of the monastic life. A dungeon would be a little like my cell, and I would rejoice in that. But what would your house remind me of, and what benefit would I derive from it? That is why dungeons comfort me far more than not only some worldly parlor, but even a beautifully furnished monastic cell. It is a thousand times better to live in prison than in a house like this.”

On another occasion, I was staying with a friend in Athens, and he asked me to meet with a father of many children—but only until dawn, because at any other time he was too busy. This man arrived—joyful and constantly praising God. He was full of humility and simplicity, and he asked me to pray for his family. This brother was thirty-eight years old and had seven children. His children, his wife, and his parents—eleven people in all. They were all crammed into a single room. With his characteristic simplicity, he explained: “We can all fit in the room while standing, but when we lie down to sleep, there isn’t enough space—it’s a bit cramped. But now, thank God, we’ve built a shed for the kitchen, and things have gotten a little easier. After all, Father, we at least have a roof over our heads—others, you see, live out in the open.” He worked as an ironer in Piraeus,¹³⁴ but lived in Athens, and to get to work on time, he would leave the house before dawn. From standing on his feet for long periods and working overtime, he developed varicose veins, which caused discomfort in his legs. But his deep love for his family made him forget about his aches and pains. On top of that, he would constantly reproach himself, saying that he lacked love, that he wasn’t doing the good deeds befitting a Christian, and he couldn’t stop praising his wife for the good deeds she did—caring not only for the children but also for her father-in-law and mother-in-law, cared for the elderly neighbors, cleaned their homes, and even “cooked soup for them!” The face of this kind family man shone with the grace of God. He had Christ within him and was filled with joy. And the little room in which they lived was also filled with heavenly joy. Those who do not have Christ within them will be filled with inner turmoil. They would not fit in eleven rooms even as a couple, whereas here, eleven souls with Christ fit into just one.

No matter how much space people may have—even spiritual people—they will still lack space, because there was not enough room in them for Christ; because He could not fully dwell within them. If the women who lived in Faras had seen the luxury that exists today even in many monasteries, they would have exclaimed, “God will send fire from heaven and burn us! God has forsaken us!” The women of Faras got their work done in no time. Early in the morning, they would let the goats out, then tidy up the house, then go to the chapel or gather somewhere in the caves, and the one who could read a little

¹³² Luke 12:20.

¹³³ Heb. 11:38.

¹³⁴ Greece’s main port. — *Translator’s note.*

would read the life of the saint of the day. Then they would begin to bow in prayer, reciting the Jesus Prayer. But besides all that, they also worked and grew tired. A woman had to be able to sew everything for the household. And they sewed by hand. Hand-cranked sewing machines were a rarity even in the city, and in the village they were practically nonexistent. It was considered good luck if there was just one sewing machine for the entire village of Farasy. They also sewed clothes for the men—very comfortable ones—and knitted socks. They did everything with taste and love, yet they still had time to spare because their lives were simple. The people of Farasy didn't worry about trivial matters. They experienced a monastic joy. And if, say, you noticed that a blanket was lying crooked on the bed and told them, "Straighten the blanket," you'd hear in reply, "Does that bother you when you pray?"

Today, people are unfamiliar with this monastic joy. People believe they shouldn't have to endure hardship or suffer. But if people thought a little more like monks, if they lived more simply, they would be at peace. Now they are tormented. Their souls are filled with anxiety and despair: "So-and-so managed to build two high-rise buildings!"—or "So-and-so managed to learn five foreign languages!"—or something similar to that. "But I," they say, "don't even have my own apartment, and I don't know a single foreign language! That's it, I'm doomed!" Or someone who owns a car begins to torment himself: "Someone else has a better car than mine. I need to buy one just like it." He buys himself a new car, but even that brings him no joy—after all, someone else has an even better one. He buys one just like that for himself, and then finds out that others have their own airplanes, and he agonizes all over again. There's no end to it. Meanwhile, another person, who also doesn't have a car, praises God and rejoices. "Praise God!" he says. "So what if I don't have a car? After all, I have strong legs and can walk on foot. And how many people have had their legs amputated and cannot take care of themselves, cannot go for a walk, need someone's care!... But I have my own legs!" For his part, a lame man says, "And what about others who have lost both legs?"—and rejoices as well.

Ingratitude and insatiability are great evils. A person enslaved by material things is always enslaved by anxiety and inner turmoil, because he is either trembling in fear that his wealth might be taken away from him, or he fears for his life. Once, a wealthy man from Athens came to me and said, "Father, I've lost touch with my children. I've lost my children." "How many children do you have?" I asked. "Two," he replied. "I raised them on the finest of everything. They had everything they wanted. I even bought them each a car." Later in our conversation, it became clear that he had his own car, his wife had hers, and each of his children had their own. "You're a strange man," I told him, "instead of solving your problems, you've only made them worse. Now you need a big garage for all those cars, and you have to pay four times as much to repair them—not to mention that you, your wife, and your children are all at risk of getting into an accident at any moment. But if you'd simplified your life, your family would be close-knit, you'd all understand one another, and you wouldn't have any of these problems. The blame for what's happening to you lies not with your children, but with you yourself. It's your fault that you didn't raise them differently." One family—four cars, a garage, their own mechanic, and everything else! Can't one person leave a little earlier and another a little later? All this comfort creates difficulties.

Another time, the head of a different family—this time a family of five—came to my hut and said, "Father, we have one car, but I'm thinking of buying two more. That will make things easier for us." "Have you thought about how much harder it will be for you?" I asked him. "You leave one car in some alleyway, but where will you park three? You'll need a garage and a storage area for fuel. Instead of one danger, you'll be facing three. You'd be better off making do with one car and keeping your expenses down. That way, you'll have time to look after the children, and you'll have peace of mind. Simplicity is the foundation of everything." — "Yes," he said, "but I hadn't even thought about that."

— Geronda, one man told us how he was unable to silence the anti-theft alarm in his car on two separate occasions. Once because a fly had gotten into the car, and the other time because he himself violated the anti-theft system’s operating instructions when getting into his own car.

— These people lead a life of martyrdom because they don’t make their lives simpler. Most conveniences entail inconveniences. Worldly people are suffocating under so many things. They’ve filled their lives with countless conveniences and made them difficult. If you don’t simplify your life, even a single convenience can create a whole host of problems.

As children, we used to cut off the ends of a spool of thread, insert a wooden stick into the center, and create a wonderful game that brought us real joy. Small children take more joy in a toy car than their father does in a brand-new “Mercedes.” Ask any little girl, “What would you rather have—a doll or a huge multi-story house?” You’ll see, she’ll answer, “A doll.” Even small children eventually come to realize the vanity of the world.

— Geronda, what helps most in understanding the joy that simplicity and unpretentiousness bring?

— An awareness of the deepest meaning of life. *“Seek first the Kingdom of God...”*¹³⁵ Simplicity and the right attitude toward everything begin with this.

Chapter 4.

On External Noise and Inner Silence

People Have Disturbed the Peaceful Nature of the World

Most of the technological devices that people use today for their convenience produce noise. Alas, with their noise, people have driven peaceful nature mad; with all this technology, they have altered and destroyed it. And what silence there used to be! How much man changes and how much he alters [everything around him]—without even realizing it.

Today, everyone has gotten used to living with noise. Many modern children love to read while listening to rock music. That is, they prefer to read with music playing rather than in silence. It calms their restlessness, because that restlessness lies within them. Noise can be heard everywhere. Just listen!... Do you hear that constant “woo-oo... woo-oo!” They’re sawing boards—“woo-oo...,” sanding them—“woo-oo...,” spraying trees with a sprayer—“woo-oo” again. And then they’ll invent other sprayers—like airplanes—to make even more noise, and they’ll say: “These sprayers are better because they spray the trees from above instead of below, and not a single bud is left unsprayed.” They’ll go looking for such sprayers and be delighted with them. A person wants to drill a single hole for a nail and once again turns on some kind of “woo-woo machine.” Why? To pound water in a mortar? And he’s even happy about it and, amazingly enough, is even proud of it! To get a breath of fresh air, they buy an electric fan and listen to its hum. In the past, when it was hot, they’d fan themselves with their hands, but now they’re damaging their own ears just for a breath of fresh air. And at sea, they’re making a lot of noise these days, too. Once upon a time, sailboats glided silently across the sea, but now even the smallest motorboat rattles away. Soon, most people will be circling the earth in airplanes! And do you know what this will lead to? The earth still absorbs at least some of the noise, but in the air, God forbid, all hell will break loose!...

¹³⁵ Matt. 6:33.

People have even destroyed the holy places of the desert

The restless, worldly spirit of our age, with its so-called civilization, has destroyed even the holy desert places that bring peace and sanctify souls. A restless person never finds peace. People have left no quiet place anywhere. Even the Holy Land—look what they’ve turned it into now! And in the life of the hermit Photini¹³⁶, it is mentioned that in the desert where she once lived as a hermit, many kiosks were later erected and snack bars opened. In the caves and cells where so many monks and saints once lived, the English began selling soft drinks. That’s it—there’s no desert left! It’s been filled with houses, radios, stores, hotels, and airports!... We’ve lived to see the time that Saint Cosmas of Aetolia spoke of:¹³⁷ “The time will come—and where young men now hang their guns, Gypsies will hang their musical instruments.” What I mean to say is that we, too, have lived to see this: where monks once labored, where their prayer beads once hung—now radios blare and soft drinks fizz!... Yes, it seems that in a few more years, none of this will be needed anymore. In general, from what is happening, one can conclude: life is drawing to a close. The end of life and the end of this world are approaching.

— Geronda, is there still a quiet place left anywhere on the Holy Mountain?

— What quiet place could there possibly be now, even on Mount Athos! After all, they’re constantly building more and more roads through the Athos forests. Cars are roaring everywhere. Even those who live in the most desolate and silent places have bought cars. I don’t understand—what on earth are these people looking for in the desert? Arsenius the Great, hearing the reeds rustle in the desert from a gentle breeze, asked, “What is that noise? Is it an earthquake?”¹³⁸ If only the Holy Fathers could see what’s going on now! In the past, in communal monasteries, the monks would get very tired from their duties. Especially the refectory attendant and the guesthouse attendant. They had to wash dishes and polish the copperware. But today all that is easy, because now the monks have all kinds of modern equipment—which, for the most part, makes a lot of noise. I remember how, in the monastery, we used to carry water from the spring and, using a winch, quietly hoist it up to the fourth floor in special containers. But now they pump water with a pump, and you can constantly hear it rattling. The walls shake, the windows rattle. They should at least install some kind of silencer. In the army during the Civil War, I used a silencer when charging my radio battery so that the enemy on the other side wouldn’t hear a thing.

Once, some monks from a monastery came to visit me in my cell. They were talking loudly. “Quiet down,” I said to one of them, “people can hear us from far away.” He kept shouting. “Just speak more quietly,” I asked him again. “I’m sorry, Geronda,” he replied, “we’re used to shouting like this at our monastery. We have a generator running, so we have to speak loudly—otherwise we can’t hear each other.” Do you see what I mean? Instead of reciting the Jesus Prayer and speaking quietly, they turn on the generator and end up shouting! Some teenagers remove the mufflers from their motorcycles so they can make a racket that echoes throughout the neighborhood... It’s unfortunate that the same spirit is seeping into monastic life today. Yes, that’s where we’re headed—noise brings joy to the monks.

¹³⁶ The hermit Photini was born in 1860 in Damascus (Syria) into a Greek family. Around 1884, she withdrew to the Transjordan Desert. In 1915, due to World War I, she was forced to move to Jerusalem, where she remained until peace was restored. She subsequently settled in the desert west of the Dead Sea, where she lived as a hermit until her death. The life of the hermit is described in the book: Archimandrite Ioakeim Spetsieris. *The Hermit Photini. Holy Hut of St. Anargyroi, New Skete, Mount Athos*, 1994.

¹³⁷ The Holy Martyr and Equal-to-the-Apostles Cosmas of Aetolia (1779; commemoration of his martyrdom on August 24). He spent a considerable time as a monk on the Holy Mountain of Athos. After his divine calling, he went out into the world and traveled through the cities and villages of Greece, which was under Ottoman rule, preaching the Gospel. He taught the Gospel, opened schools, and opposed the Islamization of the Greeks. He performed numerous miracles and left behind many prophecies about the future of all humanity. He is rightly considered a great prophet of the modern era. He was slandered by the Jews before the Turkish pasha and suffered a martyr’s death. See: *The Life and Prophecies of Cosmas of Aetolia*. – Moscow: Holy Mountain, 2007. – *Translator’s note*.

¹³⁸ See *The Ancient Paterikon*. Moscow, 1899. p. 21.

This morning I was watching a nun. She looked like an astronaut. With a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head, a respirator over her face, and a gas-powered hay mower in her hand, she was walking down the slope, admiring herself. Even astronauts weren't that proud when they returned from the moon! A little while passed, and suddenly I heard: "Tra-ta-ta-ta!..." I looked over and saw that she had started mowing the grass with that mower—and so loudly that there was nowhere to hide from the roar. No sooner had she finished than a monastery worker arrived with an even louder clatter—to plow the ground. He ran back and forth, clattering away—back and forth, back and forth! Then he set down his gas-powered plow and picked up another machine—to harrow the ground. What haven't we had to endure in our bitter lot!...

— And yet, Geronda, since all this equipment exists to make things easier...

— Oh, you know how much machinery there is that's supposed to make things easier!... Avoid, as much as possible, everything that roars, everything that rattles—avoid the noise. All this noise drives us out of the monastery. Why, then, is there a sign hanging at the gate down there that says "Hesychasterion"?¹³⁹ You'd be better off writing something like "Noisasterion" or "Restlessnesssterion"! What's the point of a monastery if there's no silence in it? Look, try as much as possible to limit everything we're talking about right now. You have not yet experienced how sweet silence is. If you understood this, you would be better able to understand what I am saying, as well as certain other things. If you had tasted the sweet spiritual fruits of silence, you would undoubtedly be kindly concerned and would strive more earnestly for the holy silence of the spiritual life.

Silence is a mysterious prayer

With all this noisy technology, a monk drives away the prerequisites for prayer and monastic life. Therefore, a monk must, as far as possible, try not to use noisy technology. Everything that people consider convenient, by and large, does not help the monk achieve his goal. In such a state, the monk cannot attain what he set out to achieve.

Silence is a great thing. By remaining in silence, a person is already praying—even without actually praying. Silence is a mysterious prayer, and it greatly aids prayer, just as every breath benefits a person.¹⁴⁰ One who is engaged in spiritual work in silence subsequently becomes immersed in prayer. Do you know what it means to be immersed? A baby who has fallen silent in its mother's embrace says nothing. It is already in union and communion with her. Therefore, if a monastery is located far from archaeological sites, from the noise of the world, and from crowds of people—this is of immense benefit.

External silence, removed from the world and combined with prudent asceticism and unceasing prayer, very quickly brings the monk inner silence—peace of mind. This inner silence is a necessary prerequisite for subtle spiritual work. And then external disturbances cease to trouble a person, because, in essence, only his body is on earth, while his mind dwells in Heaven.

¹³⁹ Hesychasterion (Greek: ἡσυχαστήριον) – a monastery of a special type. The name derives from the word "ἡσυχία" – silence. – *Translator's note.*

¹⁴⁰ The aptness of the example given by the Blessed Elder Paisios is confirmed by physiological data. Imperceptible, constant perspiration and skin respiration are the mechanisms by which the human body's temperature is regulated. If one were to cover the entire surface of a person's body with some insulating material, thereby depriving them of skin respiration, the consequences would not be immediately noticeable; however, after some time, the disruption of the body's temperature balance would lead to serious disturbances in the body's vital functions. The analogy with prayer and silence is direct. Mysterious, unspoken prayer—silence—imperceptibly but constantly helps a person maintain a healthy spiritual state. Deprivation of silence leads a Christian—and especially a monk—to spiritual consequences that are imperceptible at first glance but nonetheless destructive. – *Translator's note.*

Whether one hears the noise or not depends on the person himself

— Geronda, what should one do if it is noisy during a work assignment, or if a noisy machine is required for some kind of handicraft?

— When the craftwork is noisy, quiet psalm-singing helps a great deal. If you cannot recite the Jesus Prayer, sing something from the church. Patience is required. On the ship, when I’m sailing from Mount Athos or returning, it can get very noisy. I sit down somewhere in a corner so I won’t be disturbed, pretending to be asleep, closing my eyes—and I start singing. The things I sing! So many different versions of “It Is Truly Meet,” so many “Holy God.” And the ship’s engine, with its hum, is very well suited for psalm singing. The engine “holds the pitch”¹⁴¹ — perfectly in tune with Papanikolaou’s “It Is Truly Meet” and Nilevs’s “Holy God.”¹⁴² It hums so well that it goes with just about anything! I sing in my mind, but my heart joins in the singing as well.

And yet I think that what causes us anxiety is not so much external noise as [internal] preoccupation with something. Whether or not you hear external noise depends on you, whereas [internal] preoccupation is not easy to avoid. The foundation is the mind. The eyes can look and yet not see. When I pray, I can look at something but not see it. I can walk somewhere but not notice anything. If a person finds it difficult to pray the Jesus Prayer—¹⁴³ —amidst noise, it means that his mind is not surrendered to God. A person must attain a state of divine detachment so that they can live in inner silence, and noise during prayer will not disturb them. [Then] a person attains a state of divine detachment, in which they no longer hear noise or hear it only when they themselves wish to, or more precisely—when their mind descends from Heaven. If a person engages in spiritual work and strives diligently, then he will attain this state. Then he will be able to hear something or not hear it whenever he so chooses.

Once, while serving in the army, I arranged to meet one of my fellow soldiers—a devout man—at a certain place. “But,” he objected, “there’s a loudspeaker right next to my ear, blaring away.” “Whether you hear the loudspeaker or not,” I replied, “depends on the person himself.” Do we really hear what’s going on around us when our mind is occupied with something else? I remember that on Mount Athos, across from my kaliva, they were cutting down trees with chainsaws—they stripped an entire hill bare. So, when I was reading or praying and was completely absorbed in it, I didn’t hear a thing. But when I stopped my spiritual practices, I began to hear everything again.

Let us respect the silence of others

If we ourselves are not the cause of the noise, then it’s no big deal—God sees everything. But it’s a different matter if the noise is caused by us. That’s why we need to be constantly mindful not to disturb others. If someone doesn’t want to pray themselves, then let them at least not disturb others. Once you realize how much harm your noise causes to a person who is praying, you’ll become very careful. Because if you don’t realize that silence is necessary for you personally—and helps everyone in general—and that it must be maintained from the heart, out of love, rather than under compulsion or by

¹⁴¹ Isos (from the Greek ἴσος—even, equal, similar)—the lowest, “basic” voice in Byzantine church chant. —*Translator’s note.*

¹⁴² Charalampos Papanikolaou—a singer and composer of Byzantine music from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, from the Greek city of Kavala. Nilevs Kamarados—a Constantinopolitan singer from the mid-19th century, composer, and theorist of Byzantine music. —*Translator’s note*

¹⁴³ In monastic terminology, the word “εὐχή” refers to a short prayer consisting of a few words, repeated many times while praying with prayer beads. Usually this is the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” but besides this, “εὐχή” can also refer to a prayer to the Most Holy Theotokos: “Most Holy Mother of God, save me, a sinner,” to the Saints: “Saint (name), pray to God for me,” to the Holy Cross, to the Angels, or a prayer offered in a similar manner for the repose of the departed, for the healing of the sick, and so on. This word can be translated as “the Jesus Prayer,” “prayer with prayer beads,” “prayer,” “litany,” etc.—depending on the context. “To offer a prayer” in this text means to perform a prayer of this kind. —*Translator’s note*

force, then silence won't yield a good result. If a person observes silence out of tension, obeying rules of discipline, if they tell themselves, "Now I have to walk this way so as not to disturb anyone, and now I have to tiptoe by..." then this is sheer torment. The goal is to act from the heart, with joy, to maintain silence because someone is praying, someone is in communion with God. What a difference there is between observing silence in the first case and the second! What a person does from the heart brings them joy and helps them. If you recognize silence as a necessity and treat those who are praying at that moment with respect, then a sense of reverence follows. And by respecting others, a person respects themselves, and then they do not put themselves first, because they lack self-love but possess love for others. We must put ourselves in another's shoes; we must reflect thus: "If I were in this person's place, how would I want to be treated? After all, if I were tired or praying, would I like it if someone slammed the door like that?" If we put ourselves in another's shoes, much changes.

And how wonderful it used to be in communal monasteries!... Silence! The clock struck every quarter of an hour so that all the monks would remember the need to recite the Jesus Prayer. If anyone was distracted from prayer, hearing the clock strike every fifteen minutes would bring them back to it. The striking of the clock was of great benefit. The fathers prayed, and silence—a deep stillness—reigned in the monastery. In that Svyatogorsk communal monastery where I lived for a time, sixty members of the brotherhood were practicing their spiritual discipline. Yet one got the impression that there was only one Hesychast living in the monastery. Everyone was practicing the Jesus Prayer. And in the church, most were engaged in mental prayer—only a few were singing. The same was true during their daily duties. Silence reigned everywhere. No one spoke loudly, no one shouted; everyone went about their assigned tasks. Everyone moved without a sound—like little lambs. Whatever was done in the monastery was always done without a sound. There was none of what they've come up with in monasteries these days: "time for duties," "time of silence"... Perhaps they'll even introduce a "quiet hour"! In the past, everyone organized their time according to the duty they had been assigned.

If we want the blessed desert to help us—with its holy emptiness and sweet peace—so that we too may find peace, be cleansed of passions, and draw near to God, then we too must love it and treat it with respect. We must be careful not to adapt the holy desert to our passionate "self." This is a great wickedness—the same as going to worship at Holy Golgotha while singing pop songs.

The antidote to noise is good thoughts

Unfortunately, people today use noisy devices even for trivial tasks. Therefore, if you find yourself in a noisy environment for a time, you must cultivate good thoughts within yourself. You cannot force people not to turn on this or that noisy device. Instead, immediately put a good thought into action yourself. For example, you hear a sprayer running, and it reminds you of the sound of a helicopter flying by. Think to yourself: "It could be that one of the sisters has fallen seriously ill and a helicopter has flown in to take her to the hospital. Imagine how upset you would be then! But right now, thank God, we're all healthy." This requires wisdom and resourcefulness—the art of incorporating positive thoughts. For example, you hear a concrete mixer humming, a crane operating, or some other noise. Say: "Praise be to You, God, that there are no bombings, that buildings aren't collapsing! On the contrary—people are living in peace and building homes."

— But Geronda, what if one's nerves are frayed? What then?

— "Nerves are frayed"? What does that even mean? Perhaps your thoughts are frayed? There's nothing better than a good thought. A worldly man built himself a house in a quiet place. Time passed, and on one side of his house they built a garage, on another they built a highway, and on the third they opened a bar with a disco. Listen to the drums thundering until midnight. The poor man lost his sleep; he went to bed with earplugs, and even started taking pills. A little more of that, and his mind would have

been clouded. He came to the Holy Mountain, sought me out, and began to tell me: “It’s like this, Geronda—we have no peace at all. What should I do? I’m thinking of building another house.” “Put a good thought into your work,” I told him. “Just think: if there were a war and tanks were being repaired in the garage, and ambulances were bringing the wounded to the nearby hospital, and they told you, ‘Stay where you are. We guarantee your life; we won’t touch you. You can leave your house safely, but you must stay within the radius of these buildings, because bullets don’t reach here.’ Or they might say, ‘Don’t stick your head out of your house, and no one will harm you.’ Wouldn’t that be enough for you? Wouldn’t you consider such conditions a true blessing? So now say to yourself: ‘Praise be to You, God, that there is no war, that people are alive and well and going about their business. There are no tanks in the garage; people are repairing their cars there. Praise be to You, God, that there is no hospital, no wounded, and none of the other suffering that war brings. There are no tank columns stretching along the highway, but a stream of cars rushing by—people hurrying to work.’ If you put a good thought into action in this way, then praise of God will follow.” The poor fellow realized that the most important thing is the right attitude toward circumstances, and he left feeling at peace. Little by little, he began to counter the temptations around him with good thoughts; then he threw away his pills and fell asleep without any trouble. Do you see how a single good thought can set a person right?

And once I was riding a bus somewhere. The conductor had the radio blaring. Among our fellow passengers were several young believers. They told the conductor that there was a monk on the bus and repeatedly gestured for him to turn off the radio. They asked once, they asked twice—but he didn’t even bat an eye; on the contrary, he turned up the volume even more. “Just leave it alone,” I said to the guys, “it doesn’t bother me. I’m singing church hymns, and the radio is singing along with me—it’s keeping the same pitch.”¹⁴⁴ But in my mind, I said to myself: “If, God forbid, there were an accident somewhere on the highway and they put injured people on our bus—one with a broken leg, another with a head injury—how could I bear such a sight? Glory to You, God, that people are alive and well! Look, they’re even singing hymns!” So I rode along like that—humming spiritual hymns. It was a wonderful trip!

I’ll give you another example so you can see how a single good thought can set a person right—no matter what’s happening. I was in Jerusalem with an acquaintance of mine. Our visit coincided with some local holiday. The crowd was celebrating and shouting nonstop: “Alala... ah!” It was a scene—God forbid! Noise, commotion, exclamations! They were celebrating as they should—“with shouts of joy!”¹⁴⁵ But the words were impossible to make out. They were making a racket all night long. My friend got so worked up that he sat on the windowsill and didn’t sleep a wink all night. But I, putting a good thought into action, fell asleep like a baby: I remembered the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt,¹⁴⁶ and this even filled me with a certain tenderness.

So you, too, should ward off any temptation with good thoughts. For example, someone slammed a door. Tell yourself: “What if, God forbid, something had happened to one of the sisters—what if she’d fallen and broken her leg—would I really be able to sleep? But now the door just slammed—well, apparently the sister had something to do.” However, if a nun starts judging and says, “Look how absent-minded she is! Slamming doors, you see! What a disgrace!”—will she really be at peace afterward? The moment she harbors such thoughts, her tangalashka will start stirring things up. Or, for example, a sister might hear someone’s alarm clock ringing for a long time at night. It rings—then stops; it rings—then stops again. If the nun, awakened by someone else’s alarm clock, thinks to herself, “Apparently, this sister is completely exhausted; she doesn’t even have the strength to get up. It would be better for her to get up and begin her cell practice half an hour later,” then she will feel neither anxiety nor distress from

¹⁴⁴ See note 142.

¹⁴⁵ See Ps. 150:5.

¹⁴⁶ See Exodus 13–15.

this unexpected awakening. However, if she thinks of herself—that “here I am, being woken up by all sorts of other people’s alarm clocks!”—she might say, “What on earth is this?! They don’t give me a moment’s peace!” That is why a single kind thought helps a person more than any other feat.

We must attain inner stillness

The goal is for a person to derive benefit from everything for the sake of the spiritual struggle. We must strive to attain inner stillness. By incorporating a righteous thought into our efforts, we must derive benefit even from the noise. The most essential thing is the right attitude toward what is happening. We must counter everything with good thoughts. If we can achieve inner stillness amidst the noise, it is of great value. And if someone has been unable to attain inner silence while surrounded by external turmoil, they will not find peace even in an outwardly silent environment. When inner silence comes to a person, everything within them falls silent, and nothing disturbs them. But if, in order to achieve external silence, a person seeks to place themselves in a silent environment, then once there, they will grab a stick and chase away grasshoppers by day and jackals by night so that they do not disturb them. In other words, they will drive away what the devil has gathered for them. What did you expect? What do you think the devil does?

He tries to hinder us in every way possible—until he brings us to our knees.

Two elderly monks lived in a hermitage. They bought themselves a donkey with a bell around its neck. But a young monk who lived nearby had a penchant for a life of silence. He was annoyed by the ringing of the bell, claiming that the monks at the skete were forbidden to keep donkeys, and to prove his point, he cited every canonical rule he could find! The other hermitage monks said that the bell didn’t bother them. “Listen,” I said to the young Hesychast, “these old monks aren’t bothering you and me with all sorts of requests; they’re taking care of themselves with the help of the donkey. Isn’t that enough for us? Can you imagine if the donkey didn’t have a bell and got lost? After all, we’d be the ones who’d have to go look for it! And we’re still complaining?” Without good intentions, without deriving spiritual benefit from everything, we will not succeed, even if we live alongside the saints. For example, I found myself in a military unit. Well then—the sound of the soldiers’ bugle will serve as my monastery bell, and the assault rifle will remind me of the spiritual weapon against the devil. But if we do not derive spiritual benefit from everything, even a bell will cause us anxiety. Either we will derive benefit from everything, or the devil will take advantage of it. A restless person will carry his restless “self” even into the desert. First, the soul must attain inner stillness while in the midst of outward turmoil. Having attained it, it will be able to remain still even when it leaves the world in search of stillness.

Chapter 5.

On How Excessive Concern Distances a Person from God

Let Us Not Cling to Many Things

People today do not live simply. That is why they are so easily distracted. They take on too much and drown in a multitude of cares. But I first finish one or two tasks—and only then do I think about others. I never take on many tasks at once. Right now, I’m thinking about just one thing. Once I’ve finished the first, I begin to consider the second. Because I have no peace if I take on the second before finishing the first. By taking on too many tasks, a person loses their mind. Even simply thinking about all these tasks [at the same time] is enough to lead to schizophrenia.

Once, a young man suffering from a mental disorder came to my hermitage. He assured me that he was tormented because he had inherited some kind of sensitivity from his parents. “What are you talking

about—heredity?” I said to him. “First and foremost, you need some rest. Then finish your studies. After that, go serve in the army, and then try to find a job.” The poor fellow listened and found his way. In the same way, people find themselves.

— Geronda, I also get tired quickly from work. But I can’t figure out why.

“What you lack is patience. And the reason for your impatience is that you take on too much. You spread yourself too thin and wear yourself out. And this leads to nervousness, because you’re ambitious and care deeply about your work.”

When I lived in a communal monastery, I served in the carpentry shop. The senior carpenter in charge of the work was another carpenter—an elderly monk named Father Isidore. The poor man didn’t have a shred of patience. He’d start working on a window, then get nervous, abandon the window—and rush off to work on a door; then he’d get nervous again, abandon the door—and try to fix the roof—and so on, leaving everything half-finished, never completing anything. He’d lose some boards, cut others the wrong way... That’s how a person works themselves to the bone and achieves nothing.

Then there are people whose energy is limited; they can handle no more than one or two tasks. Yet they take on too much, get entangled in a multitude of responsibilities, and in the end, , they don’t do anything properly, dragging others into their affairs and worries as well. You should try, as much as possible, to take on no more than one or two tasks, see them through to the end in a proper manner, and only then, with a clear and refreshed mind, take on something else. After all, if your mind is scattered, how will you be able to lead a spiritual life? How will you be able to remember Christ?

Don't give your heart to material things

— Geronda, what do you mean when you say, “Devote your hands and feet to your work, but don’t give your heart to it”?

— What I mean is that you shouldn’t give your heart to material things. There are people who devote themselves entirely to material things. They spend the whole day worrying about how to get a certain job done, and they don’t think about God at all. Let’s not fall into that trap ourselves. Work with your hands, work with your feet, but do not let your mind stray from God; do not devote your entire being, all your inner potential, and your heart to material things. Otherwise, a person becomes an idolater. As much as possible, do not give your heart to work. Give it your hands; give it your mind. Do not give your heart to what is trivial and useless. Otherwise, how will it then rejoice in Christ? When the heart is in Christ, then the work is sanctified. And the person himself then preserves an inner spiritual freshness of strength and experiences true joy. Use your heart correctly; do not waste it in vain.

If the heart is squandered on a multitude of trifles, then later it will lack the strength to grieve over what is truly worth grieving for. I will give my heart to someone who has cancer, to someone who is suffering; I will worry about children who are in danger. I make the sign of the cross and ask God to enlighten them. And when I have visitors, my attention is focused on the other person’s pain, on my love for them. I don’t notice my own pain. In this way, everything [secondary] is forgotten—that is, a person turns their attention in another direction.

— Geronda, is it possible to avoid devoting one’s mind and heart to any kind of work?

— If the work is simple, it helps keep the mind from becoming absorbed in it. If the work is complex—that is, multifaceted—then some degree of mental engagement is justified. However, the work must not take hold of the heart.

— And how does work take hold of the heart?

— How? Through a drug. The tempter lulls the heart to sleep and takes control of it through selfishness. But if the heart is given to God, then the mind abides in God, while the brain is occupied with work.

- And what exactly do we mean by the word “carefree”?
- When you work, don’t forget Christ. Work with joy, but let your mind and heart remain in God. Then you won’t get tired, and you’ll be able to fulfill your spiritual duties.

Work done with peace and prayer is sanctified

— Elder, isn’t it better if work is done more slowly—so that a person can remain in a peaceful state?

— It is better. For if a person works with peace of mind, he preserves that peace and sanctifies the entire day. Unfortunately, we have not yet realized that when we do any work in a hurry, we become nervous. And work done in a state of nervousness is not sanctified. We must not set a goal for ourselves to accomplish a great deal, only to be consumed by anxiety in the process. That is a demonic state.

Handicrafts performed with serenity and prayer are sanctified in themselves and sanctify the people who use them. That is why it makes sense for monks, at the request of laypeople, to give them some handicraft as a blessing. Conversely, handicrafts made in haste and with anxiety transmit this demonic state to others. Working in haste and with anxiety is a characteristic trait of very worldly people. The agitated souls of monks engaged in handicrafts transmit not a blessing but agitation to others. How greatly a person’s state of mind affects the handicrafts they create! Even when working with pieces of wood. What a terrible thing! The result of the work depends on the state of mind the person was in while doing it. If a person is nervous, angry, or uses foul language, the result of their labor remains unblessed. Whereas, if while working they sing a church hymn or offer a prayer, their work is sanctified. One outcome becomes demonic, and the other—divine.

By acting with reverence and working with prayer, you always sanctify yourselves, and everything you do is sanctified. With their mind set on God, a person sanctifies their work and their handiwork. For example, I might be gluing a box together while reciting the Jesus Prayer—praying and working at the same time for the glory of God. My goal is not to rush through my work, make a whole pile of boxes, and then torment myself with anxiety. That is a demonic state. We did not come to the monastery for that, but to sanctify ourselves and to sanctify what we do. Sometimes, because we forget this, you feel as if you were a diligent employee of some secular institution—because, in your haste to get things done, you forget to take Christ with you. On the contrary, when you begin a task with prayer, you feel like a servant of Christ. And so, apply the Jesus Prayer to your work, so that both you yourself and what you do may be sanctified. Do you know how God blesses a person? Do you know how many blessings and what kinds of blessings He bestows upon us?

— Geronda, what if a person is engaged in intellectual work, such as translation? How can one offer prayer so that the work being done is sanctified?

— If your mind is in God, then your work is sanctified, even if it is intellectual, because you are living in a divine atmosphere—even if you cannot pray while you work. If a person is in a spiritual state, this helps them greatly. They do not try to find meaning through reason, but, as they are enlightened, they comprehend it through Divine illumination.

— What should I do if I am not in such a spiritual state, yet I must engage in this kind of work?

— Then go about it, but at the same time pray, asking God to enlighten you. As much as possible, try to let the divine meanings in the books you’re translating help you personally. And work with reverence. And every hour or two, take a few-minute break and say the Jesus Prayer.

— Geronda, working on translations is generally very distracting. I have to constantly look things up in dictionaries, read commentaries...

— But I’ve told you before: what primarily helps with translations is personal spiritual experience and purified thoughts, which make a person a vessel of Grace. Then the rendering of the divine meanings

is accurate and comes from divine enlightenment, not from reason, a dictionary, or an inkwell. What I mean is that one must ground oneself in what is primary—that is, in the Divine—and not in what is secondary—that is, in the human.

Excessive concern for others causes a person to forget God

— Geronda, does concern always distance a person from God?

