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SAFELY HOME TO HEAVEN

A Letter from an Orthodox Nun to a Former Calvinist

The following letter from an Orthodox nun to a troubled layman is a warm, sane and usable remedy for anyone troubled with doubts about the mercy and compassion of God.

Dear P.,

Christ is Risen!

I was glad you called this weekend and let me know how you are doing. It sounds like you have a pretty good case of Calvinist-Jansenist indigestion¹: uncomfortable and debilitating, but not inevitably fatal. A lot of western converts to Orthodoxy – Americans, Germans, etc., suffer from this to one degree or another, especially early on in spiritual life. Our gerondissa at St. Paul's calls it the Medieval Sickness, a combination of moralistic nitpicking, pride, secretiveness, lack of faith in God, and lack of belief in the compassion of God. It makes one pretty joyless, prone to ill-considered and short-lived bursts of ascetic effort (often as not alternating with equally ill-considered and short-lived bursts of carnal distractions of one sort or another), often

Photo: Lamb Near Pennant Melangell, Wales.

¹ Ed. note: Calvinism (also called the Reformed tradition): A Protestant Reformation theological system that emphasizes the rule of God over all things, but alters the traditional Christian understanding of free will and man's relationship to his Creator to emphasize doctrines of the total depravity of man and predestination. Protestant theologians following this trend were John Calvin, Bullinger, Zwingli, and many others including the English Thomas Cranmer.

Jansenism: A 16th-18th century Counter-Reformation Catholic movement in northern Europe that echoed Calvin's teachings in emphasizing original sin, human depravity, and predestination. Originating in the writings of the Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen, it especially found a stronghold amongst French Catholics. Several of the movement's propositions on the relationship between free will and "efficacious grace" were condemned as heresies by Pope Innocent X in 1653, and the ban on this teaching was reaffirmed by subsequent popes.

melancholy, often judgmental. If you know much about the early history of New England colonization, you can see that the Puritans represent the acme of this spiritual type.

Those who have this mindset tend, by nature or training, to see God always as the stern, unappeasable Judge, whose dealings with man are always based on law and justice, and who demands of us an exact fulfillment of rules and rubrics. And we, in fulfilling these, do not really hope for, or believe in, the transfiguration and renewal of our souls and minds. At best, we hope that our scrupulous fulfillment of the Law will induce God to overlook our flaws and sins which we, in our heart of hearts, feel remain always with us, unforgiven, unchanged, and unchangeable. In such an atmosphere, one's spiritual life is not really a journey into communion with God through repentance and deification, so much as a dreary pendulum of efforts to appease an inscrutable and implacable God, interspersed with the outbreaks of resentment and frustration this causes us. Naturally, as you have observed, this leads either to a mental breakdown, or to the abandonment of participation in church life, which we come to feel is not "working" for us. This is not an Orthodox view of God. And having this false image of God makes having an Orthodox experience of God difficult.

People born in what remains of the Byzantine world don't suffer from this as readily as we do. (They have other crosses to carry, of course.) And unless they've dealt with it in working with westerners, they don't always find it easy to understand. Greeks, for example, can be rebellious, worldly, egotistical, materialistic, avaricious, cunning hedonists, but they have a basic optimism and confidence in the goodness of God, the beauty of the world, and their own worth as immortal persons, which makes repentance less complicated for them. Even if they have turned away from the Church, in their hearts they still have a fundamental understanding that God is a loving Father, the Theotokos is a longsuffering Mother who will come to their aid if they turn to her, and the world of creation is ultimately a place of meaning and beauty. In a funny way, they enjoy a sinful or worldly life, while they're living it, more than we do, because they enjoy life more than we do, and they repent in a more child-like way because they can still touch a child's belief that home – the Church – really is the place where "when you go there, they have to take you in." The dread Pantocrator, gazing down in majestic judgment from high up in the dome of the city cathedral is also *Christouli mou*, "my little Christ," who really listens when you run in to your neighborhood

church on the way to work to cry and light a candle because your daughter is in trouble at school. The untouchable and all-holy Mother of God is also *Panayitsa mou*, who really will take your part before the court of heaven because, just like your own mom, she'll always stick up for her children, no matter how badly they've behaved.

Once, a man was being chased by the police for having committed murder. He ran to our monastery, banged on the gates to be let in, and claimed sanctuary there. (Under Greek law, he would be safe as long as he remained inside the walls.) He cried until they let him in, and then demanded to see Fr. R., saying he wanted to go to confession. Fr. R. came down, took him into the catholicon, and closed the doors. Soon the police arrived, having traced him and found his car down the road. They also banged on the gates wanting the man brought out. Fr. R. came out of the church, wearing his epitrachelion, and told the police they needn't wait. The man was with him, but had business to finish with God first, and when they were through, the man would come down to the police station and turn himself in. The police asked who would stand surety for the man's appearance. "The Apostle Paul," Fr. R. said. The police left, and after a while the man came out of the church, peaceful and changed in his countenance. The sisters fed him, and he drove away to turn himself in. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced.