— Listen to what I'll tell you: when a father approaches a child engrossed in play and gently strokes him, the child, absorbed in his toys, doesn't even notice it. He'll notice his father's affection only if he pauses briefly from his play. Likewise, when we're preoccupied with some kind of concern, we cannot feel God's love. We do not feel what God gives us. Be careful: do not waste your precious energy on unnecessary chores and vain concerns, which will one day turn to dust. By fussing and worrying about what is superfluous and vain, you not only tire your body but also scatter your mind aimlessly; and then, during prayer, you offer God weariness and yawning—just like the sacrifice Cain offered.¹⁴⁷ And from this it follows that your inner state will also be “Cain-like,” filled with anxiety and sighs, which will be brought on by the tangalashka near you.

Let us not waste the very core of our strength aimlessly, or else we will have nothing left for God but husks and shells. Preoccupation with something drains all the inner strength from the heart and leaves nothing for Christ. If you see that your mind is constantly getting distracted and drifting off into worries, cares, and the like, you must realize that you have strayed from where you should be and be concerned that you have distanced yourself from God. Realize that you have grown closer to your affairs rather than to God—to the created rather than to the Creator.

Unfortunately, the worldly pleasure derived from a job well done often deceives even a monk. Of course, man is created to do good, because his Creator is good. But a monk strives to transform himself from a human being into an angel. Therefore, in order to labor spiritually, he must limit his work for material purposes to what is absolutely necessary. Then his joy will come from the spiritual fruits he has cultivated; it will become spiritual, and the monk will not only nourish himself but also abundantly nourish others.

Amid so many cares and concerns, people forget God. Father Tikhon¹⁴⁸ used to say, in his characteristic manner: “Pharaoh gave the Israelites plenty of work and plenty of food so that they would forget God.”¹⁴⁹ In our time, the devil has completely captivated people with material things and earthly concerns. [He teaches people] to work hard and eat a lot—so that they would forget God and, thus, be unable—or, more accurately, unwilling—to make use of the freedom given to them for the sanctification of the soul. But, fortunately—against the devil's will—something good also comes out of this [hurry]: people do not find as much time for sin as they would like.

Too much work and too many responsibilities secularize a monk

It is good for a person who desires to live spiritually—and especially a monk—to keep a distance from certain kinds of activities, work, and responsibilities—that is, those that divert him from his spiritual goal. One should not take on a multitude of never-ending tasks, because such tasks never end. And if a monk does not learn to engage in inner work on himself, he will constantly turn to external work. People who strive to finish never-ending tasks end their lives with spiritual imperfections. At the end of their lives, they repent, but by then it does them no good, because their “passport” has already been handed to them. In any case, at least a brief respite from tasks is necessary.

¹⁴⁷ See Gen. 4:3–7.

¹⁴⁸ See *Elder Paisios*. The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories from the Holy Mountain. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 13–39.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Exodus 1:13–14.

When many labors are reduced, a renewal of physical strength and a thirst for inner work will naturally arise—work that does not weary but restores a person’s strength. Then the soul, too, will breathe in spiritual oxygen in abundance. Fatigue from spiritual work does not sap one’s strength but restores it, because this work elevates a person to great heights and draws them closer to the tenderly loving Father, so that their soul rejoices as well.

Physical fatigue, when devoid of spiritual meaning—or, rather, when it occurs without a spiritual necessity that might justify it—embitters a person. Even the gentlest little horse, if overworked, begins to kick—that is, it acquires a bad habit, even though it did not have one before and might have become more sensible with age.

In order to give priority to the spiritual, certain tasks may well be set aside. Excessive work and excessive concern worldly-mind the monk, and his faculty of spiritual perception becomes worldly. He already lives as a man of this world—with all the mental unrest and worldly anxiety that entails. In short, due to constant worries, anxieties, and misfortunes, he already partially experiences the torments of hell in this life. But when a monk is concerned not with material things, but with his own salvation and the salvation of all people, he makes God his ruler and people his servants.

Do you remember the story of the Venerable Gerontius and his novice?¹⁵⁰ The Venerable Gerontius asked the Most Holy Mother of God for a little water—enough for him and his novice to drink. The Mother of God, like a Kind Mother, made an opening in the rock near their hermitage and brought forth water from there—a holy spring—so that they would have something to drink. Time passed, and the saint’s novice began to build terraces, then brought in soil, planted orchards and vegetable gardens, and, having taken on so many worldly responsibilities, neglected his spiritual duties. And since there was not enough water, he took a chisel and began to widen the opening in the rock—so that the spring would yield more water. Then the Mother of God withdrew the water, causing it to flow in another place, much lower than the cell, and said to him, “If you want to tend the gardens and be distracted, then carry water from afar.”

Where there is much busyness, there is much spiritual interference

— Geronda, weren’t you sorry to leave the cell, which you had put so much effort into restoring, and move to another place?

— Since I left there, it means there was some serious reason for it.

— And everywhere, did you limit yourself to only the bare necessities?

— Yes, I limited myself to what was absolutely necessary for life here, so that I might be able to do what is necessary for the Heavenly Realm, for Heaven. When a person gets lost in earthly matters, they stray from the path that leads them to Heaven. First you do one thing, then you want to do something else... If you get caught up in this cycle, that’s it—you’re lost. When a person gets lost in earthly things, they lose what is heavenly. And just as there is no end to the heavenly, there is no end to the earthly either. Either you’ll get lost here, or you’ll “get lost” there. And do you know what it means to “get lost” there, in the Heavenly Realm! Oh, I would recite the Jesus Prayer and immerse myself in it! Have you never immersed yourself in prayer?

Being preoccupied with a lot of work, with fatigue and worries, and especially with haste, does not help us. All of this pushes sobriety into the background and hardens the soul. A person cannot not only pray, but even think.

They cannot act wisely and end up doing the wrong things.

¹⁵⁰ See *Elder Paisius*. *The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 140–141.

Therefore, be careful: do not waste your time aimlessly, without benefit to your spiritual life. Otherwise, you will reach a point where you become deeply embittered and will no longer be able to fulfill your spiritual duties. You will want to engage in work or conversation—or, just to keep yourself “busy,” you will create problems for yourself. When we abandon the Jesus Prayer and our spiritual duties, the enemy seizes our spiritual heights and wages war against us through the flesh and our thoughts. He renders all our powers—both mental and physical—useless; he interrupts our communion with God, resulting in the captivity of our soul to passions.

Father Tikhon told the monks that they must live an ascetic life in order to free themselves from worldly cares, rather than working like laborers and eating like worldly people. For a monk’s calling consists of prostrations, fasting, and prayer—not only for himself, but for the whole world—both the living and the departed. Work, on the other hand, should be minimal and done only to provide for one’s basic needs and to avoid being a burden to anyone.

— Geronda, do worldly concerns always hinder the spiritual life?

— If you are engaged in what is necessary out of obedience—¹⁵¹ —then it will not harm you. If your efforts toward the obedience entrusted to you or your assistance to a sister do not go beyond the bounds of [obedience], then you will eagerly long for prayer, and your help to others will prove effective. But if a person goes beyond the bounds [of obedience] on their own, adds extra burdens to the task assigned to them, or worries about things that are unnecessary, then their mind becomes distracted and turns away from God. And if a person’s mind is not in God, how can they experience divine joy? The heart easily grows cold. If I spend the whole day receiving people—even though this is a spiritual task—at night, when I rise to pray, my heart is in a different state than when I pray all day long. My head becomes cluttered with the many things I’ve heard from people, and it’s not easy to cast all that aside. As much as possible, recite the Jesus Prayer during the day and quietly hum a church hymn.

A short period of spiritual reading is also very helpful—especially before prayer. It warms the soul deeply and dispels the worries that occupied one’s mind during the day. And when the soul is set free and transported into the spiritual, divine atmosphere, the mind remains undistracted in its work. After reading a passage from the Gospel or from the Father’s Book (the Father’s Book contains short but powerful chapters), the mind is transported into the spiritual realm and no longer strays from there. After all, the mind is like a restless child who cannot sit still—it runs here and there. But give it a sweet piece of candy, and it won’t go anywhere.

Freedom from worries and cares brings inner stillness and spiritual growth. Cares distance a monk from God. Where there are many worries, there is much spiritual interference that drowns out the signals of spiritual radio stations. A monk has no excuse if he does not lead a spiritual life. Look at those unfortunate laypeople—they’re burdened with so many worries, yet they still try their best. A monk has no such worries. He doesn’t have to think about rent, debts, or whether he has a job or not. His spiritual father is right there, and the church is right in the monastery: prayers, anointing, prayer services, liturgies... He is free from worries and is focused on becoming an angel—he has no other goal before him. Whereas a layperson has so many worries! He is preoccupied with raising his children and other matters—and at the same time is fighting for the salvation of his soul. As Elder Trifon used to say:¹⁵² “Does a monk want to keep vigil? He can do so. Does he want to fast? He can do that, too. He has neither

¹⁵¹ In modern Russian monastic terminology, the word “obedience,” in addition to “the subjugation of one’s will” (Greek: ὑπακοή), can also refer to a particular service assigned to a monastic (Greek: διακόνημα). In this case, the term is used in the first sense. — *Translator’s note*

¹⁵² For more on Elder Trifon, see: *Elder Paisius. The Fathers of Mount Athos and Stories from Mount Athos*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 120–125.

a wife nor children. But a layperson cannot do all of this. After all, he has children. One needs shoes, another needs clothes, and a third needs something else.”

We must seek the good

Above all, we must seek the Kingdom of Heaven. This must be our concern, and everything else will be provided for us.¹⁵³ If a person loses himself in this life, he wastes the time given to him, squandering it. If he does not lose himself and prepares for the life to come, then his earthly life has meaning. If one thinks about the life to come, much changes. But when a person thinks only about how to make life here more comfortable, they become exhausted, wear themselves out, and head toward eternal torment.

Be careful not to become infected with impatient restlessness and passionate obsession with earthly affairs: “Now we must do one thing, then another...,” because in such a state, Armageddon will overtake you.¹⁵⁴ Impatient restlessness alone regarding construction, renovations, and other such matters is already the work of demons. Turn your focus toward Christ, because otherwise you will have only the outward appearance of a life with Christ, while within you all worldly wisdom will remain—and I fear that the same misfortune may befall you as befell the holy virgins.

The wise virgins¹⁵⁵ did not merely perform good deeds, but also showed good care—they did not close their eyes; they were not indifferent. The foolish virgins were indifferent and did not strive to stay awake. That is why the Lord said, “*Watch.*”¹⁵⁶ They were virgins—but foolish, without understanding. If a virgin lacks reason from birth, then for her this is a blessing from God. She passes into the next life without any trials. However, if she possesses reason but lives unreasonably, then on the Day of Judgment she will have no defense.

And what about the story of Martha and Mary, as told in the Gospel? Do you see how her preoccupation led Martha to behave, in a sense, shamelessly? Apparently, Mary helped her at first as well, but when she saw that Martha had no intention of wrapping up her preparations, she left her and went away. “How,” Mary thought, “can I give up my Christ for the sake of salads and pastries?” One might think that Christ himself had come to them just to eat Martha’s delicacies! And that’s exactly what stung Martha, and she said, “*Lord, do you not care that my only sister has left me to serve alone?*”¹⁵⁷

Let us be careful, then, that the same thing does not happen to us as it did to Martha. Let us pray that we may become good Marias.

Part 3.

On the Spirit of God and the Spirit of This World

“The inner purity of a true person beautifies their outward appearance”

¹⁵³ See Matt. 6:33 and Luke 12:13.

¹⁵⁴ See Rev. 16:16.

¹⁵⁵ See Matt. 25:1–13.

¹⁵⁶ Matt. 25:13.

¹⁵⁷ Luke 10:40.

Chapter 1.

On Worldly Education and Knowledge

A wise person is one who has purified themselves

By sharpening his mind not in divine matters but in cunning, a person surrenders himself to the devil. But then it would be better for him to lose his reason altogether, so that on Judgment Day he might have extenuating circumstances.

— Geronda, is simplicity different from cunning?

— Yes, just as a fox differs from a jackal. A jackal, wanting to steal something, boldly goes and takes what it wants. A fox, on the other hand, will try to get what it wants through cunning.

— And can a person, Geronda, mistake cunning for sharpness of mind?

— Yes, they might, but—upon looking within themselves—they will understand what cunning is and what sharpness of mind is. After all, they have a checklist for discernment. What are the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Love, joy, peace, and the like.¹⁵⁸ Is there anything of these gifts within him? Without possessing these characteristics, a person will have something satanic within him—the distinctive traits of a tangalashka.

An intelligent person is one who has purified themselves, freed from passions. Truly intelligent is the one who has sanctified their mind as well. If the mind is not sanctified, then its sharpness is of no use. Look at journalists and politicians—they are, after all, intelligent people, but many of them, lacking a sanctified mind, speak nonsense along with their intelligent remarks. They spout terrible nonsense precisely because of their great intellect! If a person does not make good use of his own mind, then the devil will make use of it. If a person does not use the sharpness of his mind for good, then the devil will use it for evil.

— So, by failing to use the sharpness of his mind for good, does a person thereby grant the devil the right to act?

— If a person has not used his sharp mind for good deeds, then power is automatically given to the devil. By failing to work spiritually, a person perverts goodness. And it is not the devil who does evil then, but the person himself. For example, someone is intelligent but does not use his mind; he is lazy. But since he does not use his head, what good is it that he is intelligent?

— Can an intelligent person who is subject to passions possess the capacity for sound judgment?

— First and foremost, they must be careful not to trust their own reason. By trusting their own reason, a spiritual person falls into delusion, and a worldly person goes mad. Do not trust your own thoughts. You must ask questions and seek counsel; you must sanctify your mind. And in general, a person must sanctify everything they possess. A sanctified, sharp mind facilitates sound reasoning. An intelligent but unsanctified person will lack spiritual reasoning. And a person who is naive by nature may mistake some deluded person for a saint, or mistake someone's effeminate cooing for reverence. Whereas a purified, intelligent person becomes very discerning.

— Geronda, how is a sharp mind purified?

— In order for it to be purified, a person must not accept the “messages” of the evil one and must not have evil thoughts, but must act with kindness and simplicity in all things. In this way, spiritual clarity and divine enlightenment come. Then a person sees into the hearts of others and does not jump to human conclusions.

— Geronda, is discernment connected to knowledge?

¹⁵⁸ See Galatians 5:22–23.

— Discernment arises from divine illumination. One can read the Holy Fathers, possess correct knowledge on certain matters, strive in the spiritual life, and pray; yet discernment arises from divine illumination. It is a phenomenon of a different order.

— Geronda, were people better in the old days?

— It's not that they were better; it's just that people of old possessed simplicity and good intentions. Today, people view everything with cunning, because they measure everything with their intellect. The European spirit has caused a great deal of harm. It is precisely this spirit that has corrupted people. If it weren't for it, the spiritual state of people today would be wonderful, because, for better or worse, everyone is now educated, and it would be possible to reach mutual understanding with them. But modern people have been taught godlessness and all these satanic theories, and in this way they have been rendered unfit, so that it is impossible to reach mutual understanding with them. In the old days, you could not reach mutual understanding with a person if he had neither reverence nor education. I remember how once a monk, upon hearing the words "*And in the Holy One, our Father Gregory, Pope of Rome*"¹⁵⁹ during the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, decided that they were commemorating the Pope of Rome and was led astray. "'I didn't expect,'" he said, "I never expected that you would become papists!" Having said this, he left the church. You see where ignorance leads! Ignorance is a dreadful thing. And the greatest evil is done by those in whom reverence is combined with confusion in the mind. Without understanding the essence of the matter, they create problems.

Knowledge without Divine enlightenment is a disaster

If people would "slow down" their reasoning, not only would their minds be clear, but Divine Grace could easily draw near to them. Knowledge without enlightenment is a disaster. A person is enlightened by God through spiritual self-cultivation and spiritual struggle. He possesses Divine enlightenment and the experience of life in God, rather than his own thoughts. Therefore, he sees far into the distance. A nearsighted person sees well up close but cannot see objects that are far away. And even for someone who is not nearsighted—even if they can see objects that are a little farther away—that is still no great achievement. A person has only two physical eyes, whereas they have many spiritual eyes.

Those who turn away from Christ deprive themselves of divine enlightenment, because, like fools, they turn away from the sunlight and go to a place where the sun's rays do not reach. As a result, they are spiritually chilled and sick. If a person does not purify himself, if Divine enlightenment does not come to him, then his [human] knowledge—no matter how correct it may be—is nothing more than rationalism and nothing else. This is the conclusion I have reached. And if Divine enlightenment disappears, then there will be no benefit in anything that people say or write. The Psalter was written through divine inspiration, and just look at how profound its meanings are! Gather together all the [contemporary] theologians and philologists, and you will see: they could not compose even a single psalm with such depth. King David was not a learned man, but it is clearly evident how the Spirit of God guided him.

And the Church today is in turmoil because there is no divine illumination, and everyone judges and acts as they please. Then the "human factor" creeps in, passions arise, and the devil has room to maneuver. That is why those who are under the power of their own passions should not seek power.

— So, Geronda, should people persistently ask for divine enlightenment?

— Yes, because otherwise the solutions they propose are the products of their own reason. And then confusion arises. Conferences, meetings... And it's a pity that those who engage in this have not first and foremost come to know themselves. After all, knowing oneself alone is worth more than all the

¹⁵⁹ St. Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome (540–604)—a saint of the Orthodox Church. His feast day is celebrated on March 12.

knowledge in the world. A person who humbly comes to know himself is recognized by others as well. If some of these [big talkers] had come to know themselves, then, upon seeing their pitiful state, they wouldn't dare open their mouths.

Once, a man was complaining that, as he put it, there wasn't a single Orthodox Christian to represent Orthodoxy abroad at various conferences and other events. He went on and on and on—exaggerating so much it was enough to make you want to just lie down and die. “When God,” I said to him, “asked the prophet Elijah: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah, on Mount Horeb?’”¹⁶⁰ — the prophet replied that he was the only one left. Then God said to him, ‘Seven thousand have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ Seven thousand people kept the faith, yet the prophet Elijah said, ‘I am the only one left!’ And now you're exaggerating the situation at a time when there are so many believers! Is our Almighty really like the Almighty depicted on the dome of the church, which might crack from an earthquake, and then we wonder what to do with it so it doesn't crumble, inviting restorers to reinforce it?” — “Over there in America,” he replied to me, “you could roll a ball—there's no one there.” — “But how can that be?” I objected, “when I know so many believers from America!” — “Yes,” he said, “that's true. But Catholics are such sly beasts! They're always trying to outsmart us!” — “But Catholics,” I replied, “have already come to feel aversion toward the papacy themselves and are now returning to Orthodoxy. When Patriarch Dimitri¹⁶¹ visited America, wasn't it the Catholics themselves who shouted, ‘The Patriarch is a true Christian, but the Pope is a businessman’? Didn't the Catholics say this with indignation? And yet you keep insisting to me that Catholics are trying to infiltrate Orthodoxy through cunning in order to corrupt it, and all sorts of things like that. Then where, in your opinion, is God? Can the devil really do whatever he pleases?”

Unfortunately, Western rationalism has also influenced the Eastern Orthodox hierarchs. And so they are in the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ only in body, while their whole being remains in the West, which, as they see it, reigns over the world. But if they were to look at the West spiritually, through the light of the East—the light of Christ—they would see the spiritual decline of the West, which is quietly losing the light of the Sun of Wisdom—Christ—and sinking into deep darkness. But instead, they gather at conferences and endlessly discuss topics that are not even worth discussing—topics that not even the Holy Fathers have discussed over the course of so many years.¹⁶² All these actions come from the evil one. They are aimed at confusing the minds of believers and seducing them, pushing some toward heresy and others toward schism. This is how the devil gains new footholds. Oh, oh, oh, these people torment the faithful and cloud their minds.

And where does it all begin? It begins when a person, without engaging in spiritual work, fancies himself to be a spiritual person, and then goes on to spout nonsense. A child, possessing natural purity of mind and little knowledge, will say sensible things to you. Conversely, a person who is highly educated but whose mind is clouded by the demonic influence he has accepted will utter the most vile blasphemies.

One who constantly hones his mind with knowledge while living apart from God ultimately makes his mind a double-edged sword. And then, with one edge, he strikes himself, and with the other—through his rational, unquestionable human decisions—he wounds others. Human knowledge is beneficial when it is sanctified and becomes Divine. Otherwise, it is human cunning, rationalism, and worldly logic. An ungraced mind in and of itself is like an unmagnetized iron rod that strikes metal objects, hoping they will stick to it. But they do not stick; they are merely distorted by its blows.

¹⁶⁰ See 3 Kings 19:13–18.

¹⁶¹ Dimitrios—Ecumenical Patriarch from 1972 to 1991—*Translator's note*.

¹⁶² Elder Paisios is referring to those theological conferences at which issues are discussed on which the Church has a well-established patristic position, as well as issues that do not require discussion at all.

Such are people today. They perceive everything from the standpoint of dry rationality. This rationality is a true catastrophe, for it is said that “*the mind boasts.*”¹⁶³ If a person lacks Divine enlightenment, then knowledge is worthless; it brings destruction.

Science must be applied to the spiritual life

All evil begins with the intellect when it revolves solely around science and is completely detached from God. That is why such people cannot find inner peace and balance. Whereas if people’s minds revolve around God, then they use science for inner self-improvement and for the good of the world, because in that case their intellect is sanctified.

— So, Geronda, could we say that science is of no benefit to people?

— Science brings many benefits, but it also brings a great deal of confusion. I know people who, despite lacking formal education, possessed greater clarity of mind than scholars. Those who, by the grace of God, purify their minds of the confusion that science has introduced into them will have more tools at their disposal. But if this knowledge—these tools—is not sanctified, it can be used only for worldly, not spiritual, pursuits. Knowledge is quickly sanctified when a person develops a sincere concern for the good. People who prioritize their inner education—the education of the soul—and who also use their external education to further their inner growth, are quickly transformed spiritually. And if they are not only theorists but also practitioners—in spiritual matters—then their help to the world is very great, because they lead people out of the suffocation of hellish torment and into the joy of paradise. Such people of God may often have fewer degrees than other learned men, but their help to the world is far greater. Such a person is blessed with many spiritual gifts, not a pile of useless pieces of paper (that is, degrees). The world is filled with sin, and much prayer and personal spiritual experience are necessary. A great deal of writing is like paper money, whose value depends on what backs it. Therefore, everyone must labor in the mine of their own soul.

I remember how, at the Esfigmen Monastery, there was an elderly monk who was such a simple man that he even considered the Ascension to be a saint. He would pray to the Ascension using his rosary and say, “Holy One of God, pray to God for us!” Once, one of the monks at the monastery’s almshouse fell ill, and the simple monk had nothing to feed him. So he quickly ran down the stairs to the lower floor, opened a window overlooking the sea, stuck his hands out through it, and asked, “My Saint Analipsia,¹⁶⁴ , give me a fish for my brother!” And lo and behold! Right then, a huge fish like this leaped out of the sea straight into his hands! Everyone who saw it stood frozen in amazement. But the simple man just smiled at them, as if to say, “What’s so strange about that?” Yet we know when one saint is commemorated, when another suffered, when, where, and how the Ascension took place—and with all our knowledge, we can’t even pray for a tiny little fish! Such are the “strangenesses” of the spiritual life, and these “strangenesses” are beyond the grasp of the logic of that segment of the intelligentsia which possesses not God but its own “self.” They are beyond their grasp because such an intelligentsia possesses barren worldly knowledge, because it is afflicted with a worldly spiritual illness, and because it lacks the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit does not descend through technology

A word spoken from the intellect does not transform the soul, because it is flesh. The soul is transformed by the Word of God, born of the Holy Spirit, which possesses divine energy. The Holy Spirit does not descend through technology; therefore, theology has nothing in common with a fruitless scientific spirit. The Holy Spirit descends of His own accord—if He finds in a person the spiritual

¹⁶³ 1 Cor. 8:1.

¹⁶⁴ In Greek, the word “Ascension” (Ανάληψη) is feminine. – *Translator’s note.*

prerequisites necessary for this. And the spiritual prerequisite is for a person to cleanse their spiritual circuits of rust and become a good conductor—so as to receive the spiritual current of Divine enlightenment. In this way, a person becomes a spiritual scholar, a theologian. By “theologian,” I mean those whose theology is backed by a solid foundation of theological knowledge and whose theological degree holds value, not those who possess a worthless piece of paper—a theological degree akin to the cheap paper money from the occupation era that was of no use to anyone.

Often, a person spends years expending the powers of their mind to learn one or two foreign languages. In our era, almost everyone knows foreign languages, but since these languages have nothing in common with the languages of the Holy Pentecost, we are experiencing the greatest Tower of Babel. The greatest evil lies in the fact that, by engaging in dry, rational theology, we mistake our own reason for the Holy Spirit. This is called “brainology,” from which the Tower of Babel arises. Whereas in theology there are many tongues and a multitude of grace-filled gifts, yet all these tongues are in harmony with one another, because they have one Master—the Holy Spirit of Pentecost—and these tongues are fiery.

— Geronda, one of the stichera for Pentecost says: *“The Holy Spirit bestows all things...”*

— Yes, He bestows, but only upon those who are capable of receiving it. How can He bestow upon one who is incapable of receiving? The words of a humble person, rooted in personal experience and born with pain from the depths of his heart, are of far greater value than a flood of beautiful words that roll off the tongue of an educated person, polished by learning. Such speech does not touch people’s souls, for it is flesh, not the fiery tongue of Pentecost.

We must sanctify knowledge

Knowledge is a good thing, as is education. But if knowledge and education are not sanctified, they will prove useless and lead to disaster. Once, several students, laden with books, came to my cell and said, “Geronda, we’ve come to talk about the Old Testament. Doesn’t God allow knowledge?” “What kind of knowledge?” I asked. “The kind acquired by reason?” “Yes,” they replied. “But this knowledge,” I said, “will only take you as far as the moon. It does not lift you up to God.” The powers of the intellect, which, at a cost of billions, lift a person to the moon, are a good thing, but far better are those spiritual powers which, with very little “fuel”—a single piece of dry bread—lift a person up to God—the goal of his calling. Once I asked an American who had come to visit me in my hermitage: “What have you achieved, being such a great nation?”—“We,” he replied, “have flown to the moon.”—“And is it,” I asked, “far away?”—“Well, let’s say half a million kilometers,” he replied. “And how many,” I said, “millions did you spend to fly there?” “From 1950 to this very day, we’ve spent so much on it that whole rivers of dollars have flowed away,” the American replied. “But what about God,” I ask, “didn’t you fly all the way to Him? Is God far away or not?” — “God,” he says, “is very far away!” — “Well, you see,” I reply, “and we reach Him on a single piece of dry bread!..”

Natural knowledge contributes to the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. However, without going beyond natural knowledge, a person does not transcend the natural realm and does not ascend to Heaven. That is, he does not leave the earthly paradise, that garden watered by the Euphrates and Tigris; he rejoices in the beautiful nature and animals, but does not ascend to the heavenly Paradise to rejoice together with the angels and the saints. In order to enter the heavenly Garden of Eden, one must have faith in the Master of that Garden; to love Him, one must acknowledge one’s sinfulness and humble oneself; to know Him, one must converse with Him in prayer and glorify Him—both when He helps us and when He tests us.

— Geronda, is it necessary for a person who is drawn to prostrations, fasting, asceticism, and the like to study dogmatic and theological books?

— If a person has a basic education, then dogmatic knowledge is a tool that helps him. However, one should not seek knowledge in order to help others or to be able to say something clever. No, knowledge [in the field of theology] must be acquired in order to help oneself. If a person strives to sanctify the talents God has given them, then Grace comes, which sanctifies the person themselves. And there, in Grace, lie both dogmatics and theology, because in this case the person experiences the Sacraments of God firsthand. And someone may be a simple person who, content with what God has given him, has no desire to learn more.

— And if, while living in a monastery, we still desire worldly knowledge, what does that mean?

— It means that we lack understanding. *“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*¹⁶⁵ When a person humbles himself and is enlightened, then both his mental faculties and the very power of his reason are sanctified. The energy of reason, before it is sanctified, is carnal. If, being uneducated, a person selfishly interprets dogmas and reads the Apocalypse, the Holy Fathers, and similar books, he becomes confused and eventually falls into unbelief. He approaches this with selfishness, and therefore the Grace of God departs from him. You see: humility helps in everything; it is humility that gives strength. My wisest plan or the wisest solution I have found is the greatest folly if selfishness is present in them. Whereas humility is true wisdom. Therefore, one’s efforts must be accompanied by love for God and great humility. Otherwise, instead of being beneficial, they will lead to the opposite result. A person’s mind becomes clouded, and afterward he utters blasphemies, because he approached the matter selfishly. What he has undertaken exceeds his strength. Even for an educated person, if he wishes to interpret dogmas, there is a danger of being led astray. How much greater, then, is this danger for an uneducated person who wishes to penetrate the spirit of the Holy Fathers without being in the appropriate spiritual state! After all, if he were in that state even a little, he would not expose himself to this danger; he would say: “If I need anything, God will enlighten me. I will simply do what I understand. After all, even that is so much!”

— So, Geronda, if someone misinterprets the Gospel, does that mean he lacks humility and reverence?

— Yes. After all, if there is no humility, then the interpretations he offers are interpretations based on the mind, on reason. There is no divine enlightenment in such interpretations.

— If a person does not understand a certain dogma or passage from Holy Scripture, is it better for them to set it aside for the time being?

— Yes, you have to tell yourself, “There’s some deeper meaning hidden here, but I don’t understand it.” That’s exactly what I did in such situations. When I was young and reading the Gospel, and there was a passage I didn’t understand, I didn’t try to interpret it. I would think, “There’s some deeper meaning hidden here, but I don’t understand it.” And then, when the time came, I saw how the interpretation came naturally. But I would still say, “Let me ask someone else how this passage is interpreted.” And it turned out that I understood that passage exactly as the generally accepted patristic interpretations did. After all, if someone tries to interpret the Gospel on their own—and especially without understanding it—that is shameless. Therefore, when reading Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers, do not interpret what you read using mere reason, but bring good thoughts into the process—until discerning divine enlightenment comes, and then the difficult passage will become clear on its own.

— And can a person, having attained a higher spiritual state, understand a passage more deeply?

— Not exactly “deeper.” Within a single divine meaning, many divine meanings are hidden. Some of them a person may grasp immediately, while others later. One person may read a great deal and learn a great deal, yet be completely unable to penetrate the meaning of the Gospel. Another, perhaps, reads

¹⁶⁵ John 8:32.

very little, but possesses humility and an ascetic spirit; and so God enlightens him, and he grasps the meaning of the Gospel. Someone who wants to read more may do so out of vanity or simply for the sake of pleasure. It's just like a person who watches a wrestling match and, without paying attention to how the wrestlers are fighting—so that it might help him become a wrestler himself—keeps glancing at his watch, just so he won't be late for the next and the next wrestling tournaments. And in this way, he doesn't become a wrestler himself, but remains a spectator.

— Geronda, people often say of an educated person, “This is an enlightened person.” Is that really always the case?

— When we say “an enlightened person,” we mean someone who is spiritually enlightened, spiritually mature. I have noticed that just as an uneducated person can be both very proud and very humble, so too can an educated person be both very proud and very humble. In other words, the whole foundation lies in inner enlightenment. This is what Basil the Great speaks of: “The most important thing is to hold a high position and possess a humble mindset.” Someone who holds a position of significance and has a little pride has, in a sense, an excuse for it. But there is no excuse for someone who is proud without holding a high position. The whole foundation lies in self-enlightenment, in inner enlightenment. If a person is enlightened, educated, and at the same time possesses humble wisdom, that is best of all. However, there is not the slightest excuse for someone who, without having received a high level of education, is filled with conceit.

“The mind boasts”

In most cases, external education is harmful—because it fosters great conceit in a person, a “grand idea” about oneself. And then this idea becomes a barrier that prevents God's Grace from drawing near to him. Whereas if a person casts aside conceit—the false idea about himself—then our Good and Generous Father enriches him with His luminous Divine ideas. However, if an unfortunate person harbors a grand idea about himself and clings to this idea in his mind, he remains a tadpole, mere flesh, and knows nothing of God's Grace—the Holy Spirit. That is, there is a danger that all this knowledge will “inflate” his head, turning it into a balloon. And then the person faces the danger of either bursting, like a balloon in the air (from schizophrenia), or falling to the ground (from pride)—and smashing into a pancake. Therefore, knowledge must follow the fear of God and go hand in hand with action—so that balance is maintained. Knowledge alone is harmful.

When I, driven by selfishness, say something just to be admired—because I've come up with something better than others—spiritual laws kick in to bring me back to my senses. However, such selfish self-promotion is harmful to a person. An eyelash that gets into the eye irritates it slightly. However, if it keeps getting into the eye, it causes severe inflammation. The same is true here—spiritual inflammation arises. If a person is not lacking in intellectual abilities and can easily handle a certain task, then he must humble himself before God, day and night, thanking Him for the fact that God has given him a mind and that, therefore, without growing weary, he can carry out his work. Not to thank God—how is that even possible?!

— Geronda, what if a person thinks he can't handle anything?

— Then the devil tempts him from the opposite “side.” Once, a camel was asked, “Which path do you prefer—uphill or downhill?” “Well, where did the flat ground go?” the camel replied.

Those who have no reason at all are in a better position. We, on the other hand, have been given reason so that we, the rational ones, might be in a better position, but here's the question: how do we use it? We will be held accountable for this. How wisely everything is arranged by God! Those who lack reason are joyful and will be in a better position in the life to come, whereas those who have a great deal of reason suffer.

— Geronda, won't mentally disabled people be at a disadvantage in the afterlife?

— Ultimately, both the “highly intelligent” and the “mentally challenged” will alike turn to dust. It is in Heaven that the mind will dwell. In Heaven, holy theologians will not be in a more advantageous position with regard to knowing God than those who were mentally challenged in this life. It is also possible that the Righteous God will grant the latter something even greater, because they were deprived of so much in this life.

Let's use our minds wisely

— Geronda, then why do you often say that an education is a good prerequisite for monastic life?

— Look: an educated person can read something from the Holy Fathers and, with a little effort—since he has understood what he has read—quickly make progress. For an uneducated person, however, if he lacks reverence, it is not easy to make progress. An uneducated person must experience divine events and miracles firsthand, and only then can he comprehend what he reads through the lens of his own experience. Whereas for an educated person, a little effort is enough to make rapid progress—provided he uses his mind and does not get stuck on theory alone, lest it rob him of his spiritual growth. Of course, I am not saying that he should strive to comprehend the Mysteries of God through his intellect.

— So, Geronda, does a person need to use their intellect in the struggle against the passions?

— Not only in that, but beyond that as well. A person sees God's blessings, sees the entire universe, and glorifies and thanks God. Consider this: after all, it was Abraham himself who first sought God. God sought Abraham afterward.

— What do you mean?

— Abraham's father was an idolater—he worshiped idols. But Abraham observed the universe, and the fact that people were worshiping lifeless idols puzzled him. He began to think it through and said, “It cannot be that these idols, these pieces of wood, are gods and created this world. So who created it? Who created the sky, the stars, the sun, and everything else? I must find the true God. In Him I will believe, and Him I will worship.” It was then that God appeared to him and said, “*Go forth from your land and from your kindred.*”¹⁶⁶ God led Abraham to Hebron, and Abraham became God's beloved child.

An educated person may lack reverence, but, being able to grasp things easily, he—with a little humility and a little effort—will achieve success. For example, when we began training as radio operators in the signals company where I was serving, some of the call signs were in English. Those who were educated and knew English learned them right away. But for the rest of us, it wasn't easy. And even in the theory classes, which weren't that difficult, those who had at least some background knowledge found it easier than we did.

A person must recognize God's blessings and understand what has been given to them. Why did God give us a mind? So that we might explore, study, and reflect on ourselves. God did not give people a mind so that they would constantly rack their brains over how to find ever-faster means of transportation from one country to another. He gave us a mind so that we might apply it diligently to what matters most—how to reach the goal of our calling: God, the true heavenly homeland.

What blessings God bestowed upon the people of Israel! What signs, what wonders! And yet, when Moses, bearing the tablets inscribed with God's Ten Commandments, was delayed on Mount Sinai and did not come down immediately, the people gave [Aaron] their gold jewelry so that he might make a golden calf out of it and they could worship it.¹⁶⁷ But in our own era, people's minds... aren't like a

¹⁶⁶ Gen. 12:1.

calf's! Therefore, an educated person has no excuse for not understanding what is right and what is wrong. God gave us reason so that we might find our Creator. But the Europeans—they've gone too far with their reason. By removing God from their lives, they've become confused and are approaching the abyss.

And some, despite having intelligence, quick wits, and so on—all the prerequisites for success—pay no attention to what you say to them.

As soon as you start telling them something, they shout, "Got it, got it!"—and, cutting you off, rush to finish your thought themselves. Very intelligent young people come to the Holy Mountain. When you tell them something, it seems as though they grasp what they hear on the fly. However, because they are inattentive, they get a big head, and what they "grasped on the fly" simply... flies away. Others, on the other hand, even though they may not have such a sharp mind, listen reverently to what is said to them, do not interrupt, hear things through to the end, and what they have heard stays with them. The first group understands a great deal, gathers knowledge from all sides, fills themselves with it—and does nothing. They render the intellect God gave them useless; their heads become as good as stuffed with straw. Because of their pride, they do not allow God's grace to enlighten them. Whereas the latter, though not particularly brilliant, are very humble. "You know," says a person of this disposition, "I'm terribly slow on the uptake!"—and asks again, "What did you say?" And such people strive to put what they've heard into practice. In this way, they are filled with Grace and prosper. A humble person usually knows a great deal, whereas the egotist has no knowledge—because he does not humble himself and does not ask questions. St. Arsenius the Great was the most educated man in the Byzantine Empire. Emperor Theodosius the Great appointed him as tutor to his two sons—Arcadius and Honorius. However, after becoming a monk and settling in the desert, he would sit at the feet of the uneducated Abba Macarius and say, "I do not even know the alphabet of this [common man]." ¹⁶⁸

— Geronda, how can one avoid examining things by reason alone?

— A person must use their reason correctly. With the help of reason, they must strive to explore God's greatness in order to find God, rather than making their own reason a god. Intelligent people should be spiritually advanced. It is enough for them to glance at something to understand what is going on. By using their reason, people can help their neighbors—otherwise, they can torment them. I know of such cases from the lives of laypeople. I knew a young man. When his father died, there were four children left. His mother remarried, and the children received no love from either her or their stepfather. When this unfortunate young man grew up, he opened a general store and began to work. One day he heard that a man had died, leaving three children orphaned. He felt deeply for these little ones, and he proposed to the deceased man's widow: "If you'd like, let's get married; we'll live as brother and sister and raise these children." She agreed. Now they lead a spiritual life, read the Lives of the Saints and **Dobrotolyubie**, visit monasteries, and have a spiritual father. This man reflected properly, acted correctly, and received Divine Grace. Otherwise, the tangalashka would have suggested to him: "You were tormented as a child, so now you should torment these children." However, this man "avenged" himself not with evil, but with good. Some use their minds for good and come up with good ideas. Others use it for destruction, and the tangalashka helps them in this as well.

In the case of Abel and Cain, we see the same thing. ¹⁶⁹ Did God create Abel from one kind of dough and Cain from another? No. But Abel used the mind God had given him correctly. "God," he thought, "has given me a whole flock of sheep—so surely I can offer Him a single lamb?" He chose the very best lamb, slaughtered it, and offered it as a sacrifice to God. Cain, on the other hand, offered God wheat

¹⁶⁷ See Exod. 32:1–6.

¹⁶⁸ See Memorable Tales of the Asceticism of the Holy and Blessed Fathers. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1993. p. 18.

¹⁶⁹ See Gen. 4:2–15.

along with chaff and bran. One offered a choice lamb as a sacrifice, while the other offered worthless remnants of ears of grain, stalks, and other threshing waste. All right, if you don't want to offer a lamb—then at least take a little bit of clean wheat! But, unfortunately, Cain took wheat mixed with all kinds of debris and began to burn it on the altar. What a difference between the offerings of the two! Abel's offering was pleasing to God, and afterward Cain became jealous of Abel and killed him. Thus, God rewarded Abel for what he had endured, while his older brother roamed the forests like a wild beast. It is clear that God granted every person freedom, but Abel used that freedom for good.

Chapter 2. **On the Rationalism of Our Time**

Common Sense in the Spiritual Life

— Geronda, what place does common sense occupy in the spiritual life?

— What kind of common sense? Worldly common sense? That kind of common sense has no place in the spiritual life.¹⁷⁰ In the spiritual life, angels and saints enter through your window; you see them, converse with them, and then they depart from you. If, however, you try to analyze such events using common sense, you will come up empty-handed. Unfortunately, in our age of ever-expanding knowledge, reliance on common sense alone has shaken faith to its foundations and filled people's souls with doubts and question marks. And so we have deprived ourselves of miracles—for a miracle is experienced, not explained by common sense. On the contrary, faith in God draws divine power down to earth and overturns all human reasoning. Faith performs miracles, raises the dead, and leaves science gaping in amazement. Viewed from the outside, all phenomena of spiritual life seem devoid of common sense. Unless a person casts aside his worldly reasoning and becomes a spiritual person, it is impossible for him to comprehend the Mysteries of God, which seem strange and illogical. Anyone who believes he can comprehend the Mysteries of God through external scientific theories is like a fool who wants to see Paradise through a telescope.

Common sense causes much harm when someone attempts to use it to investigate matters pertaining to the divine—the Mysteries and miracles. Catholics, with their “common sense,” have gone so far as to subject the Divine Eucharist to analysis in a chemistry lab—to see if it is truly the Body and Blood of Christ—whereas the saints, by faith alone, often saw the Flesh and Blood on the holy host. Soon they'll go so far as to send saints for X-rays to verify their holiness! Catholics have cast aside the Holy Spirit, replaced Him with their own “common sense,” and have even resorted to white magic. To one Catholic who was well-disposed toward me (the poor man was weeping), I said this: “Among the differences between us, this one is particularly important: you rely on reason—and we on faith. You have developed rationalism and, in general, the ‘human factor.’ With your common sense, you limit Divine power, because you push God's Grace to the very back. You add chemical preservatives to holy water so it won't spoil. We add holy water to spoiled water, and the spoiled water becomes good. We believe in sanctifying Grace, and holy water can be preserved for two hundred or five hundred years—it never spoils.”

— So, Geronda, does a person prefer logic and common sense to God?

¹⁷⁰ When speaking of “common sense” and condemning it, Elder Paisios does not mean the grace-filled gift with which God has honored man, but rather rationalism, or, as the Elder himself puts it, “unhealthy sense,” that is, “sense” devoid of faith in God, which does not accept Divine Providence and excludes the possibility of a miracle. – *Translator's note.*

— Perhaps it would be better to say not logic, but pride? After all, in essence, the common sense we’re talking about now is actually unhealthy, corrupted sense. Pride is corrupted logic; it is “common sense” in which selfishness lurks and the enemy—the demon—has made his nest. When “common sense” of this kind is mixed into our actions, we give the devil power [over ourselves].

— Geronda, if a spiritual person needs to overcome a temptation, should there still be no room for common sense?

— In this case, you need to do what is humanly possible, and leave what is humanly impossible to God. There are people who always try to “grasp” everything with their intellect. Like those who want to pray “intelligently” with their minds. To concentrate, they strain their minds, and then their heads start to ache. If I approached the problems I face every day in this way, would I ever be able to handle them? But I do what is humanly possible, and for the rest, I rely on God. “God,” I say, “will show the way out and enlighten me as to what needs to be done.” Many start lamenting: “How to handle this matter, what to do about that one, what to do with the third?”—and the slightest trifle gives them a headache. By trying to sort things out through reason alone, a person confuses their own mind. Before every action, one must let God act. One shouldn’t do anything without trusting in God, because in that case a person becomes anxious, exhausts their mind, and feels unwell in their soul.

— Geronda, you once said that you never let yourself get overwhelmed. How do you manage that?

— Yes, I don’t overexert myself because I don’t approach the things I have to deal with using my reason. If I have a headache, it’s either from a cold or low blood pressure. And just think of how many problems I have to deal with! Every day, people come to me with questions and pain, and then my thoughts return to those who have come to me with various problems—the sick, those in need. And here’s the thing: if a sick person who came to me recovers, for some reason they don’t tell me about it so that I can be a little happy for them. And I continue to keep him in my memory as well.

— Geronda, how can a monk organize his thoughts so as not to exhaust himself with rationality?

— One must order one’s thoughts with the help of spiritual common sense, not worldly rationality. One must turn the tuning knob to the spiritual frequency. A monk must think spiritually and dispose himself spiritually. Even in a layperson—if he is a spiritual person—worldly common sense has no place. Worldly common sense is suitable for a good but unbelieving person.

— Geronda, what do you mean by the words “to set one’s heart on spiritual matters”?

— To set one’s mind on spiritual matters means to find joy not in what worldly people rejoice in, but in the opposite. For example, to rejoice that you’re not worth a penny. We will move forward in the spiritual realm only if our aspirations are the opposite of worldly ones. Do you want money? Give away your wallet, too. Do you want a bishop’s see? Put yourself in the dock.

— And what percentage of common sense do we have, Geronda?

— You need to loosen a few “screws.” I pray that you may reach that mind-blowing state of love which is divine madness. Otherwise, those who are brought to Lembeti,¹⁷¹ are in a better position than Christians who possess rationalism—that is, proud common sense.

Worldly rationality torments a person

— Geronda, I feel that my heart is hard as a stone. What should I do about my hard-heartedness?

— You don’t have a hard heart, but a “head-heart.” Your whole heart has gathered in your head, and now only your head is working. But you still have a chance to correct this—your heart can return to its proper place.

— How?

¹⁷¹ The psychiatric hospital in Thessaloniki.

— Read one canon from the Theotokarion every day.¹⁷² This is the very best remedy to get your heart working again. You do have a heart, but it's obscured by rationality. You've adopted a European typikon, a European mentality. In everything, you strive to be formally impeccable. If you were an employee at some European secular institution, everyone would hold you up as an example. You'd arrive at work right on time and carry out your assigned tasks flawlessly. You'd be the standard for everyone. If you applied that same consistency to your spiritual life, you'd be making giant spiritual strides and would quickly reach Paradise. But you see, the European spirit, with its rationality, draws a person not toward God, but somewhere off to the moon. Right now, you're behaving as if you were in a secular institution. However, in the spiritual life, everything is different. Simplicity is necessary. Be simple and trust in God.

— Geronda, how does one acquire this simplicity?

— You need to clear out your little head and fill it with the wisdom of times long past! Immerse yourself in the simplicity of the Holy Fathers and the Paterikon, so that you may come to know that spiritual teaching which lifts the soul upward and restores its strength. Then a person will not suffer. Rationality torments a person. For example, I say, "I must do this"—and I do it because it must be done. That is, I do it not from the heart, but because my rationality tells me to. And not only my rationality, but also my upbringing says, "I must yield my place to another." However, the heart does not say this. But if my heart stirs and I yield my place out of love, that is an entirely different matter. Then I will feel joy.

Our "self" must not be present in our actions. We must not seek peace for ourselves. This hinders the coming of Christ. We must strive for what brings peace to another person. True peace is born from bringing peace to another. Then God rests within a person, and the person ceases to be merely human, attaining deification. Otherwise, only reason is at work, and everything remains carnal and human.

Worldly common sense wearies the mind and exhausts physical strength: it constricts and limits the heart, whereas spiritual common sense expands the heart. If the mind is used wisely, it can touch the heart and help it. When the mind enters the heart and becomes its partner, then every action we take ceases to be merely rational. Common sense is a gift from God. However, we need to sanctify this common sense.

— But I, Geronda, have no heart...

— You do have a heart! But as soon as your heart wants to do something, your mind silences it. Try to acquire heartfelt common sense, to acquire faith and love.

— How can I achieve that?

— To lose your reason, start with this: march barefoot through Thessaloniki in a protest march! Let people say you've gone crazy! You, my dear, want to calculate everything with mathematical precision. Are you an astronomer? To work on yourself, stop thinking rationally.

— Geronda, which books will help me free myself from worldly rationality?

— First of all, read the Fathers, *The History of the God-Lovers*, *The Evergetinos*, ^{*173*}—that is, not theoretical but practical books—so that worldly rationality may depart from you through the simple, fatherly spirit of holiness. And [only] after that, begin reading Abba Isaac—so that you do not mistakenly take this writer, enlightened by God, for a philosopher.

¹⁷² The Theotokarion (Greek: Θεοτοκάριον) is a collection of liturgical canons in honor of the Most Holy Theotokos, compiled by the Venerable Nicodemus of Mount Athos and first published in 1796. It contains sixty-two canons written by twenty-two hymnographers from various eras. — *Translator's note.*

¹⁷³ "History of the God-Lovers"—biographies of Syrian ascetics, a book compiled by Blessed Theodoret of Cyrrhus. "Evergetinos"—a systematic collection of patristic teachings in four volumes, compiled during the Byzantine era by Paul Evergetis, a monk of the Constantinople monastery, and first published at the end of the 18th century by the Venerable Nicodemus of Mount Athos. — *Translator's note.*

Worldly common sense distorts the faculty of spiritual perception

The Holy Fathers viewed everything through a spiritual, divine eye. The patristic writings were written by the Spirit of God, and by that same Spirit of God the Holy Fathers interpreted Holy Scripture. Nowadays, one rarely encounters this Spirit of God, and that is why people do not understand the works of the Holy Fathers. They view everything through worldly eyes; they do not look deeper; they lack the breadth of vision that faith and love provide. The Venerable Arsenius the Great never changed the water in which he soaked palm branches, and it smelled very bad.¹⁷⁴ But how are we to understand what a wondrous spring was gushing forth from that vat of putrid water! “Well, that’s something I just can’t understand!”—someone might say. The one who speaks this way is unwilling to be patient and look more closely at this water to see if there is something else in it, but rejects it because he does not understand.

When rationality intervenes, a person understands neither the Gospel nor the Holy Fathers. The faculty of spiritual perception becomes distorted, and the person, devaluing both the Gospel and the Holy Fathers with his rationality, goes so far as to say: “For how many years have people been tormenting themselves in vain with asceticism, fasting, and other deprivations!” But to speak this way is blasphemy. Once, a monk from Keliot came to my cell by car. “My son,” I said, “why do you need a car? After all, it doesn’t befit your way of life!”—“Why is that, Geronda?” he asked in surprise. “Doesn’t the Gospel say, *‘He will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life’*?”¹⁷⁵ “When it says, *‘He will receive a hundredfold,’*” I replied, “the Gospel is referring to what a person needs. But for a monk, in addition to this, it is fitting to live as the Apostle Paul says: *‘As though having nothing, yet possessing everything.’*”¹⁷⁶ That is, a monk has nothing, but because of his virtue, people entrust their wealth to him, and he may manage it. “Scripture does not mean that we monks should accumulate wealth for ourselves!” Do you see what erroneous interpretations a person can arrive at through mere reasoning? Always know that if a person does not purify himself, if divine enlightenment does not come to him, then the interpretations he offers will be nothing but utter confusion.

Once, someone asked me: “Why didn’t the Mother of God perform a miracle on the island of Tinos, and why did the Italians blow up the cruiser ‘Ellie’ on the Feast of the Dormition?”¹⁷⁷ But by allowing this evil to happen, the Mother of God performed an even greater miracle. The explosion of the ‘Ellie’ filled the Greeks with indignation. The Greeks realized that nothing is sacred to the Italians, and so, shouting “Hurrah,” they drove them out of their land. And if the Italians had not committed this atrocity, then, not understanding the Italians’ godlessness, the Greeks might have said, “After all, they are also a devout people; they are our friends.” But now people with rational minds come along and say, “Why didn’t the Mother of God perform a miracle, then?” Well, what can you say to that? And others ask, “Why does the Bible say that the flame of the Babylonian furnace, into which the three youths were thrown, rose forty-nine cubits high? Did they measure it with a ruler or something?” But at first, the height of the flame rose seven cubits. Then, without stopping, they kept throwing various combustible materials into the furnace so that it would blaze sevenfold. Seven times seven—forty-nine, isn’t that right? But what if those who

¹⁷⁴ “The elders asked Abba Arsenius, saying, ‘Why don’t you change the water with the branches—it smells bad?’ He replied, ‘For the incense and ointments I enjoyed in the world, I must endure this stench.’ The Ancient Paterikon, Moscow, 1899, p. 45.

¹⁷⁵ Matt. 19:29.

¹⁷⁶ 2 Cor. 6:10.

¹⁷⁷ On August 15, 1940 (the Feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos according to the New Style calendar), the Greek Navy cruiser “Elli,” anchored in the roadstead of the port on the Greek island of Tinos, was sunk by an Italian submarine. The Italians torpedoed the “Elli” while Greek sailors were disembarking to participate in celebrations honoring the Most Holy Mother of God (Tinos is home to one of the most revered miraculous icons of the Mother of God in Greece). This treacherous act was committed two and a half months before Italy declared war on Greece. After the sinking of the “Elli,” realizing that war with Italy was inevitable, the Greeks began to intensively prepare to defend their homeland. – *Translator’s note*

ask such questions were themselves thrown into that furnace? In these people, one sees rationalism and a rationality devoid of meaning, completely detached from reality. Some of today's theologians grapple with "problems" similar to the one described above. For example, they ask: "What happened to the demons that entered the herd of pigs and drowned in the sea?"¹⁷⁸ Did they survive or drown?" But what matters is that these demons came out of the man. What business is it of yours what became of them afterward! You'd better make sure you yourself don't become possessed, and don't rack your brains over where these demons are now.

— And some, Geronda, try to reconcile the Gospel with human common sense. Using this common sense, they examine the Gospel and simply cannot make sense of it.

— It is impossible to reconcile the Gospel with human common sense. Love is at the heart of the Gospel. Self-interest is at the heart of common sense. The Gospel says: "If anyone forces you to go one stadia, go two."¹⁷⁹ Does that make any sense? If anything, it seems like madness. That is why those who try to reconcile the Gospel with common sense reach a dead end. For example, there are various organizations engaged in charity work. When they learn that someone has gone bankrupt, fallen into poverty, and is in need of money, they say, "We'll help this person, but first we'll make sure he's truly in need." So two or three representatives from this organization go to the bankrupt person's home to see if he's really in need. They arrive and see, for example, a lavishly furnished living room. Then they say, "Well, well—look at those armchairs, that decor! Since he has such furniture, he's not in any need at all." And they leave the person without help. However, they don't understand that the unfortunate person has nothing to eat. They don't realize that just because someone becomes poor, it doesn't mean they have to immediately swap their clothes for a beggar's rags. And how are we to know—perhaps this furniture has been in his home since time immemorial, and he hasn't had a chance to sell it yet? Or perhaps someone, upon learning of his family's need, gave them these armchairs and chairs as a gift? People judge and make decisions based on reason and common sense, which is why they become confused, and the Gospel does not enter their lives. People look at things superficially and therefore interpret everything in their own way.

***"Do not judge by appearances"*¹⁸⁰**

— Geronda, I feel that my ability to judge, my rationality, and human truth are hindering my spiritual growth.

— Yes, of course. They hinder spiritual growth because [because of them] God's Grace departs. And after that, a person is left without Divine help, falls, and suffers complete failure. Human judgment and justice are, as a rule, unjust. God's truth is love, long-suffering, and forbearance. But you examine everything through human reason. It is from this very microbe that your spiritual illness begins. The remedy that heals this illness is good thoughts. When a person thinks kindly—that is, has good, "righteous" thoughts—the capacity of their heart increases. You use a great deal of reason, and therefore you must be very careful with your thoughts, because the conclusions you reach through your reasoning are human conclusions. They are neither spiritual nor sanctified.

— Geronda, why do I so often fall into judgment?

— Your personal reason is your legal education. That's why you judge the way you do. Certain fields of knowledge or professions often cultivate a dry rationality in people. Rationality is a disease of the intelligentsia. It has afflicted them to the very core. And so, even though you have a heart, your rationality takes precedence over it.

¹⁷⁸ See Matt. 8:32.

¹⁷⁹ See Matt. 5:41.

¹⁸⁰ John 7:24.

Some people are very rational, and they judge out of selfishness—they recognize no one as superior to themselves. They demand perfection—but not from themselves, only from others. They are content with their own weakness, yet they condemn others. What a strange thing! Such people have created a public image for themselves; that is, they’ve fashioned a certain outward persona—one that’s completely hypocritical on the inside. There isn’t even a trace of simplicity in them. The difference between Europeans and Greeks (by “Greeks” I mean the Orthodox spirit) lies precisely in this. You can’t figure out a European—when or how to approach him. A constant “Welcome!”—and a fake little smile. But when you look at a Greek, everything is immediately clear. If he’s feeling joy, he doesn’t hide it. If he’s upset about something, that’s obvious too. And by seeing how a person is feeling, you can easily build a relationship with them.

— Geronda, what is the reason that some people judge others, their actions, and everything that happens in the world—and do so very hastily?

— In this case, a person is driven solely by rationality; that is, only their brain is at work, and the result of that work is judgment. It would be good if God took a screwdriver and “loosened” the brains a little for those who have too much of it. To the extent that the mind is freed, a person is filled with Grace. By “mind,” I mean human judgment, selfishness, and self-confidence. However, if a person, realizing that his judgments are incorrect, says: “The capacity for judgment that I possess is worldly; it lacks divine enlightenment, and therefore I will make a mistake; consequently, I must not use this capacity,” then God will immediately enlighten him, and he will gain discernment and be able to distinguish between what is true and what is not.

The tempter throws intelligent people off course through outward judgment. If a person has a human nature, then he judges in a human way and commits crimes. For judgment to be Divine, the human nature must disappear. Worldly judgment is erroneous judgment. How many injustices of all kinds occur! How often does a person fall into sin! Therefore, to safeguard your soul, constantly incorporate good thoughts into your actions.

Every person is a mystery, and how can you know what kind of person they are! Once, we celebrated the Bright Resurrection of Christ in a kaliva on the Holy Mountain. After the Divine Liturgy, we sat down at the table to break our fast with cheese and an Easter egg. A monk was sitting next to me—a mule driver who transported firewood on them. I noticed him pushing the cheese and egg aside. “Go ahead and eat,” I said. “All right, all right,” he replied, “I’ll break my fast.” I watched—he wasn’t eating. “Go ahead and eat,” I said again, “it’s Easter today, after all!” “Forgive me, Geronda,” he replied, “I don’t eat on the day I receive Communion. I’ll break my fast at two o’clock in the afternoon.” He had been fasting since the day before, and on the very day of Communion, he ate in the afternoon! Do you see what he did out of reverence? And others might have thought he was nothing more than a simple mule driver.

Man is a mystery! And if you’ve been compelled to judge others, think this way: “Is my judgment divine, or is it filled with bias?” That is, is it free from self-interest, or is it filled with it? Do not trust your “self” even in your judgment. If a person judges, there is a great deal of selfishness in him. I am forced to pass judgment on various matters, and I am compelled to do so even though I do not want to. I judge without self-interest or partiality, but even so, when I rise afterward to pray, I do not feel that—well, let’s say—sweetness that I feel on the days when I do not judge. And it’s not because my conscience accuses me of anything—no, [it’s simply] because I judged as a human being. And what can one say if the judgment is erroneous, or if the defendants have mitigating circumstances, or if the judge applies human criteria in assessing what is happening? Judgment is no trivial matter. Judgment belongs to God. How terrifying that is! And the fact that the person sitting on the judge’s bench has good intentions is irrelevant in this case. What matters is the outcome to which his judgment has led.

A great deal of reasoning is required. Of course, every person possesses at least some capacity for reasoning, but, unfortunately, most of us apply that reasoning not to ourselves but to our neighbors (so that they might not somehow appear better to others than we do). Thus we defile our reasoning—with judgment, condemnation, and demands on others to become better. We should direct our demands only toward our own “self,” which lacks the resolve to passionately undertake a spiritual feat and cut off its passions, so that our soul may be set free and soar to Heaven.

Chapter 3. **A New Generation**

The Diminishment of the Spirit of Sacrifice

Today, most people are unaware of the joy that self-sacrifice brings. People do not like hard work. Idleness, the desire for a comfortable life, and an abundance of leisure have crept into their lives. The spirit of self-sacrifice has dwindled. If people manage to obtain something without effort, to settle into a comfortable life, they consider this an achievement. They become disheartened if they fail to attain an easy life. But if they viewed everything from a spiritual perspective, they would rejoice in this very situation, because in that case they are given a favorable opportunity for a heroic deed.

Today, everyone—young and old alike—is chasing an easy life. Spiritual people strive to become sanctified with as little effort as possible. Worldly people strive to earn as much money as possible without working. Young people strive to pass exams without studying, to get a degree without ever leaving a café. And if it were possible, while sitting in a café, to call the university and find out their exam results, they would be very happy about it. Yes, yes, it’s already come to that! Many young men come to my kaliva and ask, “Pray that I get into university.” They don’t prepare for the exams, yet they say, “God can help me.” “Prepare,” I advise, “and ask God for help through prayer.” “But why?” they ask in surprise. “Can’t God help me anyway, without any preparation?” So does that mean God will bless your laziness? That’s not how it works. God will help if a young person reads and tries hard but can’t retain what they’ve read. Some students can’t memorize or understand what they read, but they still try and work hard. God will help such hardworking students become very smart.”

Fortunately, there are exceptions. A young man from Chalkidiki took entrance exams for three different departments at the same time and was accepted into all of them!¹⁸¹ In fact, he had the highest scores on the entrance exams for one department and came in second place for another. But, despite this, the young man decided it would be better to go to work and thereby lighten the load on his father, who worked in the mines to support the family. So he didn’t go to college; instead, he got a job and started bringing home money. This man is a balm to my soul. For the sake of young men like this, I’m ready to die, to turn to dust. However, most young people have fallen under the influence of this world and have been corrupted and damaged by it. They’ve learned to care only about themselves, to think only of themselves—they don’t give their neighbors a second thought. And the more you help them, the lazier they become.

I see that today’s youth are like dough mixed with water. They judge one thing, do another, and are fed up with a third. But a person’s heart never tires or grows old. And they... Becoming monks is too hard for them. Getting married is terrifying. Strapping young men come to the Holy Mountain, leave, and then return again. “Ah,” they say, “but being a monk is hard, too. Getting up every night before dawn. Not just for a day or two, but all the time!” They return to the world, but they don’t feel at home

¹⁸¹ Previously, at Greek universities, applicants could take entrance exams for several departments at once. Now, they can only take one.

there either. “What,” they say, “will I do in this society? With what kind of person will I tie my fate if I get married? Nothing but hassle and worry.” They return to the Holy Mountain again, but after living there for a short while, they say once more: “It’s hard!”

Young people today are like new cars whose engine oil has thickened from the cold. For these cars to start, the oil must warm up—otherwise, nothing will work. Poor young men! They come to my kaliva—not just one or two, but many—and ask: “What should I do, Father? How can I fill my time? I’m overcome with melancholy.”—“My brother, just find yourself some kind of work,” I say, and in reply I hear: “That’s not the point. I have money. Why do I need this work?”—“But the Apostle Paul,” I say again, “writes: *‘If anyone won’t work, let him not eat.’*”¹⁸² Even if you have no money problems—to eat, you must work. Work helps a person warm up the oil in their engine. Work is creativity. It brings a person joy and takes away their emotional heaviness and melancholy. That’s it, my good friend! Find a job that you’d enjoy even a little, and start working. Try it and you’ll see [how everything will change]!”

And some of the guys get tired, but that tiredness restores their strength. Young men come to my hut, sit in the yard, and get tired just from sitting there. Others, with great kindness, keep asking, “How can I help you? What can I bring you?” I never ask for any help. In the evening, after the visitors have left, I turn on a flashlight and do everything myself: I bring in firewood, stoke two stoves in the winter, and tidy up the house and the yard. Many visitors leave a mess behind: they track in mud and toss their dirty socks around the yard. People send me thin socks, and I hand them out to visitors—they put them on and then toss their dirty socks wherever they please. I even give them a napkin so they can wrap them up in it, but they prefer to just leave everything as is.

I’ve asked people for a favor three times in my life. I once told a young man, “I need two boxes of matches from the store in Karyes.”¹⁸³ I already had four lighters, but I told him that just to bring him joy. He ran over, happy and out of breath, brought me those matches, and his fatigue gave him new strength, because he tasted the joy that follows sacrifice. Meanwhile, the other one just sat there and grew tired from sitting. People strive to experience joy, but for joy to come, a person must sacrifice himself. Joy is born of sacrifice. True joy comes from love. And when love is cultivated, a person celebrates and rejoices. Selfishness and self-love are torment for a person; he gets stuck precisely on this.

Once, two young officers came to the Holy Mountain and told me, “We want to become monks.” “Why do you want to do that?” I asked. “Since when have you had this desire?” “Well,” they replied, “it just came to us.” We came to the Holy Mountain on a tour, and now we’re thinking of staying here for good. Out there in the secular world, who knows—maybe another war will break out!” “You have no shame!” I said. “‘Maybe another war will break out!’ And how would you even be able to leave the army?” “‘We’ll find,’ they reply, ‘some excuse or other.’” What will they come up with? Pretend to be mentally ill or make something else up... What’s the point of even talking about it—they’ll definitely find something... “If,” I told them, “you’re becoming monks for such selfish reasons, then you’ve already failed from the very start.” But for other people, nothing has stood in the way of getting married and starting a family for a long time now. Yet they come to me and say: “Why should I get married? Can you really start a family and raise children in such difficult times?” — “All right,” I say, “did life come to a standstill during times of persecution? Did no one work or get married? Maybe you’re just too lazy to start a family?” — “I,” he replies, “want to become a monk.” — “But the reason is your laziness! Will you really make a good monk?” Do you understand this? If a young woman wants to become a nun, thinking: “Why should I stay in the world, get married, and have children? It’s a hassle, a bother. I’d rather go to a convent. I’ll do what I’m told, with no responsibility, and if I’m ever scolded, I’ll just bow

¹⁸² 2 Thess. 3:10.

¹⁸³ Karyes—the administrative center of Mount Athos, where the Holy Kinot, the governor’s office, the police station, the post office, shops, etc., are located—*Translator’s note.*

my head lower. Try going ahead and setting up your own household in the secular world! But in the monastery, I'll have everything I need—a private cell, ready-made meals, and so on..."—so, if a young woman thinks this way, let her know that she has already failed from the very beginning. Does this seem strange to you? Don't be surprised; people like this really do exist. Know this: a diligent person will succeed anywhere. A diligent family man would succeed even in monastic life, and a diligent monk—were he to choose the path of family life—would also succeed.

One young man entered a monastery as a novice but refused to be tonsured. "Why, my son, are you shying away from monastic life?" I asked him. "Because," he replied, "the monastic skullcap reminds me of a soldier's helmet!" Just listen to that! He didn't want to become a monk so he wouldn't have to wear a monk's skullcap! It reminded him of a helmet! But had he ever even worn that helmet? Even if he had, it was only a few times in the army during training—and even that's questionable! And he's never even smelled gunpowder in war! A helmet—that's what it reminded him of, you see! Do you hear what's going on? But what did he forget about monastic life? Tell me, please, what kind of monk will a man turn out to be if he begins his monastic life like this? In the end, that poor fellow was tonsured somewhere, but he never did wear that thick monastic cap.

Another time, two young men came to my hermitage, both with hair almost down to their waists. I wanted to cut their manes, but they wouldn't let me. I was in a hurry to get somewhere, so I couldn't have long conversations with them—I just treated them to some refreshments. And my cat was wandering around in the courtyard. One of these long-haired young men saw it and asked, "Can I take the cat?" "Go ahead," I said. He took the cat, and from my place they went to the Iversky Monastery—an hour's walk away. It started pouring rain, but he arrived at the monastery hugging the cat, went up to the guesthouse, and asked to spend the night. "No cats allowed," they told him, and so he was left sitting outside in the rain! All night long! If they'd sent him on an hour-long guard duty in the army, he would have replied, "Oh, no, I can't!" But sitting outside all night with a cat—sure, he can do that!

And another one was drafted into the army, but he ran away and came to the Holy Mountain. He came to my cell and said, "I want to become a monk."—"Go back," I said, "to the army, and serve out your term!"—"The army!" he replied. "The army isn't like your own home!" "Thank you very much," I said, "you're a smart young man for telling me that. So that's how it is! I never even suspected it before! Now I'll tell others about this, too!" Meanwhile, the young man's family had been searching for him all this time. A few days later, he came to see me at my hut again. It was Fomina Week, early in the morning. "I need you," he says. "What do you want?" I ask. "Where were you during the Liturgy?" "Nowhere," he replies. "Today," I said, "is Fomina Week; the monasteries held all-night vigils, and you didn't go anywhere? And you want to become a monk! Where on earth did you spend the night?" "I," he said, "spent the night at a hotel. It's peaceful and quiet there; in the monasteries, there's such a racket all night long!" "Well then," I ask, "what do you intend to do now?" "I," he says, "think I'll head to Mount Sinai, because I'm drawn to a harsh, austere life."—"Hold on a minute," I say. I go into my cell, grab the Easter cake that someone had brought me, and go back out to him. "Here," I say, "take this! This cake is very soft—just right for the harsh, austere life you're so eager for. Take it and go!" That's the youth of today for you. They don't even know what they want. They can't stand the slightest inconvenience. How, then, will they ever be able to sacrifice themselves?

I remember, in the army, whenever there was a need to go on a dangerous mission, all you'd hear was: "Sir, I'll go in his place! He's a family man—if he's killed, his children will be left on the street!" Soldiers would ask the commander to let them go in someone else's place on a dangerous mission, to the front lines. They were glad that, while they might be killed, some head of a family would remain alive, and his children wouldn't be left orphaned. And now? Do you ever come across anyone willing to make such a sacrifice? If you do, it's extremely rare. I remember one time when we ran out of water. The

commander found a spot nearby on the map where there was water. But rebels were holed up there. Then he said, “There’s water nearby, but it’s very dangerous to go there, and we can’t turn on any lights. Who’s willing to go and fill a few canteens?” One soldier jumped up: “I’ll go, Commander!” Another jumps up: “Me!” Followed by a third. In other words, everyone volunteered to go! It was pitch black outside; without any light, it was terrifying—it sent chills down your spine. The commander was even taken aback: “You can’t all go!” What I mean is that no one was thinking of themselves. Not a single one of us tried to come up with an excuse, such as: “Sir, my leg hurts,” or “I have a headache,” or “I’m tired.” We all wanted to go get water, and we paid no attention to the fact that our lives were in danger.

The spirit of today is one of lukewarmness. Courage and self-sacrifice are completely absent. With today’s flawed logic, people have shifted everything to a different system of measurement. And look at it this way: in the past, people joined the army as volunteers, but now, not wanting to serve, they get a medical certificate stating that they’re mentally ill. They’re doing everything in their power to avoid joining the army. Was there ever anything like this before? We had a young lieutenant in our army, only twenty-three years old, but what a fine young man he was! One day, his father—a retired officer—called him and said he intended to ask someone to have the young man transferred from the front lines to the rear. Oh, how the lieutenant shouted when his father told him that! “How can you not be ashamed, Father, to say such a thing? It’s the slackers who hide out in the rear!” This man possessed such exceptional sincerity, honesty, and courage that it even crossed boundaries—he would rush into battle ahead of everyone else. His entire overcoat was riddled with bullets, yet despite this, he survived. And when he was discharged into the reserves, he took that overcoat with him as a memento.

Unreasonable [parental] love renders children good for nothing

I’ve noticed that today’s children—especially those who go on to college—are already going astray while still living at home. Though they start out as good children, they eventually become good for nothing. They don’t give anything a second thought; they’re somehow numb. They are ruined by their own parents, who themselves lived through difficult times and now want their children to experience no deprivation whatsoever. Parents do not instill in their children a love of God that would allow them to find joy in deprivation. It is clear that parents do all this with good intentions. Yes, subjecting children to senseless deprivation is barbaric. But helping children develop a monastic mindset—so that they themselves may later find joy in experiencing some deprivation—is a very good thing. Whereas now, through their kindness—their thoughtless kindness—parents are themselves driving their children into a state of stupor. Parents bring everything to their children on a silver platter, right into their hands—they even serve them water. They accustom them to this. They do it so that the children will do their homework without getting distracted by anything, but in doing so, they render them good for nothing—both boys and girls. Because later on, children want to have everything handed to them on a silver platter all the time, not just when they’re doing their homework. And this problem starts with the mothers: “Study, son, study! And I’ll bring you your socks, I’ll wash your feet! Have some candy, drink some coffee!” Children don’t work, and so they don’t understand how tired their mother is, the one who serves them. And then it starts: disposable plates, disposable clothing, [pizza places, McDonald’s]—they can’t even wrap a slice of pizza in paper! And so children grow up to be completely useless people. Then life itself becomes a burden to them. A shoelace comes undone: “Mom, tie my shoelace!” And until Mom ties it for them, the child will walk around with an untied shoelace and step on it. What kind of success can we expect from such children? They’re unfit for either family life or monastic life. That’s why I advise mothers: “Don’t let your children read all day long. After all, they just read and read and overthink things. Let them take breaks from reading for fifteen minutes or half an hour—and do some

chores around the house. That way, their minds will at least be refreshed a little and return to a normal state.”

This bad habit of today’s youth has even crept into monastic life. And now you see as many as seven monk-secretaries sitting in monastery offices—all young and educated—and sitting with them is an old monk who used to hold that position. In the past, monasteries had only one secretary. His education was often limited to two years of secondary school, yet he managed all the work on his own. But now there are seven of them, and they’re all so swamped with work that they don’t even have time to follow the monastic rule! Yet they won’t let the old secretary go; he has to sit with them and help them!..

Dark forces are leading young people toward evil

Today, these unfortunate children are being corrupted by various theories. That is why they are so agitated, so confused. A child wants to do one thing but ends up doing another. He wants to go one way, but the spirit of our age carries him in another. Dark forces have launched a terrifying propaganda campaign; it is they who lead those young people, who lack sound judgment, toward evil. Some teachers in schools tell children: “To be independent individuals, do not respect your parents; do not obey them.” In this way, they corrupt children’s souls. As a result, children disobey both their parents and their teachers. And they are not to blame, because they believe they must act exactly this way. The state supports them in this and pushes them toward it. And those who care neither for their homeland nor for their family—for whom nothing is sacred—use such young people to carry out their own plans. All of this has brought a great deal of evil upon today’s youth. A great deal of evil! It has already reached the point where young people consider the devil with horns to be their leader. Satan worship has become very widespread. In some nightclubs, they sing all night long: “Satan, we worship you! We don’t want Christ—you give us everything!” How terrifying! Do you realize what he gives you, you poor children, and what he deprives you of?!...

Even little children are already embittered—from coffee and cigarettes. Can you see a radiant look on their faces, the grace of God? Oh, how right that architect was when he said to a group of young men he had brought to the Holy Mountain: “Our eyes—yours and mine—are like the eyes of a dead fish.” This architect came to Athos with a group of young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five—there were about ten of them. He himself had turned to God earlier, and so he felt sorry for those young people who live in debauchery. He drew some of these unfortunate souls closer to him, persuaded them to go to the Holy Mountain, and paid for their trip himself. They were on their way to my kaliva, and I just happened to be going somewhere, so we ran into each other on the path. I told them I was leaving, but suggested we sit for a little while right where we’d met. No sooner had we sat down than another group of children appeared, heading toward my kaliva. They were students from the Afonia School.¹⁸⁴ “Sit down,” I said, “and join us.” They sat down too. That’s when the architect said to his students, “Don’t you notice anything?” They were surprised. “Come on,” he told them, “first look at each other’s faces, and then look at the faces of these children. Look how their eyes are shining! And look at our eyes—they’re just like the eyes of a dead fish.” And it was true! When I looked closely, I realized he’d hit the nail on the head: their eyes were like the eyes of a dead fish. Cloudy, unnatural... But the eyes of the children from Afoniada were shining! After all, at Afoniada, the students bow in reverence and participate in divine services. The eyes are the mirror of the soul. That is why Christ said, “*The eye is the lamp of the body.*”¹⁸⁵ So many young people come to the Holy Mountain or to other monasteries, become monks, and—even though monastic life is, shall we say, no picnic—they are filled with such joy

¹⁸⁴ See footnote 57.

¹⁸⁵ Luke 11:34.

that their faces radiate light. But in the secular world, young people have everything they could want, yet they are tormented, suffering hellish agony.

Various winds blow toward us from all directions. From the East—Hinduism and other occult religions; from the North—communism; from the West—a whole host of different teachings; and from the South, from the Africans—witchcraft, magic, and a multitude of other pestilential winds. Once, a young man, battered by these winds, came to my kaliva. I realized that his mother's prayers had led him to me. We talked for quite a while, and at the end of our conversation I told him: "Here's what you do, young man: find a spiritual father and go to confession. Then have him anoint you with holy oil. This will help you now, as you take your first steps in your spiritual life. You must be anointed with Holy Chrism because you have renounced Christ." As I was telling him this, the poor young man was weeping. "Pray for me, Father," he begged me, "because I can't extricate myself from this quagmire. I've been brainwashed. I realize that my mother's prayers led me here." How powerful a mother's prayers are! Poor children! They are ensnared by all these teachings and rendered unfit for anything. Then they are overcome by fear and anxiety, and they seek relief in drugs and the like. From one abyss to another. May God stretch out His hand [and stop this evil].

— Geronda, is there any benefit in telling these unfortunate people that such teachings are satanic?

— Of course there is! Absolutely. But we must speak to them about this gently.

— And how can young people like this come to know Christ?

— How can they come to know Christ if, without having come to know Orthodoxy, they travel to India to all sorts of gurus there, live with them for two or three years, are driven to madness by various forms of sorcery, and then, while living there, learn that Orthodoxy offers a mysterious, mystical life, and come here, wishing to see the Uncreated Light, experience the highest spiritual states, and the like? And if you ask them, "How many years has it been since you last received Communion?"—they reply, "I don't remember exactly; maybe my mother gave me Communion when I was little."—"Have you ever gone to confession?"—"That question doesn't interest me." But can we really expect anything good to come of this? They know absolutely nothing about Orthodoxy.

— Geronda, but how can we help them?

— What can help them after they say that "the Church has had its day"? As soon as you hear something like that from a person, it's immediately clear what kind of understanding you can reach with them! However, those young people who are well-disposed receive help and draw closer to the Church.

"Don't you dare touch the children!"

— Geronda, what will become of those little children who grow up without discipline?

— There are some extenuating circumstances in their case. Their parents didn't understand as children why discipline is necessary, and so now they give their children freedom, thereby turning them into real little hooligans. You say one word to them—they'll give you five right back, and with such shamelessness! Such children can become criminals. Today, children have been completely let loose. "Freedom!" "Don't you dare touch the children!" And the children are overjoyed: "Where," they say, "else can you find a political system like this?" In other words, some people are striving to turn children into rebels who don't want to depend on their parents or teachers, or listen to anyone. This plays right into the hands of certain people; these rebellious children will help them carry out their plans. After all, if you don't turn children into rebels [now], how will you later force them to tear everything to shreds? And now you can see how these poor children have already become almost frenzied.

If freedom is not used properly in spiritual life, how can it be used in worldly life? What are you going to do with such freedom? Such freedom is a catastrophe. That is why what we are seeing is happening to the state right now. Can people today use the freedom given to them properly? Freedom,

if people are unable to use it for positive development, is a catastrophe. Worldly evolution, combined with this sinful freedom, has brought spiritual slavery upon humanity. Spiritual freedom is spiritual submission to God's will. But you see: obedience is freedom; yet the enemy, in his malice, portrays it as slavery, and children—especially those poisoned by the rebellious spirit of our age—begin to rebel. It's understandable, after all; they're also tired of the various systems of the 20th century, which, unfortunately, are increasingly disfiguring both nature—God's wondrous world—and people—God's creations. These systems fill people's souls with anxiety and lead them away from joy, distancing them from God.

Do you know what we went through when we were discharged from the army into the reserves? If today's youth were in our place, they would have torn everything to shreds! It was 1950. The Civil War had just ended. We—soldiers from different draft classes—were discharged into the reserves together. One had fought for four and a half years, another for four, and a third for three and a half. And just imagine: after so much suffering at war, when we arrived in Larisa¹⁸⁶ and went to the demobilization centers, we found that they were already packed with other veterans. We tried checking into hotels, but they turned us away there, too. "Soldiers," they said, "how can we let them in! They'll get all the blankets dirty." But we offered to pay them for a place to stay. It was March, and it was cold outside. Luckily for us, one officer came to our rescue—may God grant him good health! He went to the train station, found out when the trains arrived, when they departed, and when they were performing maneuvers, negotiated with the railway authorities, and they let us spend the night in empty train cars. "At night," the officer warned us, "the cars will move back and forth a little while they're shunting, but don't worry—they won't leave until such-and-such a time tomorrow morning." So we rode back and forth all night long.

Finally, we reached Thessaloniki. Those who lived nearby went home. But we went to the distribution centers again, only to find they were packed to the brim. Back to the hotels—and again, to no avail. I remember asking at a hotel: "Just give me a chair—to sit out the night—and I'll pay you twice as much as for a bed!"—"No," they replied, "we can't." They were afraid that someone might see a soldier sitting on a chair in their hotel at night and report them. So, stand on your feet all night on the street and lean against a wall! And so those poor soldiers stood on the streets near the hotels, on the sidewalks, leaning against the walls. Soldiers lined up on every sidewalk, just like at a parade. Do you understand? If this were today's youth, they'd have burned down Larissa—and all of Thessaly along with Macedonia to boot!¹⁸⁷ After all, even now, without facing any hardships, look what they're up to! They're rioting, taking over schools and universities. But back then, such a thing never even crossed those poor lads' minds. Of course, they were bitter, but they never even thought of taking revenge or doing anything malicious. And yet, during the war, out in the snow, they endured such suffering! Those poor souls were maimed by the war—what self-sacrifice!—and in the end, they were "rewarded" with a night spent under the open sky. That was their final "thank you!" So I find myself comparing what young people were like back then and what they've come to now. Not even fifty years have passed, and people have changed so much!..

Today's youth are like a frisky young bull that, tied up, grazes in a meadow. It constantly pulls on the rope, then yanks out the stake to which it's tied, dashes off, but gets caught on something, becomes completely entangled, and is eventually devoured by wild beasts. You need to "reign in" and restrain a child while he's still young. For example, you see a small child climbing a fence and realize he might fall and get hurt. You yell at them, "No, no!"—and give them a slap on the back of the head to boot. Next time, the child still won't think about the possibility of getting killed, but they'll remember that they

¹⁸⁶ A city in Central Greece. — *Translator's note.*

¹⁸⁷ Regions of Greece. — *Translator's note.*

might get another slap on the back of the head, so they'll behave more carefully. But nowadays, schools don't use corporal punishment, and the army doesn't beat people with sticks. That's why young people torment their parents and the public. In the old days, the stricter the commanders were during training, the greater the courage the soldiers showed in battle.

A young person needs a spiritual guide. He must consult with this guide and obey him—in order to move forward with spiritual confidence, avoiding dangers, fears, and dead ends. The older a person gets, the longer he lives, the more he is enriched by experience—both his own and that of others. A young person lacks this experience. An adult uses both his own experience and that borrowed from others to help an inexperienced young man avoid certain missteps. If the young man does not listen to the experienced, he conducts experiments on himself; but by listening to his mentors, he grows wiser.

Once, some young men from a Christian brotherhood came to my hermitage.¹⁸⁸ With great self-assurance, they shouted until they were hoarse: “We don't need anyone! We'll find our own way!” Who knows why they became like this? Apparently, they were under a lot of pressure, and that's why they rebelled. As they were getting ready to leave, they asked me how to get to the main road leading to the Iversky Monastery. “Where should we go?” they asked. “All right, brothers,” I replied, “you said that you would find your own way, that you don't need anyone. Isn't that what you just claimed? Well, this road is fine: even if you lose your way, after a little struggle you'll meet someone else a little further on, and he'll tell you how to get back on it. But how will you yourselves, without a guide, be able to find another path—the one that leads to the Heavens, that ascends to Heaven?” Then one of them said, “Brothers, it seems like Father might actually be right?”

Young people need to pass the test of chastity

Today some female students came and asked me, “Please pray, Geronda, that we pass our exams.” And I replied to them, “I will pray that you pass the exam in chastity. That is the most essential thing. After that, everything else can fall into place.” Was I right to tell them that, or not? Yes, if modesty and chastity are visible on the faces of young people today, that is a great thing. A truly great thing!

What wretched, broken young women sometimes come to me! They live promiscuously in sin with young men, not realizing that the goals those men pursue are impure. And in this way, these unfortunate girls become broken. “What should I do, Father?” they ask me. “The tavern owner,” I reply, “even though he associates with a drunkard, would never give his daughter in marriage to him. Break off these sinful relationships. If those with whom you are sinning truly love you, they will appreciate this as they should. But if they leave you, it will mean that they do not love you, and you will not have wasted your time.”

The Evil One takes advantage of youth—a time when human flesh is also in revolt—and tries to lead young people astray during this difficult period they are going through. Their minds are still immature; they are very inexperienced and have no spiritual reserves at all. Therefore, a young person at this critical age must realize that he constantly needs the advice of his elders. He needs this advice so that he does not slip down the sweet slope of worldly downfall, which threatens to subsequently fill his soul with anxiety and forever separate it from God.

I understand that it is not easy for a physically healthy young man or woman to be in such a spiritual state during adolescence that they do not regard *“the male sex as inferior to the female.”*¹⁸⁹ That is why

¹⁸⁸ In the second half of the 20th century, the ideology of so-called non-ecclesiastical organizations or brotherhoods prevailed in the Greek Church. According to this ideology, which was Protestant in nature, monasticism was considered a phenomenon alien to the Church. The Holy Fathers, especially those who wrote about the depths of the spiritual life, were consigned to oblivion. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, this ideology began to fade, and a return to the patristic tradition began. — *Translator's note.*

¹⁸⁹ Gal. 3:8.

spiritual fathers advise that boys should not be friends with girls, no matter how spiritually mature the children may be, because their age in itself creates difficulties, and the tempter takes advantage of their youth. Therefore, it is preferable for a young man that, for the sake of his spiritual prudence and purity, young women consider him even foolish (or, for a young woman, that she be considered foolish by young men), and thus take up this heavy cross. For in this heavy cross lies all the power and wisdom of God, and then the young man will be stronger than Samson¹⁹⁰ and wiser than the Most Wise Solomon.¹⁹¹ When walking down the street, it is better for a young person to pray and not stare around, even if some relatives or acquaintances misunderstand this and take offense, thinking that he supposedly despises them and therefore refused to speak with them. This is better than gazing curiously around and being misunderstood even by worldly people, who think of everything with guile. After the church service, it is a thousand times better for a young man to flee from people in order to preserve his spiritual prudence and the benefit he received in the church than to sit and carelessly admire women's fur collars (or, , a young woman's admiration of men's ties) and become spiritually embittered as the enemy scratches at his heart.

It is true that the world, unfortunately, has fallen into decay. And a person striving to remain pure will become defiled, no matter where he finds himself. However, the difference is that God will not hold modern people to the same standard as He did in ancient times with a Christian who sought to remain pure. A cool head is necessary; a young man must do what he can: strive, and avoid occasions of sin. In all else, our Christ will help. The divine zeal that blazes in the soul is so fiery that it has the power to burn away every other desire and every unseemly image. When this fire blazes within a person, he will then experience those divine delights that are incomparable to any other pleasure. For one who has tasted this heavenly manna, the sweetness of the wild fruits of the carob tree leaves him completely indifferent. Therefore, the young person must firmly take the helm in his hands, make the sign of the cross, and not be afraid. After a brief struggle, he will also receive heavenly delight. In the hour of temptation, courage is necessary, and God will miraculously help him.

Elder Augustine¹⁹² told me how, as a novice, he entered one of the monasteries in his homeland, Russia. Almost all the monks at the monastery were elderly, so he was sent to help the monastery's fisherman catch fish, since the monastery supported itself through fishing. One day, the fisherman's daughter came to the riverbank where they were working and told her father to go home immediately on some urgent business. She herself stayed behind to help the novice. However, the poor girl was overcome by a diabolical temptation, and, without realizing what she was doing, she threw herself into his arms with sinful intentions. At first, Anthony—as Augustine's father was called in the world—was taken aback, because it all happened so suddenly. But then he made the sign of the cross and exclaimed, "Better for me to drown than to sin!"—and threw himself from the bank into the deep river. But the Good Lord, seeing the great zeal of the pure young man who, striving to preserve his chastity, had repeated the feat of Saint Martinian,¹⁹³ kept him afloat on the water's surface, so that he did not even get wet. "I threw myself headfirst into the water," the elder told me, "but despite that, I didn't even notice how I found myself standing upright on the water! Not even my clothes got wet!" At that moment, he felt an inner stillness and an indescribable sweetness that completely destroyed all sinful thoughts and carnal arousal, which had been stirred up in him at first by the maiden's immodest behavior. The young woman, seeing Anthony standing on the surface of the water and struck by this great miracle, burst into tears, repenting of her sin.

¹⁹⁰ See Judges 15:14 ff.

¹⁹¹ See 3 Kings 3:9–12.

¹⁹² For more on Elder Augustine, see: *Elder Paisios*. The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories of the Holy Mountain. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 76–83.

¹⁹³ See Lives of the Saints. February 13. The Life of the Venerable Martinian and the Holy Women Zoe and Photinia.

Christ does not demand anything great from us to help us in our spiritual struggle. He expects only the very least from us. One young man told me that when he was on a pilgrimage to Patmos,¹⁹⁴ the devil set a trap for him. As he was walking across the island, a female tourist threw herself into his arms and began hugging him. The young man then forcefully pushed her away and exclaimed, “My Christ, I came here to worship the holy site, not to engage in such filth!” After that, he ran away. That night at the hotel, while praying, he saw Christ in the Uncreated Light. Do you see what he was granted simply for pushing the temptress away? Some people struggle for many years, performing no small feats, and it is still uncertain whether they will be granted anything like this. Yet a chaste young man saw Christ simply for having resisted temptation. Naturally, this event greatly strengthened him spiritually. After that, he saw the saints two or three more times: Saint Marcellus, Saint Raphael, and Saint George. Once he came to me and asked, “Pray for me, Father, that I may see Saint George again. I need some comfort—nothing in this world comforts me.”

And now look at some of his peers—the lengths to which they’ll go! Once, a young man came to my hermitage with his uncle and asked, “Pray for a young woman. She broke her spine in a car accident. Her father was driving; he dozed off and crashed into something—he was killed, and she was left crippled. Wait, I’ll give you her photo.”—“No, don’t,” I said. But he really wanted me to look at her. Well then, giving in to his insistence, I took the photo and saw a young woman sprawled on the floor between two guys who were holding her on either side! “Who is she to him?” I asked the young man, pointing to one of them. “His girlfriend,” he replied. “And the other one? Is he planning to marry her?” “No,” he says, “they’re just dating.” “Don’t be mad at the kids,” his uncle tells me, “what can you do? That’s how young people are these days.” “I’ll pray,” I thought to myself, “not for her spine to be healed, but for her head to be healed—and yours too, you wretched man!” Where has decency gone? The uncle should have given his nephew a proper scolding! “Spiritual” youth!... To have a spiritual father and end up like this! Even if one of those guys in the photo were planning to marry this poor girl, it’s still unacceptable for a girl to be squeezed like that between two guys! And why did he have to show me this photo? This young man didn’t even think that this was wrong. It won’t hurt me, but it’s still wrong! What kind of families will these young people build? May God enlighten them so they come to their senses.

And with what self-sacrifice young women guarded their purity in days gone by! I remember how, during the war, our command rounded up civilians with mules from various villages and forced them to transport supplies for the army. A heavy snowfall set in, and these people found themselves cut off at a high elevation. The men gathered fir branches and, beneath the snow-covered fir boughs, set up makeshift shelters to protect themselves from the cold as best they could. The women who were there were also forced to take refuge under these shelters, seeking protection from their fellow villagers—those they knew. There was a young woman and an old woman from a distant village. They, too, had to take shelter under one of these fir-branch shelters. But the trouble is that there are some people who are so unbelieving and cowardly that not even war can bring them to their senses. They feel no compassion for their neighbors who are being maimed or killed, but at the first opportunity, they even seek to commit sin, fearing that they will be killed before they have a chance to enjoy life’s pleasures—even though, on the contrary, they ought to repent—at least in times of danger. And so one of these unbelieving cowards—who think not of how to repent but of how to sin—found himself under the same shelter where the young woman and the old woman had taken refuge. He began to harass the young woman so viciously that she was forced to flee. She would rather freeze to death or even die in the snow than lose her maidenly honor. The unfortunate old woman, seeing that the young woman had left and was not returning, followed her tracks and found her under the canopy of the chapel of St. John the Baptist, a half-hour’s walk away. St. John the Baptist saved the girl who had defended her honor and led her to his

¹⁹⁴ An island in the Aegean Sea. — *Translator’s note.*

little chapel, which she had not even known existed. And what did St. John the Baptist do after that? After that, he appeared in a dream to a soldier¹⁹⁵ and commanded him to hurry to his chapel as quickly as possible. The soldier jumped up and hurried to the chapel. That night was bright with snow, and he had a rough idea of where to go. Oh, what a sight met his eyes! An old woman and a young woman, knee-deep in the snow, had already turned blue and were stiff with cold. The soldier managed to open the door to the little church; the unfortunate women went inside and somehow came to their senses. The soldier had no warm clothes except for a scarf, which he gave to the old woman, and two gloves, which he gave to both of them, instructing them to switch hands in turn. Then the two told him about the temptation that had led them to this chapel. “All right,” the soldier asked the young woman, “how did you decide to run away at night, through the snowdrifts, to who knows where?” “That,” she replied, “was all I could do. I believed that Christ would help me with the rest.” Then the soldier said quite involuntarily, “That’s it—your suffering is over. Tomorrow you’ll be home.” These words just slipped out of him on their own, out of pain, and not simply to comfort the unfortunate couple. Oh, how overjoyed they were to hear that! Just hearing those words made them feel warmer. And indeed, by the morning of the next day, the mountain transport company had cleared the road and arrived at the site with their mules. Then the unfortunate women were sent home. Such young daughters of Hellas—not stripped of Divine Grace, but clothed in It—are to be admired and praised! But that scoundrel—may God forgive me—went to the commander and reported that, supposedly, “such-and-such a soldier broke into the chapel and drove vehicles into it,” that is, mules! “No,” the commander replied, “I don’t believe it; he’s incapable of such a thing!” In the end, that man ended up in prison.

True love reveals itself to the young

— Geronda, those who wanted to destroy society set their sights on its foundations, its roots—the children. They corrupted them.

— None of this will last long. Evil destroys itself. In Russia, they destroyed everything, but just look at what’s happening there now, after three generations have passed! God does not abandon people to their fate. And He will not judge the sins of the young people of this present age in the same way as the sins of the young people of the past, of our time.

— Geronda, sometimes young people who live a worldly life give very correct answers when the conversation turns to faith. Why is that?

— These young people had a good disposition, but they couldn’t control themselves; they got carried away by worldly life. Because of this good disposition, they give correct answers about faith. What I mean is this: for example, a person wants to follow a certain path but is unable to do so. However, he treats those who are actually walking that path with respect. God will not abandon such people, because there is no malice in them. The time will come when they will find the strength to move forward.

— Geronda, how can one reach out to those young people who have strayed from the path?

— You must approach them with love. If there is true, noble love, it immediately makes itself known to the young people and disarms them. Young people come to my kaliva—like berries from a thousand different fields, each with their own problems. I greet them with a kind word, offer them something to eat or drink, talk with them, and we quickly become friends. They open their hearts and, in return, accept my love for them. Some of these unfortunate souls are so deprived! They thirst for love. It’s immediately clear that they’ve never seen love from either their mother or their father. They can’t get enough of love. And if you feel compassion for them, if you come to love them, they forget their problems, forget even about drugs, are healed of their illnesses, and stop causing trouble; later, they

¹⁹⁵ This soldier was Arsenios Eznipedis—the future Blessed Elder Paisios. The incident described took place during the Civil War of 1944–1948. – *Translator’s note.*

come to the Holy Mountain as devout pilgrims. This is because, in some way, they receive a revelation of God's love. And you can see that they possess a nobility that breaks through the barriers of your heart. They are in material need, but despite this, they do not accept financial assistance from others; they prefer to find work, earn a living, and study in the evenings. Such young people are worth helping. In Thessaloniki, near the train station, there are houses where many teenagers—both boys and girls—live together. Fifteen of them lived in a single three-person room. All of them come from broken families. Some steal, while others cannot bring themselves to do so because they have a sense of decency. For how many years have I been asking to reach out to these children, to help them! I asked that some kind of church be set up to gather these unfortunate souls there. Now, a small church has been opened at the station in honor of Saint Philip the Deacon—the patron saint of railroad workers.

In any case, I realized that if a person does not take advantage of the favorable opportunities given to him from a young age, the devil will take advantage of them. Why does the proverb say, “Strike while the iron is hot”? Because in the past, blacksmiths did not weld iron the way they do now: there was no such thing as oxygen welding or anything like that. Blacksmiths would put the iron in the fire, spray it with hot water mixed with borax,¹⁹⁶ and join the pieces of iron together immediately as soon as they took them out of the fire—red-hot and spitting sparks. Such pieces of iron would fuse together instantly; if they had time to cool down, nothing would come of it. What I mean is that if a young person treats the favorable opportunities given to him with indifference, and then begins to concern himself with other matters, to judge and condemn—so that God's grace withdraws from him—then the same thing will happen to him as to the iron that has cooled. While the Divine warmth is present, he—provided, of course, that he is attentive—will thrive. Therefore, parents should, as much as possible, help their children while they are still young. Children are like blank cassette tapes. If Christ is recorded on them, they will be with Him always. If not, it will be easier for children to stray toward evil as they grow older. If a person has received spiritual guidance in childhood, they will find their way back, even if they later stray from the path. If a tree is treated with linseed oil, it does not rot. If children are “imbued” even a little with reverence and the fear of God, this will help them throughout their lives.

Chapter 4. **On Shamelessness and Disrespect**

Casual speech drives away reverence

- Geronda, where does casual behavior come from?
- From Paris...¹⁹⁷ Casual behavior is shamelessness. It drives the fear of God far away—just like the smoke we use to drive bees out of the hive.
- Geronda, how can one avoid casual behavior?
- Consider yourself the lowest of all. Much humility is necessary. As the youngest, show respect and reverence to all the sisters. Humbly express your thoughts, and do not act like a know-it-all. Then God will bestow His Grace upon you, and you will prosper. Arrogance is the novice's worst enemy, because it drives out reverence. Usually, arrogance is followed by disobedience, then insensitivity—first toward minor sins; gradually becoming accustomed to them, a person begins to consider them natural. But deep down, he has no peace—only anxiety. And he cannot even understand what is happening to

¹⁹⁶ Sodium borate. — *Translator's note.*

¹⁹⁷ The Elder makes a remarkable play on words: παρρησία—frankness, boldness; Παρίσι—Paris in Greek transcription. — *Translator's note.*

him, because on the outside, his heart becomes “hardened,” and he no longer senses that he has strayed from the right path.

— Geronda, what is the connection between familiarity and simplicity?

— Simplicity is one thing, and a free-spirited manner is another. Simplicity contains both reverence and a childlike quality. A free-spirited manner contains audacity.

Often, shamelessness can also be hidden in frankness. If a person is inattentive, then shamelessness is often hidden in his frankness and simplicity. “I have a frank disposition” or “I am a simple person,” he says shamelessly, without even realizing it. However, simplicity is one thing, and shamelessness is quite another.

— Geronda, what is spiritual humility?

— Spiritual humility is the fear of God, in the best sense of the word. This fear, this restraint, brings joy to a person; they pour honey into his heart. Spiritual honey! Look at some shy little boy—he respects his father, behaves properly, and out of great modesty doesn’t even dare to look at him. When he wants to ask him something, he blushes. You could place such a little boy right in the iconostasis. But another child thinks, “But he’s just my father”—and casually, with audacity, slumps down in front of him. And when he needs something, he demands it—give it to me, put it there—stamps his feet, and threatens.

In a good family, children behave freely. In such a family, there is respect for the parents; there is no military-style discipline or rigid conformity. The children rejoice when they look at their father and mother, and the parents rejoice when they look at their children. “Love knows no shame,”¹⁹⁸ — says Abba Isaac. In love there is boldness, in the best sense of the word. In love of this kind there is reverence and respect for others; that is, it overcomes fear. Some people have modesty and indecision, but at the same time they have fear, because they lack true modesty. Another person, however, has modesty but no fear, because their modesty is genuine and spiritual. When modesty is spiritual, a person feels joy. For example, a small child loves his father and mother with boldness; he is not afraid that they will spank him. His father may even be an officer, yet the child grabs his cap, throws it down, and rejoices. There is a kind simplicity in him; there is no shamelessness in him. Let’s draw a line between simplicity and shamelessness. If respect and modesty disappear, we’ll end up with disrespectful behavior—with shamelessness. And then you might hear a young woman lying on her bed giving orders: “Mom, bring me a glass of water! And make sure it’s cold!... Ugh, it’s warm... I told you: bring me cold water!” It starts with this and then escalates to the point where people ask, “Why should a wife be afraid of her husband?”¹⁹⁹ However, fear contains respect, and respect contains love. If I respect something, then I already love it, and what I love, I respect. A wife should have respect for her husband. A husband should love his wife. But today people interpret the Gospel completely backwards and therefore treat everything as equal, and as a result, families fall apart. “A wife should be obedient,” says the husband. But if you have no love, you won’t even be able to make a cat obey you. If you lack love, a person remains indifferent to you, and you cannot even ask them to bring you a glass of water. By respecting one’s neighbor, a person respects themselves, yet does not put themselves first. There is selflessness in respect for others; if, however, a person’s concern is directed toward themselves, then there is no selflessness in it.

Respect for Elders

— Geronda, sometimes I’m rude to my elders. I realize I’m behaving badly and I confess this sin.

¹⁹⁸ See The Works of Our Holy Father Abba Isaac the Syrian. Words of Asceticism. Sergiev Posad, 1911. p. 528.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Eph. 5:33.

— Since you understand this and confess it, you will gradually come to despise yourself—in the positive sense of the word—and humble yourself. Then God’s grace will come, and you will be freed from this bad habit.

— But, Geronda, I sometimes joke with my sisters and, out of love, often tease them. However, I’m afraid of crossing the line into disrespectful behavior.

— That’s not right, since you’re the youngest! In a family, it’s usually the adults who joke with the children and play with them, not the other way around. That brings joy to both adults and children. But it’s not proper for a little one to tease a grandpa or grandma. Imagine if a little one suddenly jumped up on his father out of the blue, grabbed him by the collar, and started tickling him! But when an adult playfully pinches a child—that’s a completely different matter. Then the child behaves, in the best sense of the word, freely; the adult becomes a child, and both are delighted.

— Geronda, sometimes this happens: my conscience tells me that something is being done wrong, I express my opinion to my elders, but they don’t accept it. Should I agree with them?

— No, don’t go along with evil. Speak kindly and truthfully, but do so correctly and with kindness: “Maybe it would be better if we did it this way? I’m just sharing this thought with you.” Or say, “I have this thought.” In this way, you become a magnet and draw God’s grace to yourself. Some people speak freely out of habit, rather than because they’re trying to express their opinion. Be that as it may, the younger person must, in any case, show respect to the elder. But the elder, too—if I may put it that way—needs to be respected. And even if he has shortcomings, he still has good qualities—some experience and the like. When you are asked, express your thoughts humbly and respectfully, but at the same time, do not be overly confident that things are exactly as you imagine them to be. After all, someone else may know something you don’t, or something you haven’t considered. If a person hears a topic being discussed and, in connection with that, a thought comes to mind that they believe is more correct, they should say, “A thought has come to me,” if they are speaking with a peer. If, however, they are speaking with someone older, they should say, “A disrespectful thought has come to me.” Because meddling in other people’s affairs is impudent, even if the opinion expressed is correct.

— And when you say “respect for one’s elders,” do you mean those who are older in years or in spiritual maturity?

— Primarily by age. After all, consider this: a person who is spiritually advanced treats those older than him with respect and reverence.

— Geronda, is it natural to respect someone who is younger in age but spiritually advanced more than someone who is older in years but less spiritually advanced?

— No, that’s not the right way to frame the question. No matter what state the older person is in, you must treat them with respect because of their age. Treat people with respect: those who are older—for their years; those who are younger—for their piety. If there is respect, then the younger person treats the older one with respect, and the older one treats the younger one with respect. Love is present in respect. “*Render to everyone what is due: honor to whom honor is due,*”²⁰⁰ — says the Apostle Paul

— And if younger people correct their elders—is that wrong?

— That’s typical of the new generation. But Scripture says, “*Rebuke your brother.*”²⁰¹ It doesn’t say, “Rebuke your father.” Today’s youth argue and rebel without even realizing it. They consider their behavior natural. They speak shamelessly and then say, “I just said that offhand.” Young people have fallen under the influence of the spirit of this world—a reckless, hooligan spirit that honors and respects nothing. Younger people behave disrespectfully toward their elders and do not understand how wrong

²⁰⁰ Rom. 13:7.

²⁰¹ Matt. 18:15.

this is. What good can be expected if a young person—supposedly in order to be a “standout individual”—says that respect for elders is a thing of the past? Great care is needed. The modern worldly spirit instills in young people the idea: “Don’t listen to your parents or teachers.” That is why today’s children are becoming worse and worse from a very young age. And the children who go astray the most are those whose parents—unaware of the harm they are doing to them—admire their offspring and consider them some sort of child prodigies when they speak with shamelessness.

Once, a father came to my hut with his son, who was about eight or nine years old, and his nephew of the same age. I seated one boy to my right and the other to my left. Shortly before they arrived, an artist I knew—a very good man and a master of his craft, capable of painting a portrait from life in a single minute—had come to see me. “Dionysius,” I asked him, “why don’t you sketch the children, just as we’re sitting here together with them right now?” “I’ll give it a try,” he replied, “but I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it, because they’re fidgeting.” No sooner had he picked up a sheet of paper and started drawing than one of the children jumped up and “greeted” him: “Let’s see, you idiot, what you’re going to draw there!” And there were people all around! But the young man wasn’t the least bit flustered. “That’s how kids are these days, Father,” he said to me and continued drawing. As for me, my blood boiled! And the child’s father acted as if nothing had happened! His children were being so rude to a thirty-year-old man who was even drawing them on top of everything else! How much shamelessness and disrespect there is in this! And there’s so much more besides that! How terrifying it all is! Now imagine if one of these children wanted to become a monk. It would take a great deal of work for such a child to become a true monk. Mothers who fail to keep an eye on their children are ruining them. It all comes down to the mothers. In Russia, if anything has changed, it is only because mothers secretly preserved their faith and piety and helped their children. Fortunately for us, a little heaven has been preserved in Christian families. Otherwise, we would have perished.

— Geronda, will children who grow up this way be able to change or become monks if they later choose to do so?

“If they realize that they’ve behaved badly, then Christ will help them. In other words, if a person is genuinely troubled by their actions, then the matter can be considered settled. But how can such children reform if, after becoming monks, they still consider themselves right and say about the abbot or abbess: ‘What kind of dictator do we have here? Where have you ever seen such things happening in our day?!’” Some monastics even go so far as to say such nonsense to me.

Little by little, respect is completely fading away. Young men come to my cell, and most of them sit with their legs crossed, while the older people have nowhere to sit. Others, seeing some free stumps a short distance away, are too lazy to take two steps, move them closer, and sit down. I have to haul those stumps over for them myself. And even when they see me carrying them, they won’t come over and take them from me. They want to drink some water, but they don’t want to walk a few meters to fetch it themselves. I have to bring them a second mug myself. No, honestly, it amazes me: groups of thirty burly young men come along, watch as I hobble along carrying a large box of Turkish delight, a water jug, and mugs—all so I can give them something to drink—but not a single one of them even lifts a finger to help me. But the major general, reeking of gunpowder, sitting right next to them, gets up and rushes to my aid! The young people think that in an Athos kaliva, a waiter will also come up to them and serve them—just as he would in a restaurant or hotel. About five or six times I even pulled this stunt: I’d go get a jug, hobbling along with difficulty, bring them water, and pour it on the ground right in front of their noses! “I can bring you water, guys,” I’d tell them, “but it won’t do you any good!”

On public transportation, you see children sitting while older people stand. Young people sit with their legs crossed, while adults stand up to give their seats to the elderly. The young people won’t give up their seats. “This seat,” they say, “I paid for.” They sit there and pay no attention to anyone. But what

a spirit there was in the old days! Women would sit on both sides of the narrow streets, and when a priest or an elderly person passed by, they would stand up. And they taught their children to do the same.

How often I get indignant! I have to watch as elderly, dignified, and respected people are conversing, while young upstarts shamelessly interrupt the conversation, cut them off, spout all sorts of nonsense, and even consider this an achievement. I signal for them to stop, but they pay no attention whatsoever. To stop them, I have to make them a laughingstock—otherwise, they'll just keep going. Nowhere in any "Father's Book" or "Paterikon" does it say that young people should speak to their elders in this manner. The "Father's Book" says, "*The elder spoke,*" not "The young man spoke." In the old days, younger people remained silent in the presence of their elders and were glad to do so. They wouldn't even sit where the elders were seated. The young people of that era were distinguished by their shyness, modesty, and reverence; when speaking to their elders, they would blush. And if any of the children of that time had been rude to their parents, they would not have dared to show their face even at the market out of shame! And on the Holy Mountain, a monk did not participate in the solemn choral singing if his beard was not yet gray. But now you see novices and even candidates for novitiate joining the choir... Well, what can you do—but let them at least learn to behave with respect and reverence toward their elders.

You might even hear something like this: a student at the Athoniada tells the rector, who holds the rank of bishop, "Your Grace, the Rector, we will speak to you as equals." Yes, yes, it's already come to that! And the worst part is that this young man doesn't understand what's wrong with that; he persists: "So what did I say that was so bad? I don't understand." Instead of asking His Grace the rector, "I beg your pardon; please grant me your blessing to express a thought—though perhaps what I say will be foolish," the teenager declares as if nothing were amiss: "You have your opinion, and I have mine." Do you understand? Unfortunately, this spirit has crept into spiritual life and monasticism as well. Do you hear how novices complain: "I spoke to the Elder about this, but he doesn't understand me. Even though I've reminded him of it repeatedly!"—"Listen," I say, "how can you even bring yourself to say 'repeatedly'?" After all, by saying that, you're essentially saying, "The Elder hasn't changed his ways."—"Well, what," he replies, "am I not allowed to express my opinion?" When you hear something like that, you just explode. And at the end, he even asks you, "What, are you upset? Well, forgive me." So I'm supposed to forgive him not for what he said, but for the fact that I lost my temper!

People have gone so far as to judge God

— Geronda, has this tendency to judge everyone and everything always been present in people, or has it only emerged in the current younger generation?

— No, this didn't happen before; it's the spirit of the current era. Nowadays, laypeople are being judged, as are all political and church figures, but that's not enough—they're even judging the saints and have gone so far as to judge God. "God," such people say, "shouldn't have done this or that. He should have done such-and-such, but He did it wrong." Do you hear what they're saying? "My brother, are you going to tell Him what to do?"—"So what? I'm just expressing my opinion," he replies, not realizing how shameless that is. The worldly spirit has destroyed much that is good. Evil develops and reaches a vile, hideous state; it reaches the point of blasphemy. People judge God, and they aren't even troubled by the thought that this is blasphemy against Him. And some of the strapping fellows—those whom God has not shortchanged in stature—if they have even a modicum of judgment in their heads, start talking about others: "What kind of pygmy is this? And what kind of clubfoot is that? And just look at this one!"—and they have no regard for anyone.

Once, a man came to my hut and declared, "In such-and-such a matter, God shouldn't have acted the way He did." "And can you," I asked him, "keep even one tiny pebble suspended in the air?" The

stars you see in the sky aren't just shiny toy balls. They are celestial bodies of colossal size, hurtling at dizzying speeds without colliding with one another or veering off course." "But in my opinion," he says to me again, "it should have been arranged differently." Just listen to that! Are we really going to judge God? There's a lot of logic here, and trust in God has vanished. And if you tell such people that they're wrong, they'll reply, "Sorry, but I just expressed my opinion. Don't I have the right to do that?" The things God has to hear from us! Fortunately, He doesn't take us seriously.

The Old Testament tells us that God commanded the Israelites to drive all the Canaanites out of the land without exception.²⁰² If God gave such commands, it means He foresaw something. But the Israelites said, "That's not very humane. Let's leave the Canaanites alone; let's not exterminate them." However, as time passed, they were corrupted by the Canaanites and drawn into immorality and idolatry, even sacrificing their own children to idols, as described in the psalm.²⁰³ God knows what He is doing. Yet some shamelessly ask, "Why did God create the torments of hell?" A person begins to judge and, from that moment on, loses his good spiritual state. He lacks [even] a little of God's grace to understand anything a bit more deeply—that is, to understand why God created this or that. Judgment, pride, selfishness—that is what all these "why?" and "how come?" questions amount to.

— Geronda, some young people ask: "Why did Christ have to be crucified? Couldn't He have saved the world in some other way, without the crucifixion?"

— But He did save the world through the Crucifixion, and people aren't moved by that! What would it be like if He had saved the world in some other way? And some say, "God the Father didn't suffer at all. It was the Son who offered Himself as a sacrifice." But, in my opinion, any father would prefer to sacrifice himself rather than sacrifice his child. It causes a father greater suffering to see his child sacrifice himself than to sacrifice himself. But what can you say to people if they don't understand what love means?

Another person said the following to me: "Adam had two children—Abel and Cain. So where did Cain's wife come from?" However, upon reading the Old Testament, one learns that after the birth of Seth, Adam "*begot sons and daughters.*"²⁰⁴ And after killing his brother, Cain fled to the mountains.²⁰⁵ He did not even know that the woman he took as his wife was his sister. God arranged for people to be of one race and tribe, so that there would be no malice or crime among them, so that they would say, "We are the children of the same parents—Adam and Eve," and this would restrain human malice. But even so—look at the malice that exists among people today!

How I suffer with some people when they come to my kaliva! In the end [seeing that it's useless to continue the conversation with them], I say, "I have a headache, and I don't have any aspirin." And as they leave, they get upset and take offense. "We've come all this way, and he tells us he has a headache," they complain, not understanding why I'm complaining about a headache. And some suggest, "Well, maybe we should bring you some aspirin?"

Shamelessness drives away Divine Grace

Great attention is required. Unrestrained and inattentive behavior is an obstacle to Divine Grace. A lack of respect for others is the greatest obstacle to Divine Grace drawing near to a person. The more respect children have for their parents, teachers, and elders in general, the more Divine Grace they receive. The more unruly and disobedient they are, the more Divine Grace withdraws from them. Worldly freedom has driven out not only reverence but even basic worldly politeness. Some kids have

²⁰² See Deut. 7:2 ff.

²⁰³ See Psalm 105:37: "*And they devoured their own sons and daughters in their madness.*"

²⁰⁴ Gen. 5:4.

²⁰⁵ See Gen. 4:14–15.

no qualms about shouting at their father: “Hey, Dad! Do you have any cigarettes? Mine are all gone.” Could you ever have heard such a thing before? Even if a teenager smoked, he did so in secret. But now—as if it were no big deal! How, then, can children not be utterly deprived of Divine Grace? Today’s young women, in the presence of their father and mother, use the crudest language to berate their brothers for going to church, while their father just keeps quiet. My hair stood on end when I heard about this. Later, when I was alone, I even started talking to myself.

A worldly environment and worldly parents ruin children. The environment has a powerful influence on children. There are few children who possess modesty and kindness. Most embittered, hardened children become that way because they behave shamelessly. Many parents bring their children to me and say, “Father, there is a demon in my child.” But I see that there is no demon in these children. God forbid! There aren’t that many children who actually have a demon inside them. All the others are subjected to demonic influence from the outside. That is, there is no demon within the children themselves; it manipulates them from the outside. But even acting from the outside, it still accomplishes its work. And where does all this begin? With shamelessness. By speaking to their elders with shamelessness, children drive God’s Grace away from themselves. And when God’s Grace departs, the tangalashki come, and the children become embittered and run amok. Conversely, children who are reverent and respectful, who obey their parents, teachers, and elders, continually receive God’s Grace. God’s blessing rests upon such children. They are enveloped by God’s grace. Great reverence for God, combined with deep respect for their elders, draws abundant Divine Grace into the children’s souls and fills them with Grace to such an extent that the Divine radiance of Grace shines forth from them to others. God’s grace does not go to little rebels and miscreants; it goes to children who are loving, sensible, and reverent. Children who are respectful and reverent are easily recognizable. Their eyes shine. And the more respect they have for their parents and for elders in general, the more of God’s grace they receive. The more unruly and disobedient they are, the more God’s grace withdraws from them.

A child who has complaints against others, a child whom nothing can please—this isn’t right, that isn’t right—will turn into a rebel, will turn into the devil. After all, even Lucifer wanted to place his throne above the Throne of God. Look, after all, all children whose whims are indulged by their parents become little rebels. And if children do not repent— —to free themselves from this evil wave overwhelming them, if they continue to behave shamelessly, then—God forbid! — God’s grace will abandon them doubly. And they will even go so far as to speak irreverently of God, after which they will be ruled by evil spirits.

“Honor your father and your mother”²⁰⁶

What have today’s children come to! They can’t stand a single word. And as for putting up with birch porridge—forget it! Children are disrespectful, very selfish, and neurotic. They abuse their freedom. A child tells his parents, “I’ll take you to the police.” Not long ago, a fifteen-year-old teenager misbehaved so badly that his father slapped him. Then the son went to the police, filed a complaint against his own father, and the father was brought to trial! During the trial, the father said, “You are passing an unjust judgment on me. After all, if I hadn’t slapped my son, he would have ended up in prison. And it wouldn’t be you who would feel the pain for him—it would be me.” After saying this, he grabbed the young “plaintiff,” slapped him twice, and said, “Go ahead and put me on trial for these slaps, not for that one. Put me in jail right now, because I hit him for no reason at all.”

I want to point out just how far children have come. Such is their current “mentality.” In the old days, parents scolded us and might have given us a belt, but we had no ill will toward them. We even took the belt as a sign of affection, without arguing or dwelling on whether we had done something

²⁰⁶ Exodus 20:12.

seriously wrong or not. We believed that the belt was also for our own good. We knew that our parents loved us and sometimes caressed us, sometimes kissed us, and sometimes slapped us on the back of the head, because a parent's slap, a parent's caress, and a parent's kiss—all of this, how can I put it better—all of this comes from love. When parents hit their children, it is their own parental heart that suffers, but when children are beaten by their parents, only their cheek hurts. Therefore, heartache is stronger than the pain of a slap. Whatever a mother does to her children—whether she scolds them, hits them, or caresses them—she does it all out of love; it all comes from the same loving mother's heart. However, when children, failing to understand this, speak insolently, contradict, and act defiantly, they drive Divine Grace from themselves. And after that, it is only natural that they will be subjected to the corresponding demonic influence.

— Geronda, but aren't there also bad parents?

— Yes, there are. However, God helps children who have such parents. God is not unjust. And even wild pear trees are often full to the brim with fruit. On Mount Athos, by the road leading to my kaliva, there is a wild cherry tree. It's so laden with fruit that you can't even see the leaves. The branches bend under their weight. But cultivated trees, even though they're sprayed, [often] bear no fruit at all.

A Generational Gap

The world has turned into a madhouse. Young children go to bed at midnight, when they should be going to bed right after sunset. They're locked up in high-rises, confined within concrete, living according to the adults' schedule. What should the children do, and what should the adults do? Children come to me and say, "Our parents don't understand us." Parents come to me and say, "Our children don't understand us." A chasm has formed between parents and children, and for it to disappear, parents must put themselves in their children's shoes, and children must put themselves in their parents' shoes. If children do not torment their parents now, then later, when they themselves become adults, their own children will not torment them either. And conversely: those who are disobedient now and torment their parents will later be tormented by their own children, because spiritual laws will come into effect.

— But some children, Geronda, say that they've turned out this way because of their parents' excessive love for them.

— They're wrong. When a child is selfless, parental love does not spoil him. But if a child exploits his parents' love for his own gain, he will be spoiled and ruined. If a child is spoiled by their parents' love, then, in essence, they are already spoiled. They should be thanking God for their parents and their love, but instead they are dissatisfied with being treated kindly. After all, some children don't have parents at all! What can one say to that? When a child does not recognize his parents as his benefactors and does not love them—even though his parents fear God—how can he love and honor God, his Great Benefactor and the Father of all people? After all, it is very difficult to comprehend God's great blessings at a young age.

Chapter 5.

On People's Inner Disorder and Their Outward Appearance

Unhappy worldly people dress according to their inner state

— Geronda, grant me a wish.

— I wish for you to become spiritually costumed, like the holy fool Isidora,²⁰⁷ so that you may attain virtuous hypocrisy. Look: wretched worldly people celebrate their worldly hypocrisy and dress

according to their inner state. In the old days, people dressed in costumes only once a year—during Shrovetide. Nowadays, most people are in costume all the time. In the old days, you could see people in costume only seven days a year—during Maslenitsa—but now you see them every day. Everyone dresses however their thoughts dictate! People have become utterly strange. They’ve gone mad! There are few people who are reserved and modest—whether men, women, or children. Women especially—they’ve really gone too far. Today, on my way into town, I saw one such woman, wrapped in a wide ribbon—just like a bandage—wearing some unimaginably high boots and a very short skirt. “It’s so fashionable,” they explained to me. Other women are strutting around in those super-thin heels. If they step on even the slightest bump, they’re sure to end up at the orthopedic surgeon’s. And as for the hairstyles, it’s better not to even mention them... I saw another “beauty”—may God forgive me—what kind of person was that! Her face looked wild. A cigarette puffing away between her teeth! Her eyes were bloodshot! They say that these days people have made it a rule not to smoke at home when the children are small. But those poor children are born already smoked to a crisp, like a herring! And coffee is harmful, too—it makes them pull faces like I’ve never seen before. God’s grace has departed; it has completely forsaken people.

I remember, during my time on Mount Sinai, people would come dressed in a way that left me speechless. How it pained me to look at the female tourists arriving at the monastery! How hideous they looked! It was just like seeing beautiful Byzantine icons thrown into the trash, with the only difference being that people—the icons of God—had thrown themselves into the trash. Once I saw a woman dressed in something resembling a feloni,²⁰⁷ and said, “Well, thank God, at least one is dressed more or less decently. Well, whatever—whether she’s wearing a feloni or a melon, at least she stands out from the rest.” But then the “lady in the feloni” turned to face me... What did I see! Her entire front was completely exposed!

What have people come to! Someone sent me a photo of a bride with a request to pray that her marriage would be happy. Her wedding dress defied all standards of decency. To be dressed like that is to treat the Sacrament and the sacred space of the Church with disrespect. Even spiritual people don’t think about this—so what can we expect from the rest? That is why I say that if even the monasteries do not become a restraining force, there will be no other brake to be found. Today, people are unrestrained; they have no brakes.

In the old days, when there were holy fools for Christ’s sake, there were very few truly insane people in the world. So perhaps we should ask the holy fools for Christ’s sake to heal those who are naturally insane and to reappear in the world as holy fools for Christ’s sake? What’s the point in even talking about it: today you see and hear the most unimaginable things. One man told me that today’s trendy slackers take their clothes, deliberately rub and roughen them up in various places, then cut them up and sew patches onto them with a thick needle. When I heard that, I even crossed myself. Well, okay, it’s natural for a working man to dress that way. But for a slacker!... And then this man told me something else as well. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “Geronda, something even wilder. My wife once ran into a young guy from a family of friends of ours at Soglasia Square²⁰⁸. She saw that the guy’s pants were torn right where his legs start. “My dear,” my wife said, “at least cover yourself with your hand back there...” “Leave me alone!” the young good-for-nothing replied. “That’s the fashion these days!” Poor children!...

— Geronda, some people wear blouses or shirts with images of saints on them. Is that permissible?

— If saints are depicted on blouses or jackets, then let them; it’s no big deal. It’s better for them to wear images of saints than pictures of the devil. But it’s not proper to depict saints on pants. That’s

²⁰⁷ Felon – a priest’s vestment. – *Translator’s note.*

²⁰⁸ The central square in Athens. – *Translator’s note.*

irreverent. There are some devout people who like to decorate their clothes with various Christian designs. For example, when Patriarch Dimitrios was in America, they released blouses and T-shirts featuring an image of the patriarch and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

— Did they do this out of piety?

— Well, it wasn't Jews who did it, but Christians. After all, there are people who do good things, just as there are good doctors alongside charlatans.

— Geronda, does this immodesty in clothing also stem from foreign influences?

— Well, where else could it come from? That's why, back in my youth, people used to say, "Well, those are people from Smyrna..." Smyrna was a coastal city, and many foreigners flocked there. Saint Arsenius was very strict about clothing. A young woman from Faras got married and wore a colorful scarf she'd brought back from Smyrna. Saint Arsenius repeatedly reprimanded her, telling her to throw away that scarf and dress modestly, like all the women of Faras. The young coquette wouldn't listen to him. One day, Saint Arsenius saw her again in the colorful scarf and said sternly, "I don't need Western evils in Faras. Know this: if you do not come to your senses, the children— —whom you will bear will die after their baptism. They will go to God like angels, but you will have no cause to rejoice over any of them." But even after that, she did not come to her senses, and two of her infants died. Only then did she settle down, throw away her colorful scarf, go to Saint Arsenius, and ask him for forgiveness.

"Geronda, does wearing dark clothing help in the spiritual life for someone who wants to become a monk?"

— Yes, dark clothing is very helpful. It helps one escape from the world, whereas brightly colored clothing causes a person to cling to the world. If someone who is planning to become a monk says, "Once I go to the monastery, then I'll dress in black, and then I'll follow the monastic rule," then even there, in the monastery, he will make his life... black. But if, while still in the world, a person joyfully does what monks are supposed to do and eagerly looks forward to it, then he finds spiritual joy even in the world, and later, in monastic life, he will ascend, leaping over two or three steps at a time.

— Geronda, sometimes children who go to church and dress modestly are subjected to severe criticism from their elders.

— By doing so with faith and from the heart, they put even their elders in their place. I knew a young woman who wore a black dress with long sleeves. What reverence she had! Once, a very fashion-conscious old woman began to reproach her: "Aren't you ashamed, as a young girl, to wear black and long sleeves?" — "Since you older people don't set such examples for us," the young woman replied, "then at least we young people will dress in black." That's how she put the old fashionista in her place.

You see how it is: some woman buries her husband and immediately puts on bright clothes. What can you say to that? But my sister, having been widowed at the age of twenty-three, never took off her black dress until the very day she died. For me, the blessed ones are not those flashily dressed women in mourning who lead sinful—"flashy"—lives, but those widows who, in this life—even if they've donned a black dress against their will—live a pure, radiant life and praise God without complaint.

Today, it's impossible to tell a man from a woman

Once, in order to test him, children—boys and girls dressed exactly alike—were brought to the wise Solomon so that he might distinguish one from the other. Solomon led the children to a spring and told them to wash their faces. Watching as the children washed, he separated them. The girls carefully and modestly splashed water into their eyes, while the boys boldly splashed water on their faces and slapped it with their palms.

Today, men have become so effeminate that it is often impossible to tell them apart from women. In the old days, you could tell a man from a woman from a distance of five hundred meters. Nowadays,

sometimes you can't tell even up close. You can't tell: is the person in front of you a man? Or a woman? That is why the prophecy says that a time will come when it will be impossible to distinguish a man from a woman. Elder Arseny the Caver once asked a long-haired young man, "So who are you? Are you a boy or a girl?" The elder himself couldn't figure it out. In the past, on the Holy Mountain, they used to cut such people's hair. Nowadays, people come as they are... But I cut their hair myself: with the scissors I use to trim the wool when I weave rosaries. Do you know how many I've already cut! I cut their hair in the courtyard behind the altar wall. When these long-haired folks come, I tell them, "That's great! I have a few bald acquaintances, and I promised to glue wigs onto their heads. Show some love—let me cut your hair! What can I do? I gave people my word."

— Do they agree, Geronda?

— It depends on how you tell them. I don't rush up to them shouting, "What a disgrace! Have you no shame? You're desecrating this sacred place!"—but I say, "Listen, guys, with that hair you're insulting your own manhood. If you saw a guard from the honor guard marching across Harmony Square carrying a lady's reticule, how would you feel about that? Well, tell me, is a reticule appropriate for a guard? Let's cut your hair!" And I cut it. You have no idea how much hair I collect! Sometimes, if one of them gets stubborn and starts asking all sorts of "whys" and "what-fors," I reply: "What do you mean, 'why'? Aren't I a monk? So I'm performing 'tonsures.' After all, that's my job." It's all about how you present it. The kids laugh, and that's exactly what I want. After that, I cut their hair. No, I don't change their names during the "tonsure." I only gave one little guy the name "*It Is Truly Meet*," because when I was performing his "tonsure," a religious procession with the icon "*It Is Truly Meet*!" was passing by nearby. And how happy the parents of my "initiates" are! Do you know how many grateful letters from fathers and mothers I receive? Wow! God will forgive me just for that!

Now it's become trendy to shave the hair on the top of their heads and leave a ponytail in the back. "Hey, Eagles!" I ask, "What's the point of these ponytails?" "We," the "Eagles" reply, "leave our ponytails so people will pay attention to us." — "You're such weirdos, such weirdos," I tell them, "people have so many problems these days that they won't pay any attention to you, even if you paid them to!" And others, big, lanky guys, wear earrings. I've taken so many of those earrings off them!

— And some, Geronda, wear only one earring.

— Anarchists wear a single earring. A single earring is a symbol of anarchy. They don't wear it to adorn themselves, like women do. They pierce their ear and wear the earring as a sign of protest. Once, a father came to my kaliva with his twenty-two-year-old son—a long-haired, bearded young man with an earring. "Earrings are inappropriate for young men," I told him. "Many people misunderstand you. I don't need to explain this to you, but people don't know that you're anarchists, so they misunderstand it." Then he took off the earring and gave it to me. It was gold. "Give it," I said, "to a jeweler so he can make you a cross to wear around your neck."

"Some people, Geronda, even wear earrings in their noses."

— That means the devil has put a ring in their nose. Only the bit isn't visible. And some wear wide gold chains around their necks—in several rows. I gave one of them a good scolding, took all that trinketry off him, and said, "Give this gold to some orphan. Or give it to your mother so she can pass it on to some poor person." After I'd restored him to a more or less godly appearance, he asked me, "What should I do?"—"Start by," I said, "putting on a cross on a modest chain." Just think—men wearing gold jewelry! He stands there, all glittering with gold, with two or three thick gold chains around his neck—not even princesses wear that much—and he stands there complaining about his problems! And that's exactly the problem! His problems are the penance he's carrying. From some, I take off these trinkets myself; to others, I tell them to do it themselves. People have lost all sense of moderation. They've become utterly good-for-nothing. Some wear zodiac signs around their necks. "What's that?" I ask one

of them. “First time I’ve seen something like this.” “It’s,” he replies, “a little animal—my zodiac sign.” At first, I thought it was an icon of the Mother of God. “Well then,” I say, “aren’t you yourselves just little animals from the zoo, since you’re wearing these zodiac signs?” Oh, how strange... Their inner chaos is spilling out. Let us pray that God will enlighten the youth and preserve a little heaven.

People long for simplicity

It’s good that people long for simplicity. They’ve gone so far as to make simplicity fashionable, even if there’s not a trace of it inside them. Some come to the Holy Mountain in faded, worn-out clothes, and I ask myself, “Why are they dressed like that? After all, they don’t work in the fields, do they?” One speaks in an unpretentious rural dialect because it comes naturally to him, and you’re delighted to hear the murmur of that rustic speech. Another, however, tries to imitate a “peasant” in his speech, but his “peasant-like accent” makes you feel sick. And some come to the Holy Mountain wearing ties... Out of the frying pan and into the fire... One such “little pilgrim” brought six or seven ties with him to Athos. In the morning, as he was getting ready to come see me, he put on a tie and a suit—dressed up as if for a parade. “What are you doing over there?” someone asks him. “I’m going to see Father Paissios,” he replies. “Why are you dressed so formally?” “So,” he answers, “that I can honor him.” Oh, what have we come to!

People lack simplicity entirely. That’s why young people have started wandering aimlessly, drifting about, and feeling out of place. And spiritual people, unable to live simply—being “buttoned up to the neck”—don’t help the youth. Today’s youth have no one to look up to, so they begin to lead the lifestyle of vagabonds. This is because, seeing Christians as people who are “buttoned up to the neck”—people with tight ties, self-important and pompous—young people see no difference between them and the people of this world, and so they resist them. If they saw simplicity in spiritual people, they would not end up in such a state. But young people today are characterized by a worldly spirit, while Christians are characterized by worldly manners. “We Christians should walk this way, do this, and that...” Christians behave this way not from the heart, not out of reverence, but because “that’s how one should behave.” And young people, seeing all this, say, “What’s this? Going to church with a stiff neck? Come on, let’s get out of here!” They cast everything aside and wander about undressed. They are thrown into the other extreme. Do you understand? Young people do all this as an expression of their protest. They have ideals, but they have no one to look up to as an example. They are to be pitied. That is why someone needs to appeal to their sense of love, to touch them with their simplicity. Young people are outraged when they see even spiritual people—even priests—trying to restrain them with worldly tricks. However, when they encounter humility, as well as simplicity and sincerity, young people begin to reflect. Because if a person is sincere and doesn’t put themselves first, then they are simple and humble. All of this brings peace to the person himself, but at the same time, it is noticeable to others as well. Another person can sense whether you genuinely care for him or whether you are being hypocritical. A vagrant is better than a hypocritical Christian. Therefore, what is needed is not a hypocritical “smile of love,” but natural behavior—not malice or pretense, but love and sincerity. I am more moved when a person is internally orderly—that is, when they have respect and genuine love for others, when they behave simply rather than according to established “behavioral models.” After all, otherwise a person gets stuck on mere outward appearances and becomes an “outer person”—that is, just another carnival masquerader.

The inner purity of a true person’s beautiful soul beautifies their outward appearance, and the divine sweetness of God’s love sweetens even their countenance. Inner spiritual beauty spiritually beautifies and sanctifies a person even outwardly; through divine grace, it reveals them to others. Moreover, it adorns and sanctifies even the plain clothing worn by a man of God filled with Grace.

Father Tikhon²⁰⁹ himself sewed skullcaps from scraps of his cassock using a thick needle. These skullcaps resembled little balls, but he wore them, and they radiated abundant Grace. No matter what clothes the Elder put on—whether old or baggy—they did not look unattractive, because through his inner spiritual beauty, he made them beautiful as well. Once, a visitor took a photo of the Elder just as he found him—with a small bag on his head instead of a skufia and wearing some kind of pajamas that the visitor had draped over his shoulders, seeing that the Elder was cold. And even today, those who look at this photograph think that the Elder was wearing a bishop’s robe, when in fact it was nothing more than an old, colorful pair of pajamas! People even treated Father Tikhon’s rags with reverence and took them as a blessing. Such a blessed man, who had transformed himself inwardly and become sanctified, possesses even outwardly greater dignity than all those people who endlessly change their outward appearance (that is, their clothing), while inwardly retaining their old self with its “prehistoric sins.”

“A man shall not wear women’s clothing, nor shall a woman put on men’s clothing”²¹⁰

— Geronda, how should we treat women who come to the monastery wearing pants? They often say that pants are not only more comfortable but also more modest than short skirts.

— Women today dress either in miniskirts or in pants! They choose one or the other! Whereas the Old Testament speaks about this quite clearly—and in great detail, at that! “A man must not wear women’s clothing, nor a woman men’s.” That is the law. But even aside from the law, wearing the clothing of the opposite sex is indecent. There are far fewer men who wear skirts than there are women who wear pants.

— However, women who work in the fields say that they can only move freely while working if they wear pants.

— Those are all just excuses.

— Geronda, mothers say that girls wear pants so they don’t catch a cold.

— Can’t they come up with something else? What, aren’t there any warm tights? Well, let them wear warm tights so they don’t catch a cold. You can find a way out of any difficulty—if only you have the will.

— Geronda, what should we do when officials come to the monastery, accompanied by a woman wearing pants?

— Explain it to them. Ask them if they want you to make a concession for their sake, break established rules, and let chaos reign in the monastery?

— Once, Geronda, thirty female teachers wearing pants arrived, and we let them into the monastery.

— That was a mistake; you shouldn’t have done that. You should have told them: “I’m sorry, but we have a rule here at the monastery: women wearing pants are not allowed to enter.” Otherwise, they’ll go to other monasteries afterward and say that such-and-such a monastery let them in while wearing pants. You, not wanting to compromise them, showed them leniency, but they’ll end up compromising you. Hang a sign on the gate with the relevant passage from the Old Testament. Sew fifty skirts and gently, kindly offer them to women wearing pants or short dresses who, unaware of the monastery’s rules, are visiting you for the first time.

²⁰⁹ For more on Elder Tikhon, see: *Elder Paisius*. The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories of the Holy Mountain. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 13–39.

²¹⁰ In the Russian translation: “A woman shall not wear men’s clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God” (Deut. 22:5) – *Translator’s note*.

— Geronda, what should we do when high school students arrive and all the girls are wearing pants?

— Take their refreshments out to the gate.²¹¹ This will give them pause. Or, if they notify you of their visit in advance, warn them by phone: “Please make sure that both the teachers and students are not wearing pants.” That way, they’ll understand that they must treat the monastery with respect. This isn’t a parish. At the parish, the priest should educate women so that they understand why they must not wear pants and so that they present themselves in a godly manner. And if, on occasion, women from another parish come to his church wearing pants, he must find a way to handle the situation. The Church is a mother, not a stepmother.

— Geronda, however, many people say, “By acting with such strictness, you are driving people away from the Church.”

— But since there is a commandment from God in the Old Testament forbidding women to wear men’s clothing, what more do they need? But they, you see, argue: “Why can’t a woman wear pants? Why can’t atheists serve on parish councils—after all, the Church and the people are one and the same?” But in that case, the fate of the Church will depend on the decisions of godless people! They’ll end up turning churches into libraries, warehouses, and the like, since they approach everything with their “why.” And what can you say to that?

Monasteries shouldn’t have to put up with scantily clad tourists either. There’s no point in justifying this by saying that the monastery will use the money collected from tourists to clothe the poor—that’s a trick of the evil one, who seeks to alienate the monk from God’s blessings and turn him into a worldly person. On the contrary, a monk’s true separation from the world, undertaken for Christ’s sake, enriches him with virtues.

— Geronda, were you forced to post appropriate signs for tourists at the Stomion Monastery?

— Yes, I put up some small signboards. One that said “Welcome” was at the entrance to the monastery. Two more were hung a little further down, a twenty-minute walk from the monastery. One read: “If you’re dressed inappropriately—head to the river,” with an arrow pointing toward the river. The other read: “If you’re dressed modestly—head to the holy monastery,” with an arrow pointing toward the monastery. I wrote that well, didn’t I?

— Geronda, what should we do in the summer? At this time of year, many women come to the monastery with their backs exposed.

— Well, sew up some shawls to cover their backs. That way they’ll understand that they need to treat the place they’ve come to with respect.

Cosmetics—Stains on the Image of God

What a disgrace people have come to today! Women these days get all kinds of chemical perms, and their hair stands on end—as if it were starched. And the way they smell! It’s enough to give you an allergy. When I see a worldly woman, adorned in a worldly way and smelling of worldly perfumes, I feel a deep sense of revulsion.

Someone once told me that a certain woman had gone to Germany to study cosmetology. “And what exactly is cosmetology?” I asked. “Cosmetologists,” they explained to me, “turn old women into young ones!” That’s when I remembered that I, too, had once seen an elderly “young woman” with a horizontal scar on her forehead. “What’s wrong with her, poor thing?” I later asked one of her acquaintances. “Nothing serious,” he replied. “She had plastic surgery so that the skin on her face would

²¹¹ According to the tradition of hospitality, in Greek monasteries every pilgrim who arrives is greeted with refreshments—lokum or some other sweet treat and a glass of cold water. — *Translator’s note.*

tighten up and her wrinkles would disappear.” And I, for my part, had thought that the poor old woman had been in an accident and undergone serious surgery. What lengths people go to these days!

“These days, Geronda, cosmetic procedures aren’t considered a sin.”

— Yes, I’ve already realized that. I recently ran into a woman I used to know. She used to look like an angel, but now, all made up, I didn’t even recognize her. “God,” I told her, “created everything with great wisdom, but He made one big mistake with you.” — “Why, Father?” she asked in surprise. “Because,” I said, “He didn’t ‘embellish’ you with dark circles under your eyes! That was His mistake! He created other people beautiful, but He miscalculated with you! Don’t you understand this yourself, you poor thing? After all, with all this makeup, you’re disfiguring yourself! It’s just like taking a Byzantine icon and smearing paint on it in various places, drawing on it, ruining it. So what, are we going to smear paint on the image of God [— ourselves]? Imagine that an artist painted a beautiful picture, then a person who knew nothing about painting came along, grabbed a brush, and slathered various garish strokes onto the painting—in other words, defaced the work of art. You’re doing the same thing. By using this makeup, you’re essentially telling God: “You, my God, made me wrong. I’ll correct Your mistake.”

I remember another woman. She came to me with red fingernails—as long as a hawk’s talons—and began to plead: “My child is seriously ill. Pray for him, Father. I pray too, but...” “What kind of praying are you doing!” I interrupted her. “With those claws, you’re wounding Christ! For your child to recover, cut your nails first. For the sake of your child’s health, do at least this: cut your nails and wash the polish off them.” “Can I paint them white instead, Father?” “I’m telling you: remove the polish from your nails and trim them. Make at least some kind of sacrifice for the sake of your child’s health. What on earth is this, huh? After all, if that were necessary, God would have created you with red nails in the first place...” — “So, does that mean I’ll paint them with white polish, Father?” Phew, she really had me in stitches. “Yes,” I thought to myself, “you’ll get your health—both you and your child...” More than anything else, it’s the mother who spiritually “catches a cold” in her children when she herself isn’t clothed in modesty and, on top of that, tries to “strip away” or deprive her own children of modesty.

Someone might not be very attractive or might have some kind of disability. God knows that this actually helps them spiritually.

After all, God cares more about the soul than the body. We all have virtues, but we also have some small flaws and shortcomings. These aren’t even crosses—they’re little crosses. These little crosses help us in the salvation of our souls.

Part Four.

On the Church in Our Time

“The Church is the Church of Christ, and He governs it. The Church is not a temple that pious people build from stone, sand, and lime, and that barbarians destroy with fire. The Church is Christ Himself.”

Chapter 1.

On Education

The Greek Language

— Geronda, why were accents abolished in Greek grammar?²¹²

— Just as people today can't put up with anything and lash out at everyone, so too the letters can't put up with anything—neither acute accents nor circumflexes! The letters have come to resemble people: they gallop off at full speed and don't even leave a period behind them.

What kind of language are some people writing in! In one modern translation of the New Testament, I read: "I called my son from Egypt."²¹³ My brother, how can that be right! The sacred must not be separated from the profane. They write this way supposedly to "standardize" the language, to bring it to uniformity. But what person, even from the most remote village, would fail to understand what "*I called My Son out of Egypt*" means? And once, on the Holy Mountain, during a reading in the refectory of a certain holy father in a Modern Greek translation, I heard that the words "bread," "wine," "Divine Communion" had been replaced with modern, mundane terms used in everyday speech. But such words are unsuitable [for conveying sacred concepts]! How could that be? Which Greek does not know what "artos" and "ino" mean?²¹⁴

— Geronda, they say they're planning to replace the Greek alphabet with the Latin alphabet.

"Don't worry, that won't happen. They won't get away with it. Fortunately, God brings good out of even what is crooked and evil. Otherwise, we'd be lost." Tradition and language didn't die out even back when all written records were handwritten, when there were no photocopiers or other technical devices. So why would they die out now, when there are so many technical tools available? No, tradition and language won't die out—no matter how hard they try to destroy them. Look at the Greek immigrants from Russia—how they have preserved their customs! They knew the Pontic language, and that helped them. In this way, they preserved their traditions. But they left Russia to find freedom, even though they had been granted some measure of freedom there in Russia as well. If they hadn't left, they would have lived like a bird released from its cage and left to fly freely around a room. Wouldn't that bird feel melancholy in a room? And just imagine what it was like for those unfortunate Pontians back then!

There are also those who want to create a new language. However, the Greek language derives its "language" from the tongues of fire at Pentecost.²¹⁵ No other language can convey the dogmas of our faith. And that is why, by God's Providence, the Old Testament was translated into Greek by the Seventy, and the Gospel was also written in Greek. If someone, without knowing Ancient Greek, delves into dogmatics, they may fall into error. And we have removed Ancient Greek from the school curriculum! A little more time will pass, and Germans will begin coming to our universities to teach us Ancient Greek. Then, after initially becoming a laughingstock, our intellectuals will fully appreciate the significance of Ancient Greek and say: "Look at that—so the Church did not preserve Ancient Greek in vain!"

They are striving to destroy our Orthodox people. Do you understand what that means? To be an Orthodox people today is a great thing. We once had philosophy. Saint Catherine silenced the philosophers by appealing to philosophy.²¹⁶ Philosophers paved the way for Christianity. The Gospel was written in Greek and spread throughout the world. Later, the Greeks enlightened the Slavs. The very

²¹² In the Greek language, there are three types of accent: acute, grave, and circumflex. In 1982, new spelling rules were introduced in Greece, according to which only one type of accent was retained in Modern Greek. At the same time, a number of other artificial simplifications were made, which significantly lowered the grammatical standard of the modern Greek language. See also footnote 221. – *Translator's note.*

²¹³ Cf. Matt. 2:15.

²¹⁴ ἄρτος (Ancient Greek) – bread, οἶνος (Ancient Greek) – grape wine – *Translator's note.*

²¹⁵ Cf. Acts 2:3.

²¹⁶ See The Life and Martyrdom of Saint Catherine the Great Martyr. Lives of the Saints, November 24.

existence of Hellas greatly bothers some people. “It,” these people say, “is harming us. We must destroy it.”

Problems with Education

— Geronda, you often say that today everyone is trying to tear everything apart. Does that include the education system as well?

— Yes. Can’t you see what’s happening? Are these even schools? Is what they’re teaching children today our language? Is this our history? And as for theology, do you think things are any better there? An atheist with a degree in theology is allowed to teach the Law of God.

Yet no one checks what he’s teaching the children—God’s Law or atheism. “We can’t fire him,” say those in charge. But if a philologist wanted to teach math, would they allow him to do so?

Another graduate of the theology department refuses to allow people to receive Communion so they won’t contract AIDS. This “theologian” is one of those who enrolled in the theology department not out of a calling, but because of a “computer-generated assignment.” Such knowledge is not knowledge of God. “A child of the sacred sciences has been born,” — they used to say in the old days, because learning was a sacred endeavor back then. But now you see a professor of theology who does not believe in God, who blasphemes against the prophets in front of his students, yet he is not removed from teaching. But, my good sir, what have you forgotten in the theology department? What kind of theologians will you produce?

And what influence have Protestants and Catholics had on us? How deeply has the godless spirit penetrated Catholicism! Little by little, Catholics are trying to diminish the saints. “Saint Catherine,” they say, “was not a great saint: her father was, well, just a minor prince.” Saint Nicholas was an insignificant saint. Saint George the Great Martyr is a myth; the Archangel Michael never existed—he was simply a manifestation of God. The same applies to the Archangel Gabriel.” Then they’ll say that Christ isn’t God, that He was simply a great Teacher. Eventually, they’ll get to the point where they’ll start calling God some kind of force, and then they’ll declare that God is nature. There are so many obvious supernatural events, so many prophets and prophecies, so many living miracles, but despite all this, some Orthodox Christians go so far as to believe such nonsense.

Once, a young man came to me to ask for a blessing to study in Italy. He was planning to study liturgy there and write a dissertation. “Are you out of your mind?” I asked him. “You’re planning to go to the Jesuits to write a dissertation, and yet you came to me for a blessing? They don’t even know what’s going on within their own ranks! After all, Uniate priests, Jesuits, and who knows who else teach there!” When it comes to our young people studying abroad, we must be vigilant in every respect. Because this is what happens: our students go to study in England, France, and other Western countries, get infected with European “germs,” and then write some kind of dissertation. For example, they study the Greek Fathers in translations into Western European languages. But Western translators—either because they are unable to convey the meaning of the original correctly, or out of malice—have added their own erroneous opinions to the writings of the Holy Fathers. And so our Orthodox scholars, having learned foreign languages, pick up these foreign “germs” in the West and bring them back here. And then they go on to infect others with these “diseases.” Of course, if a person is attentive, he can easily distinguish gold from a fake.

— Geronda, some churchgoing young people, having failed to get into a university here in Greece, go abroad to study and lose their faith.

— Well, I’ll mention this to a few of my acquaintances. I’ll ask them to open a couple more universities in Greece so that our young people don’t have to go abroad. Let them study here. Otherwise,

the children go astray, the parents incur expenses, and so much money ends up in some stranger's pocket.

To young people who go abroad to study, I always say this: "Go, if that's what you want. But be careful not to lose your faith. Gain only knowledge while you're abroad. And most importantly: don't forget to return to your homeland afterward. Hellas is waiting for you.

It is your duty to help her. Your place is here—alongside your fellow countrymen—so that they won't be forced to suffer while searching abroad for a doctor or a specialist in some field of science. Be careful that your heart doesn't grow cold. Europeans are a cold people. And in America—there, you can become materially wealthy, but spiritually ruined."

— Geronda, what harm teachers' strikes cause! Children don't go to school for a whole month and just loiter in the streets.

— I tell teachers never to go on strike, except in cases where it's necessary—for example, to protest plans to abolish God's Law, eliminate prayer before classes,²¹⁷ remove the cross from the Greek flag, or do something similar to that. In such cases, teachers need to protest. But not in other cases—otherwise, what have the children done wrong to be left without classes?

— So, Geronda, will the current education system cause a great deal of harm?

— Now the souls of many children will be crippled by this system, but the Good God will not judge them strictly by the letter of the law. He will consider what state they would have been in had they not fallen under this evil influence, had this harm not been done to them. However, we, too, need to pray fervently for these unfortunate children, so that God may intervene and help them, so that they may not be spiritually scarred, but may possess strong spiritual health and acquire virtues.

The Theory of Evolution

What nonsense they tell children in schools today! Darwin's theory and similar rubbish... Those who teach children all this nonsense do not believe in it themselves. Yet they fill children's heads with it to instill this poison in them and lead them away from the Church. Once, one such "scientist" began telling me his fairy tales: "Let's assume that the earth contains various ingredients and microorganisms, which God used to create the human being..."—"So," I said, "if none of that existed, God wouldn't have been able to create man? Just think—what a complicated business that is!"—"But suppose," he continued his reasoning, "that He took a monkey and brought it to perfection?"—"All right, — I replied, — couldn't God have created His perfect creation—man—right away, without a monkey? After all, He devoted an entire creative day to the creation of man! Or did He first have to gather the necessary parts? Read about the creation of man in the prophecy of Job, which we hear in church during the Matins service on Holy Thursday.²¹⁸ Even science today rejects all these fables about monkeys. How many years have passed since humans flew to the moon? Huh? And monkeys, in all their years of "evolution," haven't even managed to go ice skating once. Not to mention a monkey inventing a bicycle and riding it. Have you ever seen a monkey on skates? It's a different matter if you, a human, take a monkey, bring it to the rink, and teach it to skate through training." — "Yes," my conversation partner couldn't hold back, "but if we were to make the following assumption, which is..." — "Don't even go there," I said, "don't make any assumptions. Just keep quiet. That's the safest bet."

A university professor taught that very same theory of evolution. Once I said to him: "If you tend to a bean, it will gradually become simply a better bean. An eggplant, if tended to, will become a better

²¹⁷ In Greek schools, an Orthodox prayer is read aloud in classrooms at the beginning and end of each class. At the start of the school week, the Greek national flag is solemnly raised in the schoolyard in the presence of all students, and at the end of the week, it is lowered.
— Translator's note.

²¹⁸ "Or did you take clay from the earth and form a living creature, and set this speaking being upon the earth?" (Job 38:14)

eggplant. A monkey, if you feed it and care for it, will become a better monkey. It cannot become a human. If a Black person lives in cold countries and avoids the sun, the color of his skin will change slightly. But he will not cease to be Black.” And if we also consider that Christ was born of a human being, of our Most Holy Mother of God! So what does that mean: according to the theory of evolution, does that mean Christ’s ancestor was a monkey? What blasphemy! But the proponents of this theory do not realize that they are blaspheming. They hurl a stone and, without regard for how many heads that stone will shatter, boast: “I threw the stone farther than anyone else.” That is exactly what they are doing today—admiring whoever throws the stone farther than anyone else. But such people do not think about how many heads will be shattered among those upon whom it falls.

— Geronda, some believe that such theories can help bring Marxists closer to the Church.

— At first, Marxists may indeed grow closer to the Church, but then “they will join its ranks in accordance with party discipline.” And then they will decide when to go to church and when not to, when to do one thing and when to do another. They will take control of everything, and in the end they will say: “Who told you there is a God? There is no God. The priests are deceiving you.” This is how Marxists use supporters of the theory of evolution to achieve their goals. And those people don’t understand this. Marxists who are well-disposed come to the Church even without the theory of evolution; they repent and go to confession. But those who are not well-disposed will not change anyway.

Children Are Being Led Away from the Church

When I was little, how much it helped me to go to church! In elementary school, we had a very good teacher. He helped us too, teaching us traditional Greek songs and church hymns. On Sundays, we sang the Great Doxology, “*Through the Prayers of the Mother of God...*,” “*Holy God,*” and the Cherubic Hymn in church.

— And did the girls sing, too?

— Yes, all the children sang together. The church used to be next to the school, and we played around it in the churchyard. On holidays, the teachers would take us to church, even during class. The teacher would rather skip a class so that the children could pray during the service. That’s how the children learned, were sanctified, and became “lambs.” One of our teachers was Jewish, but he didn’t teach us the Law of God; another teacher came to teach the Law of God. However, even though he was Jewish, this teacher took us to church. And then all the children stood meekly and quietly during the service.

And now, today, children are being taken away from the Church, and I see how embittered they have become. After all, in the Church they become quiet, kind children, because in the Church a child receives God’s blessing and is sanctified. Now children aren’t allowed to go to church so they won’t “fall under spiritual influence,” yet at the same time, they aren’t protected from all sorts of nonsense. And not only are they not protected, but they’re also taught all kinds of rubbish. Is it really not clear that if children were truly to come under “spiritual influence,” they would ultimately stop misbehaving and become sensible, diligent students—rather than the wild, out-of-control kids they are now? And as they grow up, children who live within the Church will become conscientious citizens of their homeland. They will not associate with bad company or drugs, nor will they turn into good-for-nothing people. Isn’t everything mentioned above a sufficient condition for them to grow up to be decent people? Will those who are leading them away from the Church really deny even this? Do they really not care about this?

But today, their goal is to lead children away from the Church. Children are being poisoned, infected with various theories, and their faith is being undermined. They are being hindered from doing good, so as to render them good for nothing. They are being destroyed from a young age. And naturally,

the children are turning from lambs into young goats. Then they begin to terrify their parents, teachers, and those who are instigating their behavior with their antics. Children turn everything upside down—they hold protests, occupy schools, and refuse to attend classes. But eventually, even those who push children toward evil will come to their senses—when the children they have corrupted go so far as to slit the throats of their wicked teachers.

Children are being overloaded with too much

I see that it's not uncommon for not only high school graduates but even college graduates to scrawl nonsense and make spelling mistakes. Back when we finished elementary school, we didn't make such mistakes. Nowadays, only students in the philology and law departments are more or less literate.²¹⁹ In other departments, they don't even know how to write without mistakes. But back in the old days, the eight-year school was almost like...

— Like a university, Geronda!

— Indeed, if children acquired so much knowledge in elementary school, what more can be said about the eight-year school! But today, children are overloaded and buried under a whole pile of all sorts of rubbish. They're overfed with academic subjects, yet the other side of the scale—the spiritual side—is left empty. In schools, children should first and foremost be taught the fear of God. Young children learn English, French, and German—but they don't learn Ancient Greek. They study music, and other things—the fifth, the tenth... But what should they learn first and foremost? Nowadays, they learn only letters and numbers, but they don't learn what they need to know about their homeland—the most important thing of all. No patriotic songs, nothing of the sort.

Stop any modern child and ask, "In which region is your village located? How many people live there?" He won't be able to answer you. "I," he'll think, "will go to the bus station, get on a bus, and it will take me to my village. And as for where my village is, the conductor must know that. I'll tell him I'm going to such-and-such a village, pay for the ticket, and the bus will take me there." In elementary school, we knew the entire world map like the back of our hands. An elementary school student was expected to know by heart the names of cities in every country with a population of over five hundred thousand. In addition, we had to memorize which rivers in those countries were the longest, which were the widest, which ranked second, the names of the world's highest mountains, and much more like that. And Greece—needless to say! But these days! I've come across not only young children but also adults—students—who don't know how many people live in the city where they're studying. I asked one student what the highest mountain in Greece is. He couldn't answer. What's the longest river? Silence. What's the shortest? Silence. A student—and he knew nothing about his own homeland! And then, when our "friends," our "kind neighbors," come and say, "This isn't your homeland—it's ours," he'll reply, "Yes, you're right; that's exactly how it is." Do you understand this? We're heading straight for this. However, if you ask today's children about soccer or television, you'll see that they know everything down to the last detail.

On the other hand, the children who came from Albania—Northern Epirus—know how to read and write. You ask them, "Where did you learn to read and write?"—and they answer, "In prisons." These poor souls turned prisons into schools. But our Greek children have turned schools into prisons. They've

²¹⁹ In modern Greek, there are two linguistic styles: Dimotika (literally, "the people's" language) and Katharevousa ("pure" language). In terms of grammar and vocabulary, Katharevousa is significantly closer to Ancient Greek, from which both styles historically developed. Until 1974, instruction at Greek universities was conducted in the literary language—Katharevousa. Today, in the overwhelming majority of higher education institutions in Greece, instruction is conducted in Dimotiki, which was originally a colloquial style. Combined with the artificial simplification of spelling (see footnote 214), the widespread influx of foreign vocabulary into Modern Greek, and other factors, the abolition of Katharevousa as the language of instruction in schools has led to a significant decline in the educational level of modern Greeks. — *Translator's note*

taken over the schools and locked themselves in from the inside. Today's children, especially teenagers, have been driven to the brink of madness—particularly in middle and high school. At universities, the young people are more mature, and besides, they attend university lectures whenever they want.

But instead of taking the necessary measures regarding the education system, they just keep ruining it more and more. And what's being distorted more and more is the spiritual aspect. Just listen to this prayer from a primary school reading anthology: "O Virgin Mary, Your Little One is the most beautiful in the world!" Oh, what have we come to! What children used to be taught in school and what they're taught now:

*My little goat,
Don't butt heads, little goat.
Feed your little kids,
You little devilish suckers...
... so they'll give milk
To your little granddaughters,
Those little horned ones,
Little devilish kids.*²²⁰

Is it even conceivable to teach young children such disgusting filth! But they do this on purpose—to accustom children to the devil, so that it would be easier for Satanists to do their work. May God stretch out His hand, because today children aren't receiving the help they need to change for the better; instead, they're becoming possessed.

Children acquire knowledge in such a way that they don't learn to use their minds at all. That's why they don't exercise their brains. But when the brain isn't exercised, it becomes clouded with fog. Take inventors, for example—they did exercise their brains. Faced with a problem, they thought about how to solve it. But today, most people just look at what's written in the manual. People remain at this level: nothing but numbers and codes, and nothing more. "This is screw number one, this is bolt number two."... And if some little screw won't fit into a hole and the machine won't work, they immediately call an engineer. They don't realize that they should take a small file, enlarge the hole just a little, and the screw will fit. And if, on the other hand, the hole is too big, they should take a piece of insulation, wrap it around the screw, and it won't rattle around. No, at the slightest problem, it's immediately: "Let's call an engineer." What can you say to that? Television and other modern technology have turned people into mindless automatons. Even smart people end up like cassette tapes [they just play back whatever's recorded on them]. In other words, I want to emphasize that a person must use their brain. That's the whole foundation. After all, without using their brain, they might learn something today, but tomorrow they'll confuse it with something else. Therefore, the goal is for the human brain to generate ideas on its own and find solutions by itself. A brain that produces nothing on its own is an underdeveloped brain.

The teacher's calling is sacred

— Geronda, sometimes it is not the students but their own colleagues who create the most difficulties for teachers in schools.

²²⁰ We apologize to our readers for leaving the poem quoted by the Elder unchanged in the translation—despite its utter repugnance. However, the spiritual substance of the problem is far more terrifying than its grotesque aesthetic shell. The excerpt cited is taken from a native language textbook officially recommended by the Greek Ministry of Education for the 2nd grade of elementary school; thus, it is evident that a similarly targeted spiritual war is being waged against the children of Greece as against their Russian peers. Consequently, the methods of spiritual defense proposed by the Blessed Elder Paisios in this chapter can also be put into practice by Russian parents and educators. — *Translator's note*

— In our age, a person who wishes to conduct themselves properly among their colleagues requires a great deal of discernment and enlightenment. A great deal of prudence and divine enlightenment is required in each individual case. Sometimes it is not even necessary to show others that you are a believer, but rather to conduct yourself quietly and speak to your colleagues about the faith not so much with words as by the example of your genuine Orthodox life. In this way, a person will help others without irritating them. This is especially true in an educational setting: there, some problems are like tumors—sometimes benign, and sometimes malignant. When we approach a problem based on logic, we end up causing a lot of harm instead of doing good. If the tumor is malignant, metastasis will begin after surgery. Therefore, it is better to carefully cauterize such a tumor.

— Geronda, it's not always easy for educators who want to do something good, because they're constrained and limited in their options.

— If a person wants to, they will always be able to find a way to do something good. Those who wanted to found such opportunities even under godless regimes. So why can't they find one here? A Greek man once traveled to Bulgaria (back when it was still under a godless regime) and began handing out crosses to children near a school. However, he was spotted by a communist standing nearby. The teacher, seeing that the communist was watching them, began taking the crosses away from the children, scolding them for taking them. But when the atheist left, the teacher herself handed out the crosses to the children. Do you see how the teacher managed to avoid conflict both with the law and with God? And what about the Greek teachers in Asia Minor? How much did they give to the people during those difficult years! And all because they worked from the heart, were passionate about their cause, were devout, and sacrificed themselves. And how wisely Saint Arsenius of Cappadocia conducted himself in Faras!²²¹ After preparing a room for the school, instead of setting up desks, he spread shaggy goat and sheepskins on the floor. Kneeling on these skins, the children listened to the lesson. By acting so wisely, Saint Arsenius did not provoke the Turks. Even when they caught the children during class, the Turks thought they were praying. And when Saint Arsenius wanted to take his students out into nature to rest, he would lead them to his plot of land, which was like a garden, ostensibly to work—and would say: "If you see a Turk, start working—do something. Break branches off the trees so he'll think you're clearing the garden." And that's exactly what the poor children did. After all, if the Turks had figured out that the saint had taken the children out into nature, he would have been in serious trouble. It was a real secret school! And when the Turk left, the children would start playing again. And in the summer, during vacation, Saint Arsenius would also gather the children at his place—so that they wouldn't lose the habit of studying and wouldn't forget what he had taught them.

— Geronda, why did Saint Arsenius write in Turkish during his lessons, but using Greek letters?

"So that the children would also know the Turkish language and be able to live among the Turks. And besides, if the Turks had caught Saint Arsenius teaching the children to read and seen the Greek letters, but then heard him reading in Turkish, they would have calmed down. So the children learned, and the Turks didn't worry." Everything that was characteristic of Saint Arsenius himself—his uncompromising attitude toward Orthodoxy and his reverence—he passed on to his students.

That's why I say that if a person wants to, they can do good for children—no matter where they find themselves. Once, I came across a wonderful book about Northern Epirus, written by a teacher who had visited the region. Just one such teacher is worth five hundred men! How skillfully she dealt with the Albanian ideologues! She crushed them completely. Now that's impressive!

A true teacher is a great calling, especially these days. Children are like blank cassette tapes. They can be recorded with either obscene songs or wonderful Byzantine hymns. A teacher's calling is sacred.

²²¹ See *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos*. The Venerable Arsenius of Cappadocia. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 1997. pp. 30, 33–34.

A great responsibility rests on the teacher, and if he is attentive, he can receive a great reward from God. Their duty is to strive to teach children the fear of God. Educators must find ways to impart some knowledge about God and the Fatherland to children. Let them sow the seed. Can't they see it sprouting? Never mind. Nothing passes without a trace: the time will come, and the seed will sprout.

And let them always treat children with kindness, patience, and love. Let them strive to awaken a spirit of love in the children. A child craves love and warmth. Many children are completely deprived of this at home. If teachers love the children, the children will love them in return. And then it will be easier for teachers to do their work. Our teacher, when we misbehaved, could spank us with a cane. But he loved children, and the children loved him too. This man had no children of his own, and he loved children very much.

Therefore, those parents who, by having many children, become fathers and mothers of large families are worthy of praise; but even greater praise is due to those true educators who "revive" a great multitude of children and become "fathers and mothers of many revived children." They give society a new generation of revived people, and in this way, society becomes better.

Chapter 2. **On the Clergy and the Church**

— Geronda, why didn't you become a priest?

— Our goal is to be saved. The priesthood is not a means of salvation [for the person who accepts it].

— Were you never offered the chance to become a priest?

— I was pressured to do this many times. When I lived in a communal monastery, I was pressured both to become a priest and to take the great schema. But the goal is to become a monk from within. That was precisely what concerned me—nothing else occupied my mind. Even as a young man, a layperson, I experienced some miraculous events, and so, upon entering the monastery, I said, "It is enough for me simply to live a monastic life." I focused primarily on that, and I wasn't concerned with when I would be tonsured into the Great Schema or whether I would become a priest. And recently, a man came to Panaguda's cell, where I live, and insisted very strongly that I be ordained. He even traveled to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for this purpose, and when the exarchate from Constantinople arrived on the Holy Mountain, he approached them with the same request. But the bishops replied to him, "Tell Father Paissios himself about this. We don't want to end up making a decision about his ordination only for him to run away from us." So he came to me. When I heard this, I even yelled at him. Then he said to me, "At least become a priest so that you can recite the prayer of absolution over the people who come to you. After all, they tell you not only about their difficulties but also about their sins. Didn't you complain to me about the confusion caused by people telling different spiritual leaders different things about their spiritual problems? And doesn't it happen that you tell them to share something with their confessor or bishop, but they only tell half the story? That is why you should become a spiritual father yourself: listen to their sins and read the prayer of absolution to them, so that their sins may be forgiven and their spiritual problems resolved as well." He, poor soul, said all this with good intentions, but what he was suggesting wasn't for me.

— So, Geronda, what should a person do who feels he is too weak for the priesthood, but others are pushing him toward it?

— Let him tell them his thoughts. No one can be forced into either the priesthood or the great schema. However, if a person accepts what is offered to him out of obedience and humility, if he applies

a little bit of zeal and a little bit of love to it, then God will make everything right. Moreover, people themselves possess an infallible criterion: they can recognize those who have become priests out of love for God and to serve His Church. After all, there are also those who wish to become priests out of a lust for glory. If such priests find themselves in some difficulty, they will suffer, because Christ will not help them—unless they humble themselves and repent. However, if a person wants to become a priest without pursuing any worldly goals, then in a moment of danger Christ will help him. But in general, according to [spiritual] law, you must be called to the priesthood; others must want this for you, and the Church must want this for you. Then Christ will protect you, and if you find yourself in a difficult situation, others will come to your defense, and Christ Himself will also help you.

Of course, it is rare, and very few people enter the priesthood for some unspiritual reason. I am not even speaking of such people. Most enter the priesthood with good intentions. But then the devil begins his work, and you see how a priest develops a love of glory, a passionate desire to attain a higher rank, and he forgets everything else. Some even go so far as to use people, connections, and intermediaries to get appointed as a parish rector, elected as a bishop, or placed in some church office... They start out for Christ's sake, but end up for the sake of a golden cross... Golden crosses, golden miters, diamond-studded pectoral crosses... Anything but what is truly necessary. How the devil deceives us when we are inattentive!

— Geronda, what does God want from a priest, and what do people want from him?

— What God wants is very great; you'd better not go there. As for what people want... In the old days, priests strove for holiness, were virtuous and holy, and people revered them. But today, people want two things from a priest: that he be free from greed and that he have love. If people find these two qualities in a priest, they consider him a saint and rush to church as fast as they can. And since they rush to church, they are saved. Then God, in His mercy, saves that priest as well. But be that as it may, a priest must possess great purity.

The devil tries to weaken a monk with discontent and grumbling, in order to put him out of commission and to deprive his prayer of all spiritual power. In order for a monk to possess the Grace of the Holy Spirit, he must be a true monk. Only then does he possess the authority given by God and, through his prayer, help people very effectively. But a priest, even if he is not in a spiritually elevated state, still helps people—through the authority of the priesthood that has been given to him. He helps them by celebrating the Sacraments, conducting prayer services and memorial services, and fulfilling other priestly duties. Even if a priest were to kill a person, the sacraments he administers would still be valid until he is defrocked. However, if a priest is in a high spiritual state, then he is a true priest and helps others more.

When responding to priests who ask me how they can help their parishioners—and indeed, when speaking with anyone who bears some form of pastoral responsibility—I emphasize the following: one must strive to work on oneself. One must fulfill one's prescribed prayer routine, but not limit oneself to it alone; one must labor spiritually "beyond the norm" in order to always have some spiritual reserves. Spiritual work on oneself is at the same time quiet work on our neighbor, because a good example speaks for itself. And then people imitate the goodness they see and are set aright. Without having accumulated the spiritual wealth necessary to live off "spiritual interest" in cases where we have to work [spiritually] "for free" for others, we will be the most miserable and pitiable of people. Therefore, we must not consider self-improvement a waste of time—whatever form this work may take: brief, long, or constant—a lifelong endeavor. For this mysterious work possesses the power to proclaim the Word of God in the souls of people. A person graced by God transmits Divine Grace to others and transforms those who are carnal. By freeing them from the bondage of passions, he thereby draws them closer to God, and they are saved.

A priest bears a great responsibility

A priest can never close the door of his home to others. A priest bears a great responsibility. Some have reached the point of despair; some are sick and in need of help; some are on their deathbeds... The priest must welcome some and visit others himself. A priest cannot refuse. People's souls are in danger, and he must help them. If he does not help these souls and God takes them while they are unprepared, who will bear the responsibility for this? Is it not the priest? As a monk, I can close my door and walk away. I can disappear from human sight and quietly help the world through prayer. Because untangling the knots of human problems is not my business. My business is to offer prayers for the world. I became neither a priest nor a spiritual father precisely so that I could help people in a different way—in a monastic way.

If I were a priest in the secular world, I would never be able to close the doors of my home. I would always have to give everyone what they needed, without making distinctions between people. First, I would care for my parishioners, and I would give the surplus [of time, energy, and resources] to others—those who asked me for help. I would be concerned not only for believers, but also for non-believers, atheists, and even the enemies of the Church. Or if I were a spiritual father and one person complained to me about another, I would call the other person to me as well, to sort out their relationship. I would call people on the phone to find out how someone who had previously faced a temptation was doing, or how someone who had encountered a difficulty was faring. Could I possibly lead a quiet, silent life amid all this?

A priest must lead the way so that the faithful will follow him. It's just like in a flock: the leader goes first, and the rest of the sheep follow behind him. The leader turns his horns to the right, and all the sheep turn to the right. All the sheep follow the head of the flock—their leader. That is why the sheep do not stray from the flock—one sheep follows another. The leader sets the direction; the sheep follow him.

— Geronda, what if a shepherd loves one particular sheep—a good, docile one—more than another that is overly demanding? Is that justified?

— Look: let's say you're a shepherd. You have many lambs in your flock. Some are peacefully nibbling grass and bleating happily, while others—the weak or sick ones—cower off to the side. Which ones will you care for more? Wouldn't it be the weak ones? And if a jackal attacks some of the lambs and they start bleating pitifully, who will you rush to help? The ones who are happily and calmly grazing and bleating, or the ones who are crying out heart-wrenchingly, begging to be protected from the predator? A shepherd feels more pain for a wounded lamb, and he cares for it especially until it is healed. Both those who perform miracles and those who are wounded by the enemy—the devil—must occupy the same place in our hearts. We must not inwardly despise the latter. For those who once led a sinful life but now strive to cut off their passions, I feel more love and more sorrow than for those who are not tormented by passions. I think of the former constantly. If a person has inner love, then his neighbor is also made aware of it, because this love sweetens the entire outer person—it makes him more beautiful through Divine Grace, which cannot be hidden, for it shines.

It would be good for pastors—whether priests or bishops—to remember Moses as well, and how he struggled with a rebellious people numbering two million. How lovingly he prayed for his people, and how much suffering he endured alongside them during their long years of wandering in the wilderness, until he led them into the Promised Land. By keeping all this in mind, Christian pastors will draw inexhaustible strength and will never complain about their own sufferings—which are insignificant compared to those endured by Moses.

The Secularization of the Clergy

— Geronda, must a sexton always wear a cassock, even in the summer heat? I just end up drenched in sweat when I wear a cassock in the heat.

— Well, well... That's monasticism for you these days!... What can you say... The Venerable Athanasius of Mount Athos, in his ascetic struggles, wore thick clothing and a heavy—very heavy—cross, but we... What have we come to now! When I was in Australia, I saw a sexton in shorts at a church. "People dress like that," I told him, "to go to the beach and swim in the ocean." "But for me," he replied, "it's more comfortable this way."

They start with this, move on little by little, and then end up saying, "Let's take off our cassocks so the sun doesn't beat down on us." Is the mantle getting in the way? Take it off! Is the headscarf or the apostolic stole getting in the way, or are you sweating buckets? Take those off too—what's the big deal! Yes, yes, that's where we're headed. My brother, but if it's hot, then every monk should think of himself. Let him wear fewer clothes under his cassock.

— Geronda, is it permissible for a monk to take off his cassock and wear only a mantle?

— And let the priests take off their cassocks and stay in their pants, right? What can I say to that... The mantle is a monk's vestment. A monk who receives the lesser or greater schema is clothed in it. During the tonsure, the sponsor of the person being tonsured is clothed in the mantle. After dressing the newly tonsured monk in the cassock, the sponsor removes his own mantle and puts it on the novice. When I was in Alexandria, I was struck by the fact that some local women were dressed in black from head to toe. That is their tradition. And this in that heat! And what about us—can't we endure the cassock we received from our fathers?

— Geronda, some people wonder: "Does the cassock make a man a priest?"

— Just look, for example, at two olive trees—one with leaves, the other without. Which of the two do you like better? The one with leaves or the one without? While living in the Holy Cross skete, I once stripped the bark from the trunk of an olive tree growing in the courtyard and wrote: "The trees have shed their finery—let's see how much they'll bear!" and next to it: "A priest without a cassock—apparently, an immoral one." At that time, there was a lively debate about abolishing the wearing of cassocks by priests, and some people came, hoping to receive my blessing for this!

— Geronda, a man brought an Orthodox priest wearing pants to our monastery. Should we have sought his blessing?

— What blessing are you talking about! No matter who brought this priest to you, you should have told him this: "We apologize, but it is our rule here at the monastery to provide clerical robes to clergy. How can a priest in pants come to a women's monastery? It's improper." If neither the person who brought him to you nor the priest himself feels ashamed, why should you feel ashamed to give him a cassock? Once, at the airport, I met a young archimandrite in secular clothing who was flying abroad. "I am Father So-and-so," the archimandrite introduced himself to me. "Well, where's your cassock?" I asked him, and, naturally, I did not accept his blessing.

— And some, Geronda, claim that by becoming more modern, the clergy will be of greater benefit.

"When Patriarch Dmitry, while in America, visited the Holy Cross Theological School, some devout American students approached him and said, 'Your Holiness, in our era the clergy must become more modern!'" And the patriarch replied to them: "Saint Cosmas of Aetolia says that when clergy become laypeople, laypeople will become demons!" Didn't he give them a good answer? They had prepared a magnificent room for him, with a luxurious bed and opulent furnishings, but when he saw all this, he said, "Where are you going to put me up? In this room? Better bring me a folding cot instead. By becoming worldly, a clergyman becomes a candidate for the devil."

— Geronda, should we sew simpler liturgical vestments? Perhaps vestments with a lot of embroidery aren't good for priests?

— It would be to your credit if you told your customers: “These are the simple vestments we sew. We could sew vestments with elaborate embroidery, but we don't, because we're concerned that we might be leading people astray.” And besides, even non-believers use them. We've heard people saying, “We can't even afford bread, but the priests have a whole pile of vestments.” If you make vestments with simple embroidery, then serious priests will buy them from you. But priests who are worldly-wise—if they buy vestments from you that are heavily embroidered, they themselves will look like clowns in them, and they'll bring you into disrepute. However, you may decorate vestments for the holy altar and covers for sacred vessels with richer embroidery. And try not to embroider crosses or images of saints on the lower parts of the albs, sticharions, and phelonsia. Depict some simple, non-sacred symbols in these areas of the vestments. Otherwise, priests will sit directly on the saints and on the crosses... This is irreverence.

“Who will bring a charge against me concerning this offense?”

— Geronda, if a clergyman falls into some mortal sin, does he lose the Divine Grace that he possesses?

— No, how could it be lost? Divine Grace may not be lost, but it may withdraw. A priest who has been suspended from ministry is not deprived of the priesthood, but the Sacraments he performs are invalid. Such a priest no longer has the power to perform them. The most essential thing is Grace. If, however, the suspension is lifted, then the Sacraments he performs are valid.

Much discernment is required regarding priests who have canonical impediments to the priesthood. Special care is needed so that unwise strictness does not lead people into temptation; so that the priest's family does not begin to be tormented by doubts. He must step down from celebrating the Liturgy judiciously, so that, instead of doing good, this does not bring harm to the faithful. For God and the priest are aware of the canonical impediments, and if he were to cease his priestly ministry abruptly, in one fell swoop, then both the faithful and his family would begin to be tormented by doubts, and the harm would increase.

Sometimes I see how God allows certain physical ailments—such as nosebleeds, stomach ailments, or something similar—to befall devout clergy who have canonical impediments. These priests are glad that things are working out in such a way that they must cease celebrating the Liturgy. Sometimes a priest with some canonical impediment comes to my hermitage, and I see that the poor man needs to leave the priesthood. But it sometimes happens that his bishop has a different opinion on the matter. What can one say? All that remains is to pray that God will intervene. I remember one specific case. I advised a certain priest to leave the priesthood and prepared him for this step. But when he spoke to his spiritual father and his bishop about it, they did not agree. So he continued in the priesthood, even though he had a canonical impediment. A short time later, he was struck by a car. The car veered off the road onto the sidewalk where he was walking and ran him over, killing him. *“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”*²²²

Our Orthodox Church has not a single flaw. The only flaw that discredits the Church comes from us ourselves, when we—from the head of the hierarchy down to the ordinary believer—represent the Church in a manner unbecoming of it. There may be few of the elect, but this should not be a cause for concern. The Church is the Church of Christ, and He governs it. The Church is not a temple that pious people build from stone, sand, and lime, only to have it destroyed by fire at the hands of barbarians. The

²²² Heb. 10:31.

Church is Christ Himself—“*and whoever falls on this Rock will be crushed, and whoever the Rock falls on will be ground to powder.*”²²³

Today, Christ endures what is happening. He endures, and Divine Grace is at work for the sake of the people. We are going through a storm, but the situation will become clear. What is happening now will not last. Remember what is written in the Gospel: “I will not quench a smoldering wick, nor will I break a bruised reed.”²²⁴ Christ said this so that on Judgment Day we would have no excuse. You know, when the oil in a lamp’s reservoir runs out and only a little oil remains in the wick, the lamp will soon go out, even though its flame “flickers”—sometimes flaring brightly, sometimes becoming barely visible. Such a lamp is like a person lying on their deathbed, in whom the last glimmers of life are visible. However, Christ does not want to blow out this lamp, because then the extinguished lamp will say, “I would have continued to burn, but You blew on me and extinguished my flame!” But why did You blow on it? After all, there was no oil in your lamp at all! And Christ does not want to touch a broken reed either, because then, having broken completely, the reed will protest: “It was You who touched me, and that is why I broke!” But since you were already half-broken, barely holding on, and on the verge of breaking on your own, why do you accuse Christ of touching you and breaking you?

By failing to live according to the Gospel, we—monks, and clergy as well—spread godlessness. People need our virtues, not our vices. And the example that monks set for laypeople is of particular, immense importance. Laypeople look for excuses to justify their sins, so we must be vigilant. Look, after all, we cannot repeat after Christ the words: “*Who condemns Me for sin?*”²²⁵ — but we can say the words: “*Who condemns Me for causing others to stumble?*” Christ spoke these words *about* sin because He was Perfect God and Perfect Man. But we are human beings. We have imperfections; we stumble—what can we do? But we must not become a cause for anyone to be led astray.

One general told me that if he hadn’t inherited his faith from his mother, he would have lost it while in Cyprus during the events of that time.²²⁶ There was an order instructing us to treat the peaceful Turkish population humanely, but this general heard with his own ears a clergyman shouting into the phone: “Slaughter the Turks!”—just like that, for no reason at all. And the Pharasioi, having moved to Greece from Asia Minor, were led astray by sects that began to spread here in those years, because they saw irreverent bishops and priests. Seeing people of a different sort in the Church—those who did not lead a spiritual life—the refugees from Asia Minor were led astray, for in their homeland they had known a different kind of clergy. And immediately, just like that, heretical “evangelists” appeared, claiming that they were supposedly applying the Gospel to their lives, and the unfortunate refugees were led astray into sectarianism.

But if a bishop, priest, or monk is to blame, Christ is not to blame. However, people don’t think that deeply about it. “Isn’t he,” they say, “a representative of Christ?” Yes, but the question is: does this representative bring comfort to the One he represents? Or do people not consider what awaits such a representative of Christ in the life to come? That is why some, led astray by certain inappropriate behaviors in the lives of clergy, go so far as to lose their faith. These unfortunate souls do not understand that if a certain police officer is at fault, his people are not to blame, and if a certain priest is at fault, the Church is not to blame. However, those who are led astray but have a good disposition are capable of understanding this if it is explained to them. Such people also have extenuating circumstances, because they may have been led astray into evil, and there are certain things they simply cannot understand.

²²³ Matt. 21:44.

²²⁴ Cf. Isa. 42:3 and Matt. 12:20.

²²⁵ See John 8:46.

²²⁶ On July 20, 1974, Turkish troops invaded Cyprus and occupied its northern part. — *Translator’s note.*

— Geronda, why does no one openly express their position regarding so many temptations occurring in the Church?

— With regard to what is happening in the Church, it is not possible to openly express a position on every issue. One can simply endure what is happening, be patient, until God shows what needs to be done. Enduring what is happening is one thing, but approving of it—when it should not be approved of—is quite another matter. In cases where something needs to be said, it must be done with respect and courage—without spitting venom in anger or airing the problem for all to see. One must say what is necessary, in private, to the person concerned. One must speak with sorrow, out of love, so that he may be more attentive to certain matters. The one who is sincere and straightforward is not the one who throws the truth in someone’s face, nor the one who trumpets it to the whole world, but the one who, having love and living according to the truth, speaks with discernment what needs to be said and when it needs to be said, at the necessary hour.

Those who condemn others without discernment are in a state of spiritual darkness and, unfortunately, view people as stumps or logs. These thoughtless people mercilessly chip away at others who are tormented and suffering. Yet these deluded “masters of Cubism” rejoice that from under the axe of their condemnations emerge smooth, right-angled human stumps. Only for a person possessed by a senior demon is there an excuse for putting people on public display and exposing their past in order to unsettle weak souls. Of course, the latter applies only to those over whom the demon has such authority. It is clear that the unclean spirit exposes to public view not people’s virtues, but their weaknesses. And conversely: people who have freed themselves from their passions harbor no malice and therefore repay evil with good. When they see filth somewhere that cannot be removed, such people cover it with something so that it does not cause disgust in anyone else. But people who dig up the trash and filth of others’ sins are like chickens pecking at you-know-what...

Right now²²⁷ the devil is defiling, slandering, and defaming a great deal. He is causing terrible confusion, but in the end, he will come up empty-handed. Years will pass, and the righteous will shine forth. They will be noticeable, even if their virtue is small, because by then great darkness will reign in the world, and people will turn to them. And those who are now leading others astray—if they live to see those times—will be put to shame.

The Proper Attitude Toward Church Problems

— Geronda, when complex problems arise in the Church, what is the right way to approach them?

— One must avoid extremes. Problems are not solved by extremes. In the old days, a grocer would take a scoop to measure granulated sugar, grains, or something similar and add them to the scales little by little. That is how he achieved accuracy, and the scales would balance. He did not throw large amounts onto the scales or remove them all at once in a sudden, abrupt manner. Both extremes have always tormented the Mother Church. And those who cling to these extremes suffer as well, because every extreme usually stings painfully with its sharp edge. It is as if, on one side, a demoniac—a spiritually shameless person who despises everything—were clinging to his extreme, while on the other side, a madman, whose foolish jealousy is combined with narrow-mindedness, were digging in his heels at his own extreme. In other words, a spiritually shameless person will never come to an agreement with a zealot consumed by foolish jealousy. These people will devour and strike one another, because both are deprived of Divine Grace. And then—God forbid!—both extremes may strike and wound one another constantly, with no end in sight. But those who are able to bend the edges of both extremes toward one another—so that they may unite—and thus reach unity of mind and be reconciled—will be crowned by Christ with two unfading crowns.

²²⁷ Delivered in 1974.

We must be careful not to create problems in the Church or blow minor human weaknesses out of proportion, so as not to cause greater harm or give the evil one cause for joy. Anyone who, upon seeing some minor disorder, becomes greatly agitated and, in anger, rushes to correct it, is like a foolish sexton who, seeing that a candle is dripping, rushes at full speed to fix it, in the process knocking over worshippers, overturning candlesticks, and creating the greatest disorder during the divine service. Unfortunately, in our time, Mother Church is troubled by many: some—the educated—have clung to dogma with their minds, but not with the spirit of the holy fathers. Others—the uneducated—have also clung to dogma, but with their teeth. That is why they gnash their teeth when discussing certain church issues, and in this way, the Church suffers greater harm than from the enemies of our Orthodoxy. It is good for a river not to be too swift, because then the water carries away trees, stones, and people; nor should it be too shallow, because then it turns into some kind of stagnant, mosquito-infested swamp.

And there are people who are concerned not with the common good, but with mutual criticism. A person pays more attention to others than to himself. He waits to see what his opponent will say or write so that he can then deal him a merciless blow, whereas if he himself had to say or write the same thing, he would also have supported his arguments with many passages from the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Holy Fathers. The evil committed by such a person is great because, on the one hand, he commits injustice against his neighbor, and on the other, he crushes him in full view of the faithful. Moreover, such a person often leads the souls of the weak astray and thus sows unbelief in them. Some, in justifying their malice, denounce others rather than themselves, and—speculating on the Gospel words “*the leadership of the Church*,”²²⁸—expose certain internal church issues to the shame of the whole world, trumpeting from every corner what ought not even to be spoken of. Let these people start with their own small church—with their family or monastic community—and if that suits them, then let them go on to disgrace the Mother Church as well. I think that good children would never accuse their mother of anything.

The Church needs all kinds of people. Everyone—both those with a gentle disposition and those with a stern one—contributes to the Church’s ministry. The human body needs a variety of foods—sweet and sour, and even the bitter leaves of dandelions. After all, every food contains its own unique nutrients and vitamins. Likewise, the Body of the Church needs people of every disposition. One person complements the character of another. Each of us is obligated to bear not only with the peculiarities of our neighbor’s spiritual disposition, but even with the weaknesses that exist in him as a human being. Unfortunately, however, some people make unreasonable demands of others. They want everyone to have the same spiritual disposition as they do, and when another person differs from them—for example, by having a more forgiving or sharp temperament—they immediately conclude that this person is unspiritual.

On High Office and Human Glory

I am amazed that some attach such importance to human glory rather than to the glory of God, which awaits us if we “*turn away from human glory*.” Even if we were to attain the highest rank in the whole world, and even if the whole world were ready to shower us with praise, what good would that do us? Will the world’s praise lift us up to Paradise, or will it push us toward the abyss of hell? And what did Christ say? “*I do not accept glory from man*.”²²⁹ What benefit would it bring me if, instead of being a simple monk, I became a hieromonk, a bishop, or a patriarch? Would a higher rank help me attain salvation? Or would it weigh heavily upon the weak Paisius and plunge him into the torments of hell? If there were no life beyond this one, then the mad pursuit of a higher rank might still be justified in some

²²⁸ Matthew 18:17.

²²⁹ Acts 5:41.

way. However, one who seeks the salvation of his soul “*considers all things to be nothing*” (²³⁰) and does not strive for a higher rank.

Moses was sent by God to liberate the Israelite people. But despite this, he was not deemed worthy to enter the Promised Land, because he grumbled against God on behalf of his people. Moses lived amid their constant grumbling and complaining, and one day he himself grumbled. “These people,” he said, “are demanding water from me. Where am I to get water for them?”²³¹ How so? After all, just recently you struck the rock, brought forth water, and gave them a drink! Was that so difficult? But Moses, having become completely immersed in the various administrative matters and problems of his people, forgot how much water he had brought forth from the rock before. He did not realize his mistake and did not ask God for forgiveness. If he had asked for forgiveness, God would have forgiven him. The fact that he did not enter the Promised Land was a small punishment from God, a penance for his grumbling. Of course, God took Moses to Paradise. He honored him by sending him, along with the prophet Elijah, to Mount Tabor during the Transfiguration of the Lord. All these events from Holy Scripture help us understand what a great obstacle on the path leading a Christian to Paradise the high office with which he is entrusted—and the responsibility that comes with it—can be.

And some should experience nothing but joy within and radiate it outward, since God has arranged it so that they bear no responsibility. But instead, such people, on the contrary, strive for responsibility and a higher office, and when such an office is not granted to them, they are consumed by torment and destroy their soul, and at the same time their body, which, according to the Apostle Paul, is the temple of God.²³² While Christ is preparing heavenly glory for them, they want to enter Paradise through human glory.

However, someone might ask me, “Then why are some first glorified by people and then by God?” But in essence, if a person desires human glory, God will not glorify him. A person should never seek responsibility for himself. And if he is relieved of responsibility, he should rejoice. For according to [spiritual] rules, the responsibility a person bears should be a burden to him. If a person does not rejoice that he has been relieved of responsibility, it means that pride lurks within him. Let us never strive for higher ranks, titles, or positions in order to gain glory, because such aspirations are a sign of an advanced illness. This indicates that, in our illness, we are following a path different from the path of humility that the Holy Fathers walked and through which they attained Paradise.

We have many saints who shunned various kinds of responsibility: the office of abbot, the priesthood, and the episcopate. Some of them cut off their own hands, others their noses, still others their ears, and yet others their tongues—so as to have physical disabilities and avoid ordination. There were saints for whom the roofs of their huts were opened so they could be ordained from above; there were saints, like Saint Amphilochius, who were ordained from a distance. These people were educated; they possessed holiness. But, realizing the great dignity of the soul and the immense burden of responsibility—which becomes a major obstacle to a person’s salvation—they avoided this responsibility. The path these people found helped them spiritually.

And on the Holy Mountain, some consider the priesthood an obstacle to the spiritual life. After all, in addition to their other duties, hieromonks must travel to other monasteries to meet with the bishop; they are sent out on feast days... Of course, these are spiritual feasts, but they still offer little inner peace. While living in a communal monastery, I knew a certain hierodeacon. He grew old and passed away while still holding the rank of hierodeacon. When he was still a young monk, there was no deacon at the monastery, so he was ordained. Later, a younger group of monks joined the monastery. They were

²³⁰ Phil. 3:8.

²³¹ See Numbers 20:10.

²³² See 1 Cor. 3:16.

ordained as deacons and priests, while the deacon, who had been ordained before them, kept yielding his turn to others and remained in the same rank. When he was urged to become a hieromonk, he replied: “The monastery has no such need at the moment. Thank God, there are brothers younger than me.” Then he was assigned a duty in the monastery’s office. When educated novices arrived at the monastery, he asked to be relieved of his duties in the office and moved on to another assignment. And when the monastery was going through difficult times, the devout hierodeacon began to ask a virtuous hieromonk to agree to be elected abbot. “Why did you yourself shy away from responsibility?” the hieromonk asked him. “Did you decide to shift it onto me? Let’s do this: you become a member of the Spiritual Council, and then I’ll become the abbot.” So one became the abbot, and the other joined the Spiritual Council. But once everything was settled and the monastery returned to normal life, our deacon left the Holy Synod as well. This deacon helped me greatly. He possessed abundant grace from God. Whenever difficult issues were discussed in the Holy Kinot of the Holy Mountain, he was invited there to share his enlightened opinion.

— Geronda, what, then, is the reason that spiritual people, though they do not love money, seek glory? It seems that the words of the ancient Greeks are true: “Many have hated wealth, but no one has hated glory?”²³³

— The reason is that their minds are so empty you could roll a ball through them. This is precisely what empty, vain glory is. The words “many have come to hate wealth...” reflect a worldly perspective. There is no place for this in the spiritual life. These are the words of the ancient Greeks, who did not know the True God. In the spiritual life, glory must disappear. Has anyone ever endured greater dishonor than that which Christ suffered? The Fathers sought dishonor, and God rewarded them with honor. But those who seek honor for themselves are still in the worldly arena—that is, in the stadium. They chant at a soccer game: “Glory to Spartak!” But in the glory spoken of in the Gospel, there is love and humility. “*Glorify Your Son,*” says Christ, “*and Your Son will glorify You... For this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God.*”²³⁴ That is, Christ asked God the Father that people might come to know their Savior and thus be saved. But today, most people try to achieve glory wherever possible. Glory on the left, glory on the right, and then they limp on both the right and left legs at once. This is what Christ spoke of: “*Receiving glory from one another,*”²³⁵ “*deceiving and being deceived.*”²³⁶ Such glory makes me sick; I cannot live even a single day in such an atmosphere.

Responsibility for others is a great obstacle in the spiritual life. Those who wish to engage in spiritual practice avoid responsibility. Usually, those who strive for high office and authority come to a bad end. Personal motives and selfishness creep in, and then the leaders begin to clash and quarrel with one another. After all, selfishness is present in both of these leaders. However, those who labor selflessly, without indulging themselves and removing their “self” from every action, help others very effectively, because only then are the souls in need of help comforted, and only then will the souls of those who help others be inwardly comforted in both this life and the life to come.

In ancient times, the holy fathers withdrew to the desert and, through ascetic feats, emptied themselves of passions. Without making their own plans or projects, they entrusted themselves to God’s hands and avoided high office and authority—even when they had attained a measure of holiness. The exception was when the Mother Church was in need. Then they obeyed God’s will, and God’s name was glorified through their holy lives. In other words, first, by living in the desert, nourishing themselves with wholesome spiritual food, and remaining under the watchful, fatherly guidance of their spiritual

²³³ A saying by Cleobulus—tyrant of Lindos on Rhodes—one of the seven ancient sages (6th century B.C.).—*Translator’s note.*

²³⁴ John 17:1 ff.

²³⁵ John 5:44.

²³⁶ 2 Timothy 3:13.

fathers, the Holy Fathers attained robust spiritual health; only afterward did they themselves become spiritual mentors.

How the Church Is Governed

The Orthodox Church has always organized its life through Councils. This is the Orthodox spirit: the Holy Synod must govern the Church, and in monasteries, the council of elders. The Primate of the Church and the Synod must make decisions together. The abbot or abbess of a monastery must make decisions together with the monastery's spiritual council. The Primate of the Church is first among equals. The Patriarch is not the Pope; he holds the same rank [in the priesthood] as the other hierarchs. Now, the Pope—yes—he is a figure of a different order. He sits on a high throne, while the rest kiss his foot. But the Patriarch is not the Pope; he sits alongside the other hierarchs and coordinates their actions. And the abbot or abbess of a monastery, in relation to the other members of the spiritual council, is also first among equals.

The Primate of the Local Church or the abbot of a monastery cannot do whatever he pleases. God enlightens one bishop or member of the council of elders regarding one matter, and another regarding a different matter. Consider this: even the four evangelists complement one another. The same is true when discussing an issue at the Holy Synod or in a monastery's spiritual council: each person expresses their opinion, and if someone's opinion differs from the others, it is recorded in the council minutes. For if a decision is made that contradicts the Gospel commandments and someone disagrees with that decision, then—unless he insists that his opinion be recorded in the council minutes—it will appear as though he has agreed to a falsehood. If a member of the Holy Synod or a spiritual council disagrees with an erroneous opinion but signs the general decision without recording his opinion in the minutes, he commits an evil act and bears responsibility. In this case, he is guilty. Whereas if he expresses his opinion—even if the majority disagrees with him—he does not sin before God. If the Synod in the Local Church or the spiritual council in monasteries does not function properly, then, while speaking in words of the Orthodox spirit, we in reality have a papal spirit. The Orthodox spirit is this: everyone must express and record their opinion, rather than remain silent out of fear or a desire to preserve their honor—in order to maintain good relations with the Primate of the Church or the abbot of a monastery.

But even those clergy who assume certain leadership positions in the Church at a young age are doing themselves a disservice. They are wasting their potential—even if they possess the qualities necessary for their office.

They are stifled and caught up in the administrative and bureaucratic machinery, and they derive no spiritual benefit, even though they possess the necessary prerequisites for it. Had they not squandered themselves in vain but instead devoted themselves to working on themselves, some of them would have gone on to become a great spiritual asset to the Church. By not engaging in self-cultivation—in the best sense of the word, that is, by not working on themselves—a person becomes like a merchant who is busy buying and selling, yet remains unaware of how much debt he is burdened with. And in the end, such a merchant is thrown into a debt pit.

It saddens me greatly to hear that young priests are sitting in positions of authority. If they had waited a little longer before taking on the burden of leadership, their ability to help others later on would have been far greater. However, all too often, it is not experienced priests—capable of doing spiritual work with their flock—who become parish rectors, but young priests. This gives rise to a twofold evil. The first evil is that young priests, without first having done spiritual work on themselves, take upon their shoulders the responsibility for others. Having not yet acquired spiritual wealth, they occupy a position that obliges them to distribute this spiritual wealth to others. The second problem is that older

clergy, not holding positions of responsibility in the Church, are unable to share their precious experience and divine enlightenment with others.

The Divine Liturgy

— Geronda, when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated, must there always be communicants present?

— Yes. Because the main purpose of the Divine Liturgy is for Christians—at least those few who are ready for it—to receive Communion. All the prayers of the Divine Liturgy refer to “ ” the faithful who will receive Communion. Therefore, there must be at least one communicant present at the Liturgy. Of course, sometimes it happens that none of those praying at the Divine Liturgy are ready for Communion. That is a different matter, but it is still good if at least someone receives Communion—a small child, perhaps, or an infant. When there is not a single communicant, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated solely for the priest’s communion and the commemoration of the names of the faithful. But this should be the exception, not the rule.

During every Divine Liturgy, the events of the New Testament are relived. The Holy Altar is Bethlehem; the Holy Throne is the Most Holy Sepulcher of the Lord; the Crucifix behind the throne is Holy Golgotha. Through the Divine Liturgy and the presence of Christ, all of creation is sanctified. The Divine Liturgies sustain the world! How awe-inspiring is what God has given us! We are unworthy of it. There are priests who experience this awe-inspiring Sacrament at every Divine Liturgy. One clergyman told me how a very simple and kind priest confided in him: “It is very difficult for me to partake of the Holy Gifts. I can’t hold back my ‘ugly’ tears. They fall right into the Holy Chalice, and I’m deeply distressed by this.” And how he wept! “Ask Christ,” my acquaintance told him, “to give me a few of those ‘ugly’ tears, too.”

— Geronda, why do you leave the stasidia when the priest is reciting the entrance prayers?

— I leave the stasis because, when the priest prays, God bestows Divine Grace upon him to free him from his weaknesses and give him the strength to celebrate the Divine Mystery. At the same time, the faithful must also pray with reverence to receive Divine Grace.

The Divine Liturgy begins with the Proskomedia. How providentially God sometimes arranges things so that we, too, may understand what the Divine Mysteries are and experience them! When I was serving as an altar boy, a miraculous event happened to me. Once, when the priest performing the Proskomedia uttered the words: “‘*As a lamb is led to the slaughter,*’” I heard the Lamb tremble on the holy diskos. And when the priest uttered the words, “‘*The Lamb is being sacrificed, the Son of God...*,”²³⁷ I heard the bleating of a lamb coming from the holy altar. How terrifying that was! That is why I tell the priests that they must not remove and cut the Lamb before the Proskomedia, but only then place it on the holy diskos with the words: “*The Lamb of God is being sacrificed*” and “*As a sheep led to slaughter.*” While these words are being spoken—and not a moment sooner—the priest must take the holy spear and cut the prosphora. That is, when the words “*The Lamb of God is being sacrificed*” are spoken, that is when the “slaughter” of the Lamb on the altar must take place.

When, during the Proskomedia, the priest rings the bell²³⁸ and you silently commemorate names, your heart must share in the suffering of every soul you commemorate, whether that person is living or departed. Bring to mind all human needs in general and, specifically, those of the person for whom you are praying, and ask: “Remember, O Lord... Mary, Nicholas... You, my God, know what difficulties they

²³⁷ According to the Greek liturgical book. — *Translator’s note.*

²³⁸ According to the tradition of Mount Athos, after the prayer of the Third Hour, the priest performing the Proskomedia rings a small bell located on the altar, and the service is interrupted. The monks step out of their stasidia and silently commemorate the names of the living and the departed. At this time, the priest takes out the particles, saying, “Remember, O Lord.” Then the interrupted service continues. See *The Holy Mountain Rule of Church Liturgy*. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2002. p. 33. — *Translator’s note.*

face. Help them.” Mention the names given to you for commemoration during several Divine Liturgies—some during three, some during five. Mention the remaining names as a secondary priority. Otherwise, what’s the point—you constantly pray for some, but don’t pray at all for others who need your prayers? I don’t understand that at all. The names of Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other heretics must not be mentioned during the Proskomedia. You must neither take out a portion for them nor serve a memorial service. But we can pray for their health and enlightenment, and even sing a prayer canon.

— Geronda, some priests say they don’t want to celebrate the Liturgy often so they don’t get used to it.

— A priest should not say such things. It is wrong. It is as if he were saying, “I visit my relatives infrequently so that they will welcome me better when I come.” However, one must prepare for the Divine Liturgy. Holy Communion heals and sanctifies the one who strives in the faith. But how can it help someone who does not strive? What can Christ change if a person does not change himself? Once upon a time, on Mount Athos, in the cave of the Venerable Athanasius, there lived an elder with two novices, one of whom was a hieromonk and the other a hierodeacon. One day, the novices went to a small church to celebrate the Liturgy. The priest was very jealous of the deacon, since the latter was smarter and more capable than him in every way. However, the deacon himself contributed to this jealousy through his own selfishness. So, the priest outwardly prepared for the Divine Liturgy: he read the rules for Holy Communion and did everything as required. Unfortunately, however, he failed to do the most important thing—he did not prepare for the Liturgy inwardly. That is, he needed to humbly confess his sins in order to drive envy and jealousy from his heart. After all, even if we put on clean clothes and wash our hair, these passions do not leave us. So, the hieromonk prepared for the Liturgy only outwardly, entered the altar where the Holy Sacrifice is offered, and began the Proskomedia. But suddenly a terrible clap of thunder rang out, and he saw the holy diskos rise from the altar and vanish.²³⁹ They were unable to celebrate the Liturgy. It occurs to me that if the Good God had not intervened in this way, and the priest, being in an unworthy spiritual state, had proceeded to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, a terrible calamity would have befallen him.

— Geronda, if something unexpected happens during the Divine Liturgy, can it be interrupted?

— Once the Divine Liturgy has begun, the priest cannot interrupt it midway—no matter what happens. Even if a war breaks out, he must finish the Liturgy. He must complete the Liturgy, even if enemies are approaching the church. The most he can do in such a case is to try to finish it as quickly as possible. But one must have faith in God and not be afraid.

A minister of the Most High God must be distinguished by great attentiveness, purity, and uncompromising integrity.²⁴⁰ Priests are higher than angels. During the celebration of the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist, the holy angels cover their faces while the priest performs this sacrament.

Chapter 3. On Holidays and Non-Working Days

²³⁹ See *Elder Paisios*. The Holy Mountain Fathers and Stories of the Holy Mountain. Holy Trinity St. Sergius Lavra, 2001. pp. 102–104.

²⁴⁰ The word “uncompromising” here translates the Greek word “ἀκρίβεια” (literally, “precision,” “strictness”). In Orthodox theology, *akrivia* refers to the patristic principle of a strict attitude toward the Sacred Canons (and, more generally, toward the Tradition of the Church), which holds that their literal and precise application is necessary. – *Translator’s note*.

“Let us, the faithful, celebrate this spiritual feast”²⁴¹

By lifting us to spiritual heights with His great love and His great joy—which He showers upon the souls of the faithful through all His feasts—Christ truly resurrects us and brings us back to life. All we need to do is participate in these feasts ourselves and have the spiritual discernment to allow them to become a spiritual celebration. Then we feast spiritually and become spiritually intoxicated by the heavenly wine brought by the saints, which they give us to drink.

— Geronda, how can a person experience a feast spiritually?

— To experience a feast, one must immerse one’s mind in the holy days themselves, rather than in the tasks we must perform for the sake of these holy days. One must reflect on the events of each holy day—whether it be the Nativity of Christ, Theophany, Pascha, or any other feast—and recite the Jesus Prayer, glorifying God. In this way, we will celebrate every feast with great reverence. Worldly people seek to grasp the meaning of Christmas through roast pork, Easter through roast lamb, and Shrovetide through confetti. However, true monks experience the divine events daily and rejoice constantly. Every week they live as if it were Holy Week. Every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday they experience Great Wednesday, Great Thursday, and Great Friday—that is, the Passion of Christ. And every Sunday they experience Easter—the Resurrection of Christ. Is it really necessary to wait for Holy Week to remember Christ’s Passion? Or, like worldly people, must we wait for Easter with a roasted lamb to understand what *“Christ is Risen”* means? What did Christ say? *“Be ready”* (²⁴²), not *“Let’s start getting ready now.”* From the moment Christ utters the words “be ready,” every person—and especially a monk—must be ready at all times. He must constantly explore and experience the divine events. By exploring the events of each feast, a person will naturally come to a deeper understanding and pray with reverence. Furthermore, our mind must be immersed in the events being celebrated, and we must follow the stichera and troparia that are being sung with reverence. When a person’s mind dwells on the divine meanings, they experience the sacred events and are thus transformed. If, while in this state, we reflect, for example, on a particular saint—one whom we especially venerate or whose memory we are commemorating—then our mind goes a little further—it ascends to Heaven. When we think of the saints, the saints also think of us and help us. This is how a person forms a friendship with the saints, and such a friendship is more reliable than any other. Then, even while living alone, a person can simultaneously live together with everyone—with the saints, with the angels, and with the whole world. To be alone—and yet tangibly experience all this friendly communion! The presence of the saints is alive. All the saints are God’s children, and we are God’s wretched children, and they help us.

To receive this help, we must always reverently commemorate the saints who shed their blood, sweat, and tears for the sake of Christ’s love. And we must listen to the reading from the Synaxarion: *“On this day we commemorate Saint...”*—we must stand, just as soldiers stand at attention when the names of their comrades who died heroically are read aloud: “On such-and-such a day of the month, such-and-such a soldier fell a brave death on such-and-such a front.”

In order to truly experience the festive occasion, one must not work on the feast day. For example, if a person wants to feel and experience something on Good Friday, then on that day he must not be occupied with anything other than prayer. In the secular world, unfortunate worldly people are busy with work and chores during Holy Week, and on Good Friday they begin to shower one another with Easter greetings: “Many happy returns!” “Be well!” “May God send you a bride!” This is not right! On Good Friday, I shut myself away in my cell. After being tonsured in the angelic manner, a newly tonsured monk must remain in silence for one week. These silent days are of great help to him, because Divine Grace nourishes his soul, and the monk comes to understand what has happened to him. Silence is also of

²⁴¹ See the 6th strophe of the second canon for the Presentation of the Most Holy Theotokos (November 21).

²⁴² See Matt. 24:44.

great benefit during the feast days. On feast days, we are given a favorable opportunity to rest a little, to venerate the feast, and to pray. Thus, a good thought will come to us, we will look deep within ourselves, devote some time to the Jesus Prayer, and through all of this, we will tangibly experience something of the divine significance of the feast day being celebrated.

“Better is a little for the righteous...”

Unfortunately, today we use our freedom not for good, not for the pursuit of holiness, but for worldly vanity. In the past, the entire week was a workweek, and Sunday was a day of rest. Now Saturday has also been made a day of rest. However, do people now live more spiritually, or do they sin more? If people used their time for spiritual pursuits, everything would be different—they would be more focused. But we, wretched people, want to steal a portion of the spiritual, to usurp a portion of Christ’s. If laypeople need to work an extra day, they agree among themselves to work it on Sunday. They seek out a free Sunday for a “Sunday workday” or some holiday for a “Saturday workday,” and then God’s wrath falls upon them. How, then, can the saints help them? Is a Sunday or a holiday meant for work? And if worldly people want to help us monks in some way, let it not be by working on Sunday, but by offering some other kind of assistance.

We do not allow God to guide us. And whatever is done without faith in God has no connection to God. Therefore, what we do lacks God’s blessing, and thus will not yield a good result. And then we say, “It’s the devil’s fault.” It is not the devil’s fault; rather, we ourselves do not allow God to help us. By working on days when, according to church regulations, we are not supposed to work, we give the devil power over us, and he interferes with what we do from the very beginning. *“Better is a little for the righteous than the wealth of many sinners,”*²⁴³ — says the psalm. That is what truly brings a blessing; everything else is mere trifles, nonsense. However, one must have faith, love, and reverence; one must entrust everything to God with confidence. Otherwise, you will work half-heartedly even on holidays, and on other days you will waste your time in vain.

And just look—God never abandons those who are faithful to Him. I never worked on Sundays or holidays, and God never abandoned me; He blessed my work. I remember one time when combine harvesters came to our village to harvest wheat. They told my father that they would start with our field and then move on. It was Sunday. “What are we going to do?” my father asked me. “The combines have arrived.” “I,” I said, “won’t work on Sunday. Let’s wait until Monday.” “But if we miss this opportunity,” my father said again, “we’ll have a hard time harvesting with horses later.” “It’s okay,” I said, “I’ll harvest even until Christmas.” I went to church as if no combine harvesters had arrived at all. But the combines headed off to the harvest. Well, they broke down right away, while still on the road! Then the combine operators went back to my father and said, “We’re sorry, our combines broke down. We’re going to Yanina now for repairs, and as soon as we get back on Monday, we’ll start right with you.” So they postponed the harvest from Sunday to Monday. I’ve seen many such cases with my own eyes. If we monks do not treat the holidays as we should, what will be left for laypeople to do?

What a spirit there used to be in the monasteries! I remember how, in the secular world, people—after celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross according to the new calendar—would bring grapes to the Holy Mountain. However, their boats would sometimes pull up to the shore of Athos on the very day we were celebrating the Exaltation according to the old calendar. When that happened, the monks would never go to unload the grapes on a feast day. They would send them back or leave the boat loaded with grapes at the pier. If oil or lumber was delivered on a feast day, the same thing would happen. And yet the monasteries were poor. But the monks of the Holy Mountain reasoned as follows: “What would a

²⁴³ Ps. 36:16.

layperson say upon seeing monks working on a feast day?” For the monks, it was a thousand times preferable for an unloaded barge to be wrecked by a storm overnight—so that both the grapes and the lumber would be lost—than to unload them on a feast day, thereby forfeiting the feast and, at the same time, tempting people’s souls.

And now... On the eve of a certain holiday, I found myself at a certain monastery. The monks were unloading grapes. Afterward, they gathered the entire brotherhood to tread them. There was supposed to be a vigil that evening, but it was postponed to the next day! And yet it was a great feast day! “For the sake of necessity,” they say, “even the law can be set aside...” At another monastery, after a fire, the burned-down buildings were being rebuilt on Sundays. Well, so what—they’ll burn down again. And yet laypeople see this and say, “All these holidays are of little importance.” We must be very careful not to work on holidays. This applies especially to us, the monks, because by working on holidays, we not only sin ourselves but also become a temptation to laypeople. In doing so, we sin twice over. Laypeople look for excuses to justify their sins. They themselves may work day and night, disregarding the holidays. But then they see a nun or a monk working on a holiday out of some great necessity. After that, the devil says to them: “Look, even the priests are working over there! So why are you just sitting there with your hands folded?” When they see a nun shaking out a blanket on Sunday, laypeople will say, “If the nuns are working, why can’t we go to work too?” That is why we must be very careful not to become a stumbling block to others.

— Geronda, what if on a feast day, for example, the Presentation of the Most Holy Theotokos, a craftsman comes to the monastery to work?

— The Presentation of the Most Holy Theotokos, and a contractor will be working in the monastery?! That’s unseemly! Let him not work.

— Geronda, this situation arose because the sister in charge of the work didn’t think to tell him not to come.

— Then a canonical penalty must be imposed on that sister.

— Geronda, if on a feast day, after the all-night vigil, my eyes are getting heavy from fatigue, is it permissible to do needlework and recite the Jesus Prayer?

— Can’t you do prostrations? To ward off sleep, it’s better to do prostrations rather than needlework.²⁴⁴

— And on Sunday? If the monastic rule has been read, is it still forbidden, for example, to braid rosary beads?

— Why weave them? Why aren’t you nourishing yourself spiritually on this day? Unfortunately, even in monasteries a certain worldly spirit is creeping in. I’ve heard that in some monasteries, on Sundays and major feast days, the monks go about their duties immediately after noon. You’d think their children were starving to death and their house was being auctioned off! Such great need, indeed!... The arkhondarichny, or cook, is a different matter. In the arkhondarichny,²⁴⁵ someone must perform their duty in the kitchen on Sundays and holidays as well. These areas cannot be left unattended.

Sometimes, when someone brings fish to my kaliva, I tell the person who brought it, “Take it back and leave.” If people start bringing me fish—some alive, some dead—what will come of it?

And if fish is brought here to the monastery for a feast and you have to go to all the trouble of preparing it, what joy will you get from the feast? Do you remember Father Mina from the Skete of Saint Anne? One Sunday morning, a fisherman brought fish for the patronal feast of his kaliva and said,

²⁴⁴ According to the Mount Athos tradition, prostrations are omitted from the monastic rule in the cell only on Sundays and during Bright Week. On all other feasts, including the Twelve Great Feasts, prostrations are performed in the cell. – *Translator’s note.*

²⁴⁵ Archondariki—a place for receiving guests in Greek monasteries. – *Translator’s note.*

“Here’s some fresh fish, Geronda.”— “Wait a minute,” the elder said in surprise, “but today is Sunday! When did you catch it, that it’s so fresh?” — “This morning,” the fisherman replied. “Throw it away!” Father Mina advised him. “This is excommunicated fish! If you want to see for yourself, throw one of the little fish to the cat. You’ll see that it won’t eat it.” And indeed, when the fisherman threw one of the fish to the cat, the cat turned away from it in disgust! That’s how perceptive our fathers were!

But nowadays, on major holidays at monasteries, you see workers, craftsmen... Once, on the Feast of the Dormition, a whole crew of workers was cutting down a forest with chainsaws near a monastery. At first, there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky, but suddenly a cloud appeared, a thunderstorm began, and lightning flashed right next to the lumberjacks. The lightning set the forest ablaze, and the workers fled in such terror that they didn’t even tell anyone about it. The fire raged so fiercely that the firefighters were afraid to put it out. And what do you think happened? The following Sunday, the crackling and whirring of chainsaws could be heard in the forest again! This time, two teams of loggers went out to cut down the forest. But since we’re cutting down the forest on Sundays and holidays, these fires are also God’s wrath. And the worst part is that we don’t understand this. We’ve already crossed the limits of God’s patience.

If a need arises, the monks pray while counting their rosary—one hundred knots—and God enlightens someone, who then sends the monks one hundred thousand drachmas. A monk’s calling is prayer. Who will trust in God if not even we, the monks, do so? Laypeople? If a monk entrusts his life to God, then God is bound to hear him. In the communal monastery where I lived at the beginning of my monastic journey, the abbot had one cell attendant. His duties included preparing the hall for the brotherhood’s meetings. When he was sick or busy with something else, his duty was entrusted to me. The cell attendant wasn’t a particularly quick-witted man, and besides, he always stood through the entire Divine Liturgy, yet he managed to get all his work done. I was quicker than he was. To have time to prepare the hall before the brothers arrived, I would leave the Divine Liturgy early, but everything went haywire for me. Sometimes the coffee pot would tip over and spill coffee; sometimes the cups would fall; sometimes the glasses of water would slip from my hands... Everything was turned upside down! But the cell attendant, having remained in the church until the very end of the Divine Liturgy, would cross himself and trust that God would help him. And if he was scolded [for not leaving for his duty ahead of time], he accepted it with humility. This monk possessed humility, and the benefit he received was twofold.

Be that as it may, by not clinging to secondary matters that can be omitted without harm, people derive great benefit and give special praise to the saints being celebrated. Let us be as careful as possible to ensure that nothing we do comes at the expense of our spiritual life. So that all our labors may be sanctified and we may have God’s blessing—the spiritual must take precedence. Let us give primary attention not to material things, but to the spiritual life. If a monk places his tasks and concerns first and prayer only second, then work holds greater value for him than the spiritual life. And in this lies pride and irreverence. A task that is performed but spiritually devastates the one who performs it is not sanctified. If we give primary attention to the spiritual, God will take care of everything. If we monks do not treat the feast days as we should, what will be left for laypeople to do? If we do not fulfill our spiritual duties and do not ask the saints for help, who will ask them for it? So, we say with our lips that we believe in God, but in reality we do not trust Him. If we, monks clad in monastic robes, do not even honor the sacred canons, but trample on and dishonor everything, then what is the meaning of our lives?

People work on Sundays and holidays, and misfortunes rain down upon them

According to the rules, all work ceases before Vespers on the eve of a feast day or Sunday. It is better, if possible, to work a little longer the previous day so as not to work during and after the festive

Vespers. If, out of great necessity, someone performs some simple task closer to evening on Sunday or a feast day itself, that is a different matter. But even such light work should be done with discretion. In the old days, even peasants working in the fields, upon hearing the bells calling for Vespers, would cross themselves and stop working. The same was done by women who gathered with their neighbors near their homes to do needlework. They would rise from their benches, make the sign of the cross, and set aside their knitting or other work. And God blessed them. They were healthy and enjoyed life. But now people have done away with holidays, turned away from God and the Church, yet in the end they squander all their hard-earned money on doctors and hospitals. Once, a father came to my kaliva and said, “My child is often sick, and the doctors can’t figure out what’s wrong with him.” “Stop working on Sundays, and everything will be fine,” I replied. And indeed, he listened, and his little one was no longer sick.

I always advise laypeople to stop working on Sundays and holidays so that misfortunes do not befall them. Everyone can organize their work. It all comes down to spiritual sensitivity. If you have this sensitivity, you can find a way out of any situation. And even if that solution entails some small loss, the blessing these people will receive will be all the greater. However, many do not understand this and do not attend even the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and holidays. The Divine Liturgy sanctifies a person. If a Christian does not go to church on Sunday, how will he be sanctified?

But, unfortunately, people are gradually moving toward a situation where nothing will remain of either the holidays or the Tradition. You can see how: in order to make people forget the saints, they’re even changing Christian names. They turn Vasilika into Vika. They turn Zoe into Zoz, and the result isn’t just one animal, but two!²⁴⁶ They’ve invented Mother’s Day, May 1, April 1... Soon they’ll be saying, “Today is Artichoke Day, tomorrow is Cypress Day, the day after tomorrow is the commemoration of the inventor of the atomic bomb or the person who invented soccer...” But, despite everything, God does not abandon us.

Chapter 4. On Orthodox Tradition

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”²⁴⁷

— Geronda, we often hear talk of renewing the Church. As if the Church, too, were growing old and in need of renewal!

— Has it grown old? Not at all! Even those who lack piety but have at least a modicum of sense in their heads are not satisfied with new, modern contrivances, but seek out antiquity. For example, newly painted icons leave such people cold—they understand the dignity of an ancient icon. If even the simply sensible behave this way, what can be said about those who possess true reverence! This comparison makes it clear just how misguided all this talk about the renewal of the Church and similar matters really is.

If today someone tries to preserve the Tradition in some way—by observing fasts, not working on holidays, and being devout—some people say, “What, did he fall from the moon? These are all relics of the past! They’re outdated now!” And if you try to reason with them, you’ll hear in response, “What era do you think you’re living in? All that is long gone!” Little by little, the Church’s Tradition is being

²⁴⁶ The Elder makes a play on words based on the homonymy between the newly coined name Ζωζώ (a corruption of Ζωή—“life”—corresponding to the Russian name Zoya) and the word “ζωο”—“animal.” – *Translator’s note.*

²⁴⁷ Heb. 13:8.

dismissed as fairy tales. But what does Holy Scripture say? *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* If a person cannot observe Tradition, then let him at least say, “I have sinned, O my God!” Then God will have mercy on that person. But today, having some weakness of his own, a person wants to force his neighbor to share in it, because if the neighbor does not have this weakness, it exposes the sinner. Take a man possessed by a demon and place him in some kind of spiritual environment. You’ll see—he’ll start fidgeting as if on pins and needles, unable to find a comfortable spot. All because the spiritual environment will disturb him. Likewise, people living in sin—the righteous lives of others convict them and disturb them. They strive to stifle their own consciences and therefore spout all these lies about “relics of the past.” They even declare [eternal] values to be obsolete and want to replace them with debauchery. A great corruption is taking place in the world! Spiritual beauty is considered ugliness. That is, to the people of this world, spiritual beauty appears worldly ugly. But take any monk and cut his hair short! How ugly he will become! Yet the people of this world mistake this ugliness for beauty.

And look: right now they are fighting against the Church, striving to destroy it. All right, let’s assume these people don’t believe. Let’s assume they teach others to be godless. But how can they fail to recognize the good that the Church gives to people? How dare they go against it? There is a great deal of malice in this. For example, how can they fail to acknowledge that the Church cares for children, that it helps them become good people rather than hooligans? Yet they push children toward evil; they give free rein to those who corrupt children. But what does the Church teach the young? To be a sensible child, to respect others, to preserve one’s purity, so as to enter society as a true human being. But [despite the efforts of the Church’s destroyers] everything will fall back into place. In Russia, even under the godless regime, an elderly woman came to a church, knelt behind a column, and began to pray. At the same time, another woman—a young one—was in the church. Despite her young age, she was already a prominent scholar. Seeing the elderly woman praying on her knees, the young woman said, “All that belongs to a bygone era.” Then the elderly woman replied to her: “It is to this very pillar, where I am now praying and weeping, that you will come to weep later. For your own way of life, my daughter, has come and gone: it was here today, but tomorrow it will be overgrown with weeds. But Christianity—no, it will never be overgrown with weeds.”

Respect for Tradition

Many holy martyrs, not knowing the dogmas of the faith, would say: “I believe in what the Holy Fathers have established.” By saying this, a person bore witness to Christ and became a martyr. In other words, a Christian could not provide proof of the truth of the Christian faith to convince his persecutors, but he had trust in the Holy Fathers. “How can I not trust the Holy Fathers?” he thought. “After all, they were both more experienced and more virtuous [than I], and they were holy. How can I agree with such nonsense and tolerate blasphemy against the Holy Fathers?” We must trust Tradition. Today, unfortunately, European “political correctness” has taken hold among us as well, and people strive to present themselves as good. In their desire to demonstrate their “supreme nobility,” they end up bowing down to the two-horned devil. “Let there be one religion,” they say, and lump everything together. Several people with such views have also come to my kaliva. “We—that is, all who believe in Christ,” they told me, “must unite into a single religion.” “That’s like suggesting I gather a certain number of carats of gold and a certain amount of copper separated from that gold into a single pile, so as to make them into one alloy again,” I replied. “But is it reasonable to mix gold with base metals again? Ask a goldsmith: ‘Can you mix dross with gold?’ After all, there was so much struggle to purify the dogma of dross.” The Holy Fathers knew what they were doing. They forbade communion with heretics for good reason. But today they call for joint prayers not only with heretics, but also with Buddhists, fire-worshippers, and Satanists. “Orthodox Christians,” they say, “must also attend ecumenical joint prayers

and conferences. This is ‘witness’!” What kind of “witness” is that! These people resolve all problems through logic; they find justification for what cannot be justified. The European spirit believes that even spiritual matters can be traded on the counters of the Common Market.

Some of those Orthodox Christians who, acting recklessly, want to “push Orthodoxy forward,” “launch missionary activities,” organize joint conferences with non-Orthodox Christians—just to create as much hype as possible—and think that in this way—by mixing with the heretics into a single hodgepodge—they are “pushing Orthodoxy forward!” After that, the “super-zealots” get down to business. These fall into the opposite extreme: they even go so far as to blaspheme the Sacraments of the Local Churches that follow the New Calendar, and the like, greatly tempting devout and Orthodox-minded souls. And the non-Orthodox, for their part, attend all these joint conferences, pose as teachers, select the good spiritual material they hear from the Orthodox, process it in their own “laboratory,” color it to match their own palette, slap their own label on it, and pass it off as the real thing. And strange modern people, enthralled by such oddities, are spiritually destroyed. But still, when the time comes, the Lord will raise up both Mark of Ephesus and Gregory Palamas, who will gather together all our brothers wounded by temptation—for the confession of the faith, for the affirmation of Tradition, and to the great joy of our Mother Church.

If we lived in accordance with the teachings of the Fathers, we would all enjoy robust spiritual health. And all those of other faiths, envying this health, would abandon their unhealthy delusions and be saved without preaching. At present, our holy patristic Tradition does not affect them, because they wish to see in us the successors of the holy fathers and to recognize our true kinship with our saints. It is the duty of every Orthodox Christian to instill a healthy concern in those of other faiths as well, so that they may understand they are in error and not falsely reassure themselves, thereby depriving themselves of the rich blessings of Orthodoxy in this life, and in the life to come—even greater, eternal blessings from God. Some young Catholic men come to my hermitage—they are very well-disposed and eager to learn about Orthodoxy. “We want you to tell us something, to help us spiritually,” they ask. “Do this,” I advise them, “pick up a book on church history. You’ll see that we were once united, and where you’ve ended up since then. This will help you greatly. Do this, and next time we’ll have a thorough conversation.”

In the past, people treasured certain items that belonged to their grandparents and carefully preserved them as heirlooms. I knew a very good man, a lawyer. His home was distinguished by its simplicity. This simplicity restored strength not only to him but also to his guests.

“A few years ago, Father,” the lawyer recounted, “my acquaintances used to laugh at me because of my old furniture. But now they come over and admire it as antiques! I take joy in using this old furniture. I take joy in it because it reminds me of my father, my mother, and my grandparents. These memories warm my soul. But my acquaintances collect all sorts of old junk for their apartments, turning their living rooms into what look like secondhand shops, so they can lose themselves among all these objects and, if only for a short while, stop thinking about their worldly anxieties.” A tiny gold coin, received from a mother or a grandfather, used to be treasured as a great treasure. But today, if someone has, for example, a Greek gold coin from the time of King George that is valued at a hundred drachmas less than an English gold coin from the time of Queen Victoria, they will trade the former for the latter. Such a person neither honors nor takes into account either their mother or their father. This European spirit is emerging, and it is quietly sweeping all of us into a common torrent.

I remember how, when I first arrived at the Holy Mountain, I met an elder from one of the brotherhoods. He was already an old man, distinguished by his great piety. Out of piety, he did not throw away not only the *kamelavki*,²⁴⁸ worn by the “elders”—his predecessors—but even the wooden molds

²⁴⁸ A head covering worn by clergy and monks. – *Translator’s note.*

used to make these kamelavki. Various beautifully bound antique books and manuscripts were kept in his carefully locked bookcase. He protected them from dust. He did not use these books and kept them under lock and key. “I,” he would say, “am not even worthy to read such books. I read these simple ones—the *Father’s Book* and the *Ladder*.” Then a young monk joined their brotherhood (though in the end he did not stay on the Holy Mountain) and began to rebuke the elder: “Why are you collecting all this junk here?” He gathered up the old blocks used for making kamelavkas and wanted to throw them into the fire. “These belonged to my spiritual grandfather,” the elder said to him, weeping, “how have they bothered you? After all, we have so many rooms! Just put them away in some corner.” Out of reverence, this old monk kept not only books, relics, and kamelavki, but even old blocks! If there is reverence for the small things, then there will be great reverence for the great things as well. If there is no reverence for the small things, then there will be no reverence for the great things either. This is how the Fathers preserved the Tradition.

Let us preserve in monastic life that which has been tested by experience

— Geronda, if a sister is assigned a new duty and finds a certain established order there, may she change anything about that order?

— No, at first she shouldn’t change anything, even if she is performing this duty alone. The changes you’re referring to were made by new monastic communities that came to the old monasteries. They treated the experience of their predecessors with disrespect. By approaching their work with such an attitude—introducing their own schedules for divine services and daily routines while abolishing the ancient monastic statutes—that is, the previously existing order, proven by experience and helpful in monastic life—these monks lack not only Tradition but even respect for Tradition. Only later will they realize the benefit of all that they have changed. Those who established a certain order or rule in monastic life knew what they were doing. What has been preserved in monasticism since ancient times has been carefully considered and tested by experience. Consider this: in any art or craft, one must adhere to the canons. I used to be a carpenter, and I know that the height of a standard table should be eighty, and the width of a stair tread—twenty-seven centimeters. All of this has been verified by experience, established as a rule, and the apprentice must simply accept it on faith—he doesn’t need an explanation of why it is this way and not another. These standards are born of experience. The apprentice is expected to trust the master and respect his experience. Anyone who does not honor the canons of the craft will not produce good work. He will make a table that is too low or too high; he is bound to mess something up.

I’ve changed many kalivas in my life; I’ve become a true “kavsokalivit!”²⁴⁹ Sometimes, when arriving at a new place, I’d make changes—nailing shut unnecessary doors, pulling out extra nails... But then I came to believe that everything done before has some kind of meaning. So now, when I arrive at a new kaliva, I don’t change anything done by my predecessors at first, even if it causes me some inconvenience. I don’t pull a single nail out of the walls. If, lacking experience, I were to pull out the nails driven into the wall, then—after fruitless attempts to hammer them into another spot, ruining the plaster in the process—I’d still be forced to hammer them back into the same place they were before. After all, whoever lived in this place before me hammered them in there, having verified their practical necessity. Once a nail is hammered into the wall, it’s needed there—to hang a T-shirt, a cassock, or for some other purpose. In one cell where I lived for a while, there was a thick, crooked stick standing in every corner. I used to give these sticks away to visitors, but then I realized what they were for. There

²⁴⁹ The Greek word “kavsokalivitis” means “burner of kalivas.” This was the name given to the 14th-century Athos saint, the Venerable Maximus (commemorated on January 13), who led an ascetic life, often moving from one place to another, building small kalivas—huts—for himself and then burning them down. —*Translator’s note.*

were many snakes in that cell, and the person who lived there before me had placed the sticks in the corners—so he wouldn't have to run around looking for them in case of an emergency.

The most important thing is to stick to what has been proven by experience. Otherwise, Tradition is lost and only betrayal remains.²⁵⁰ Compare the words “Tradition” and “betrayal”! How different they are from one another! Can the betrayal of Tradition ever be turned into Tradition? Today, some monasteries do as they please and believe that this falls within the bounds of Tradition. Thus, in relation to Tradition, these monasteries transform from guardians into traitors. But if there is no spiritual sensitivity, how can spiritual discernment then arise? After all, monastic life requires following a different path. Neither a marching column of soldiers, nor the tracks of social activism, nor a factory- or collective farm-style production line are suitable for us, the monastics. Monastic life requires a monastic path, proven by experience, bearing the imprint—the character—of the path of the Holy Fathers. It sometimes happens that a different path is also called “patristic”—the false path of “theoretical monasticism,” so named because those who follow it have read the Holy Fathers extensively, yet have no inner connection either with the Fathers or with monasticism in general.

Some new monasteries today live and operate as charitable organizations. Of course, they have some justification—they have not found the leaven. But they could have inquired about monasticism at the older monasteries. When the first monasteries began to come back to life in Greece after the Turkish yoke, there was no leaven there either. The Bavarian administrators²⁵¹ wanted to destroy the existing monasteries and seize their property. In their efforts to destroy the monasteries, they went so far as to issue an order requiring the monks to marry! But, on the other hand, the Orthodox Greeks themselves did not want to seek out the old monastic tradition to see what it was like and return to the Tradition. Seeing that the monasteries had cows and calves, the Greeks said: “So this is what monasticism is like! They even have cows and calves!” However, all these cows, calves, and piglets were in the monasteries because, under the Turkish yoke, unfortunate laypeople had entrusted their property, livestock, and the like to the monasteries to protect them from the Turks. Sick and maimed people would come to eat the monastery's bread. The monasteries fed the poor and the destitute; all the unfortunate flocked there. There were no charitable institutions in those days, so the monks had to tend to livestock—in order to help people. But later, when the monasteries no longer needed to engage in charity on such a large scale, they still continued to keep calves, cows, and sheep, and continued to engage in all this animal husbandry. Then, seeing this, many spiritual people of that era began to point their fingers: “Just look at the kind of monasticism we have!”—and, turning their gaze to the West, began to take Western-style monasticism as their model, with its emphasis on missionary work.

They began to imitate everything Western. They did not turn back to our own Tradition to see what had happened, reflect on it, and say: “All right, all these remnants are left over from the time of the Turkish yoke. Back then, the monasteries had no opportunity to live the monastic life as they ought to. This is a problem that dates back to the old days. Now we need to return to Tradition.” No, they did not return to our Tradition, but instead turned to the state in which monks in the West find themselves. They took models from there, wishing to apply them here. They did not return to Tradition, and therein lay their mistake. After all, even the Turks treated what belonged to the Church with respect, because they,

²⁵⁰ The Elder makes a play on words: παράδοση – tradition; παράβαση – crime, violation, transgression. In this instance, as an exception, we translate the latter word as “betrayal.” – *Translator's note.*

²⁵¹ In 1833, the underage Bavarian Prince Otto was elected king of liberated Greece. Along with him and his regency council, a large number of Germans arrived in Greece, who came to occupy the overwhelming majority of leadership positions in the Greek government, army, and economy. Thus began a period in Greece known as the so-called Bavarian domination, which in many respects was harder for the Greeks than the overthrown Turkish yoke. The Bavarian domination came to an end on September 3, 1843, with the abolition of the absolute monarchy and the adoption of the Greek Constitution. King Otto and most of the Bavarians were expelled from the country. – *Translator's note*

too, had witnessed miracles from our saints time and again. And in the monasteries, the Turks sought not a warm welcome, but divine help.

People will return to the old ways

Time will pass, and people will come to appreciate that Christians today preserve the honor, faith, and grandeur of the Church. You'll see—people will return to the old ways. After all, the same thing happened with icon painting. There was a time when Byzantine art was not understood. People used chisels to chip away the old frescoes from the walls so they could plaster them over and repaint them—in the Renaissance style. Now, after so many years, Byzantine art has been recognized for its great value. Even many of those who lack reverence, even those who do not believe in God, are quietly returning to the old ways and removing the Western-style plaster that had been covering the ancient, chisel-scarred frescoes. In the same way, people will gradually begin to seek out the very things they discard as unnecessary today.

And just look how everything is falling back into place in Byzantine church chant! Nowadays, even small children have learned to sing in the Byzantine style. In the past, it was hard to find anyone who knew Byzantine chant. But now even small children know it, and adults, seeing this, are giving it some thought. And what beautiful, sweet “ornaments” Byzantine chant has! Especially in purely Byzantine compositions. Some resemble the delicate trills of a nightingale, others—the gentle lapping of an incoming wave, while still others lend the melody a special grandeur. All of them convey and emphasize divine meanings. Yet it is not often that one can hear these beautiful “ornaments.” Most singers perform musical works incompletely, imperfectly, and in a formulaic manner. There are gaps and holes left in the singing. And most importantly—they sing without paying attention to the stress. I'm surprised: could it be that their hymnals lack stress markings, just as they are absent from modern grammar books? Most singers perform in a completely superficial, monotonous manner—as if a road roller had run over their sheet music and smoothed everything out. It's all “pa-ni-zo” and “pa-ni-zo,”²⁵² but it makes no sense at all. Other singers emphasize the stressed syllables, but without feeling and with a shrill tone. There are also those who emphasize the syllables forcefully, but everything sounds the same, clunky—as if they were hammering in nails. Yes, it's true: they either sing with no stress at all or emphasize the syllables, but too harshly. Such singers do not inspire or transform you. But pure Byzantine chant—how sweet it is! It brings peace and softens the soul. Proper church chant is an outward expression of an inner spiritual state. It is divine joy! That is, Christ gladdens the heart, and a person, in heartfelt joy, speaks with God. If a singer is fully engaged in what he is singing, then—in the positive sense of the word—both he himself and those who listen to him are transformed. Many years ago, an elderly singer, having come from the secular world to the Holy Mountain, was taken aback. The monks of the Holy Mountain sang in the old style. They had him sing along with them, but he sang without the “ornaments,” because he did not know them. The Holy Mountain fathers, however, had learned them according to Tradition. It was only later that this cantor, along with some others, began to scratch their heads in puzzlement. A healthy sense of concern arose in them; they began to search, read literature, and listen to old-time cantors who sang according to Tradition. In this way, even these cantors from the secular world began to sing with “ornaments.”

After all, the Turks also borrowed their music from Byzantium when they came to Asia Minor. That is why Turkish folk songs touch the listener's heart. There is even a saying among the people: “Sing songs in Turkish, speak in French, and write in Greek.” It's not that all Turks have good voices—no. But even those Turks who don't have good voices sing with soul and feeling. And some Greeks, unaware that Turkish folk songs originate from Byzantium, claim that we, they say, borrowed Byzantine singing

²⁵² Notation of Byzantine music.

from the Turks! But when the Turks came to Byzantium from the depths of Asia, they had neither music nor singing! They had absolutely nothing back then. They took their melodies from the Byzantine liturgical tradition.

— Geronda, why do Catholics prefer European harmony?

— Why? They say that kind of music is more accessible to the people. Do you remember those Catholic nuns in France who sang “Christ Is Risen” while performing a modern dance with an icon? They were celebrating Easter! And the mother superior herself was holding the icon! They changed everything, replacing one thing with another—and look where it’s all led us in the end! Once I heard a monk singing a doxology. The melody struck me as somewhat strange. “What on earth is he singing?” I thought. “Whose doxology were you singing?” I asked him later. “Peter of the Peloponnese’s—²⁵³” he replied, “but I tweaked it a little.”—“You tweaked Peter of the Peloponnese’s doxology?!”— “Well, why not,” he said, “don’t I have the right to do that?” — “If you want, you can write your own hymn, but don’t ruin someone else’s!” Just like that—he went and changed the melody of someone else’s hymn, and then, I bet, he would have even called his opus ‘Svyatogorsk.’ One must be very careful. You cannot change what was created before. If you want, you can create something of your own and give it your own name. A person has the right to do that. But to take something old and alter it—that is irreverence. It’s just as if someone who knows nothing about icon painting wanted to “correct” an ancient icon. If that’s what they want, let them paint their own icon, but they must not destroy someone else’s.

Without faith, the world cannot stand

Godless authorities believed that faith was harmful to society and wanted to abolish it. Now they are slowly coming to realize that if a person has no faith, they have no restraint and become a beast; they understand that a person cannot stand firm without ideals. Once, a journalist asked an elderly Communist politician: “What do today’s politicians need to pay attention to in order to avoid failure and succeed?” “We failed because we went against the Church,” the elderly Communist replied. In other words, non-believing communists—who have neither material interests nor spiritual aspirations—realized that they cannot fight against God. Now,²⁵⁴ in some regions of Serbia, they have begun building churches. The Yugoslav authorities observed that, statistically speaking, where there is a church, there are fewer mentally ill people, fewer crimes, and so on. These people do not believe in God, but in order to avoid stuffing people full of schizophrenia medication, they are building churches for them. Even Ceaușescu, despite being a “shameless corporal,”²⁵⁵ who called Christianity “the opium of the people” and uttered other similar blasphemies, simultaneously said that Christians were good people. Because those who believed had “restraints” and did not cause disturbances. The rest, the non-believers, reduced everything to rubble. And how many saints shine upon us from Russia! War has now been declared on communism. But there are also those who try to find an excuse for everything. “Lenin and Marx,” these people say, “agreed with Christ, but did not understand His spirit and therefore committed crimes.” They say this because Christians have raised their voices, declaring that they want to return to their ancient Tradition, to their faith. And so, unable to keep the people under their former control, the communists, too, are appealing to them: “Let’s return to our ancient Tradition!” As if the communists had committed all those atrocities during and after the revolution simply because they failed to understand the spirit of Christ!

²⁵³ Peter of the Peloponnese (d. 1777)—an outstanding composer of Byzantine church music of the post-Byzantine period. — *Translator’s note.*

²⁵⁴ Delivered in June 1985.

²⁵⁵ Wordplay: The surname of the politician and General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989), when transcribed into Greek, is a homonym for the phrase “τσαούσης του αἰσχούς,” which literally means “shameless corporal.” — *Translator’s note*

The time will come when not only believers, but even non-believers will realize that without faith, the world cannot stand. Then they will force the people to believe in something in order to keep them in check. Years will pass, and a time will come when, if you fail to pray on any given day, you will be thrown into prison. People will have to report to the ruler whether or not they prayed!... That is how everything will fall into place.

We must leave behind a good Tradition

— Geronda, why is it that in some regions, villages, and hamlets, good people are born?

— Because the people who lived there before were good. They left behind good descendants, and now the good Tradition continues. Did you perhaps think that the soil there is simply so fertile for good people? No, it's not about the soil. If there is a Tradition in a certain place—whether good or bad—it continues. In Epirus, near the Albanian border, there was a village whose residents would go to church for Vespers and the Divine Liturgy—whenever it was celebrated. They even attended Compline. These people—how best to put it—lived in paradise even in this life, and, upon passing into the next life, they too will go to Paradise. They helped both themselves and the next generation, because they established a virtuous legacy. When descendants embrace a virtuous Tradition, that virtuous Tradition continues. Not far away was another village. Everyone there stole. Only one priest ever came from that village, but even he stole icons from the church! The problem wasn't that the land in that village was poor, but that the people there had a bad habit. So they left behind bad descendants, and this bad tradition continues. It will take a great deal of effort to bring a good tradition to this village of thieves. And look: if an unkind person lives in a certain place, the other residents try to prove that he is not a native of the area, digging deep into the roots of his family tree. But when it comes to a holy person, everyone scrambles to claim him as a relative. Take Saint Cosmas of Aetolia—even though he was originally from central Greece—he was included among the saints of Epirus because his father traced his ancestry back to a village in Epirus. And so, whether he wanted to or not, Saint Cosmas became an Epirote.

An acquaintance of mine, the head of a family, would nervously wiggle his index finger nonstop while talking. Then his children, too, would wiggle their little fingers when telling a story. After all, children pick up all their father's habits; they copy them exactly. But the challenge is to adopt only the good ones. Otherwise, evil takes root for a long time. I remember how a young man entered a monastic community as a novice, but he didn't like it there. "Wait, my child," his elder told him, "don't leave; everything will change." "How will it change, Geronda?" the novice objected. "After all, the novice of Elder So-and-so is his exact copy. Father So-and-so's novice also resembles his teacher like two peas in a pod. How can anything change?" If there is some deep-rooted evil in a monastery or monastic community, and the novices, failing to show healthy concern, simply "copy" what they see, then that unhealthy state becomes chronic. But if the novices show genuine concern, then the negative state can be transformed into a positive one. Thus, good and evil can become endless.

I have come to understand one thing: all that we have—whether it be the traditions of the Holy Fathers or those laid down in the statutes—is mere scraps [compared to what existed before]. That is, all of this can be likened to those rare clusters of grapes that remain in the vineyard after the harvest. Therefore, we must be careful to preserve a little leaven. This is our Christian duty. We have no right to leave behind an unwholesome legacy.

A few years ago²⁵⁶ various theologians, university professors, and other prominent figures gathered in Geneva for a "pre-council meeting." They decided to abolish the Christmas and St. Peter's fasts and to shorten Great Lent by a couple of weeks—since people do not fast anyway. Our professors also took

²⁵⁶ Delivered in 1992.

part in this meeting. When they returned from there, came to see me, and began telling me all about it, I became so indignant that I even shouted at them. “Do you realize what you’re doing?” I said. “If someone is sick, they have an excuse to eat non-fast food during Lent—the general rules do not apply to them. If someone eats non-fast food during Lent not because of illness but because of [spiritual] weakness, then they must ask, ‘Forgive me, my God,’ they must humble themselves and say, ‘I have sinned.’ Christ will not punish such a person. However, if a person is healthy, then they must fast. And those who are indifferent eat whatever they want anyway, and nothing concerns them. Everything just goes on as usual. Indeed, the majority does not fast, having no valid reason to do so. And we, wishing to please this majority, want to abolish fasting altogether? But how do we know what the next generation will be like? What if they turn out to be better than the current generation and are able to follow the Church’s commandments without compromise? By what right will we abolish all of this? After all, it’s all so simple! For Catholics, fasting before Holy Communion lasts one hour. What, are we going to give in to the same spirit? Are we going to bless our own weaknesses and failures? But for the sake of our weaknesses, we have no right to tailor Christianity to our own standards. Even if only a few can observe the established rite, it must be preserved for the sake of those few. If a sick person finds himself among strangers, let him eat meat in such a way that others do not see him and are not led into temptation. Let him buy himself some sour cream and eat it in his own room.”—“That’s hypocrisy,” one of these professors replied to me. “Then why, to be more sincere, don’t you go out to the square and sin there?” I asked him in response. In what light does the devil present all this to them! We create our own “Orthodoxy” and, in the spirit of this “Orthodoxy,” interpret the Holy Fathers and the Gospel. In our era, when there are so many educated Christians, Orthodoxy ought to be shining brightly! Just look at Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite²⁵⁷—just think of all he accomplished! How many words he wrote, how many books! He compiled the Lives of All the Saints! The reverend knew every library down to the last comma, even though he had neither a photocopier nor a computer.

A person must, as far as possible, become a true Christian. Then he will possess a sense of spirituality; then he will feel, to a greater or lesser degree, pain for Orthodoxy and the Fatherland and realize his filial duty toward them. In this state, upon learning of some event, a Christian shows concern, worries, and prays. However, a Christian who must be constantly prodded—“Now take an interest in this, and then in that”—is like a square wheel that must also be constantly pushed in order to move forward. The goal is for the impetus to come from within the person himself. Then he will roll smoothly—like a round wheel. If a person becomes a true Christian, if the impetus comes from within him, then God will reveal even more and broader things to him than to someone who reads [newspapers]. Such a person learns not only what is written, but also what is about to be written. Do you understand this? Divine enlightenment comes to a person, and all his actions are enlightened.

We have no right to squander in our day the great legacy that Christ has left us. We will give an account to God. We, the small Greek people, have believed in the Messiah; we have been given the blessing to enlighten the whole world. A hundred years before Christ’s coming into the world, the Old Testament was translated into Greek. And what did the first Christians endure? They constantly put their lives at risk. And what indifference reigns today! How can we be indifferent today, when we can enlighten people painlessly, without risk to our lives? Do you know what our ancestors endured for the sake of the world in which we now live? Do you know how many people sacrificed themselves? If they

²⁵⁷ The Venerable Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain was born in 1749. He was one of the most educated men of his time. He combined exceptional aptitude for the sciences with the unblemished purity of the Orthodox faith. From 1775 onward, he lived as a monk on Mount Athos. There he wrote numerous books that constitute the golden treasury of Orthodox theology and asceticism. With the direct participation of the Venerable Nicodemus, “Dobrotolyubie,” “Evergetinos,” and other patristic works were edited and prepared for publication. He fell asleep in the Lord on July 1, 1809. Most of the Reverend Nicodemus’s works have not yet been translated into Russian. – *Translator’s note.*

hadn't made that sacrifice, we wouldn't have anything now. And so I draw a comparison: back then, risking their lives, they preserved their faith—and now, facing no pressure whatsoever, people treat everything as equal! Those who have never lost their national freedom don't understand what it means. "God forbid that barbarians should come and dishonor us!"—I say to these people, and in response I hear: "So what would we lose from that?" Just listen to that! May you be empty inside, you worthless people! That's what people are like these days. Give them money and cars, and they won't care a bit about faith, honor, or freedom.

We Greeks owe our Orthodox faith to Christ and to the holy martyrs and fathers of our Church. And we owe our freedom to the heroes of our Fatherland who shed their blood for us. We are bound to honor this sacred heritage. We must preserve it, not squander it in our time. It would be a tragedy if such a people were to perish! And now we see how God is summoning people through personal summons, just as such summons are sent to those liable for military service before the start of a war. God is doing this so that something may be preserved, so that His creation may be saved. God will not abandon us, but we, too, must do what we can as human beings. And for what we cannot do on our own, we must pray that God will grant His help.