That is the Christian soul of a man, and a culture, at work. The man knew he was guilty of a crime at law, but he knew also that his heaviest burden was the sin that lay upon his soul. Instead of committing suicide, or taking thirty hostages in a shopping mall, he ran to the church to be washed and clothed and fed, spiritually and physically, before going to make his peace with Caesar. He accepted punishment in this world with a peaceful heart, knowing that he was already freed of punishment in the world to come. In the same way, every man wounded by sin in a fallen world, who runs for salvation to the Church, finds the arms of Christ open to him.

You have seen for yourself that the sort of thinking you mention in your letter is crazy and self-defeating. God does not sit up in the sky, setting us impossible tasks we must perform at any cost, no matter how unsuited they may be to our nature and abilities. He doesn't begrudge our innocent pleasures, or enjoy our failures or mistakes. Humility is not self-hatred, and self-reproach is not neurotic self-obsession. "If I do something I enjoy doing, then it is definitely not God's will... If I am asked to do something I have no talent or desire to do, this is God's will... I must always be suffering." A clas-

sic exposition of the Jansenist manifesto! Fortunately, it has nothing to do with Christ, or with life in Christ. You are on the right track when you suppose the answer lies in looking at Christ, and following His commandments. And those commandments are compassed like this: “To love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength, and thy neighbor as thyself. In this is all the law, and the prophets.”

Trials and sufferings will come upon us, if we are looking to keep this Great Commandment, but they will come unsought. We needn't invent them for ourselves, by putting gravel in our shoes and ashes on our food, or forcing ourselves to be a bad radio announcer when we could be a good landscape gardener because we think God will finally like us (or at least let us slip past His eye) if we do as many of the things we hate as possible.

Self-accusation is also a big bear-trap for self-hating Puritans like you. I was reading an article by Elder Sophrony of Essex² last week. Someone was asking him about the psychological and emotional problems so prevalent in western life, and whether he felt that secular psychiatry offered any help. He said that, with the exception of syndromes directly attributable to malfunctioning brain chemistry, he felt that psychiatrists often do more harm than good by making people focus too much on themselves and too little on God and their neighbor. He said they begin to concentrate too much on the “designated problem,” often not the real problem anyway, and then try to change it by yet more self-analysis and introspection, which only makes us prey to many kinds of illusion.

In this interview, done a couple of years before his repose, Fr. Sophrony said he doesn't advocate too much introspection even for monastics or his other spiritual children. “You know, we pick and poke away, hunting for every little mistake or thought, and we make ourselves crazy, all for nothing. It becomes an obsession, and really makes a wall between us and God, leaving no room for grace to act. Yes, we must know in general our sins, and that we are sinful and deluded beings, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we come to God in prayer, not to be obsessed with our sins, but to find His mercy. Otherwise the devil takes everything away from us... joy, hope, peace, love... and leaves us nothing but this obsession with our mistakes. That is not repentance. That is neurosis.”

The remedy? I knew a woman once, a spiritual child of Elder Sophrony's, a

2 (Ed. note) Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) (1896-1993): Spiritual son of St. Silouan the Athonite, and compiler of his works, Fr. Sophrony founded the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Tollshunt Knights, Essex, England in 1959. The community is now under the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

middle-aged married woman with several children, who was overtaken suddenly by a painful psycho-spiritual illness: severe depression with suicidal thoughts, which took the form of religious mania. She was obsessed with forebodings of damnation and despair of forgiveness; made long catalogues of her minutest daily thoughts, no matter how fleeting, etc. In desperation, with her marriage almost over, she went to Essex and begged Fr. Sophrony for help. He told her to throw out all of her notebooks of sins, to read the Gospel of St. John every day for a year, to say the Jesus Prayer as much as she could³, to receive Holy Communion as often as possible, and to come back to Essex for some time every year, to rest and pray there. She did as he said, and made slow progress at first; but after a few years she became free and whole again. She told me at first that she had to say the Prayer out loud as much as she could, because the minute she stopped, she began falling back into her “old crazy mind” as she called it; but little by little, she began having more time free of her fears. The Gospel of St. John, after many repetitions, forced her to see that God is really a God of love, who cares for her in a personal sense. This was reinforced by her practice of the Prayer and her visits with Fr. Sophrony. Over the course of time, she proved to have quite a gift of intercessory prayer for others and spent the remainder of her life, as her children were grown, living a quiet life, “only a housewife” to all appearances, but spending much time each day in prayer for others, a form of charity in which she was much aided in the great compassion for the sufferings of others that her own torment had given her.

You asked for suggestions. Naturally, anything I offer is subject to your own confessor's direction, but the following suggestions come to mind: Your case may not be so extreme... but it can become so. I would suggest you begin making an effort to cut off these darkly accusing thoughts by saying the Prayer when they arise, and also reading the Gospel as much as you can. You might find it helpful to simply prepare your confession from a prayer book for now – using the list of sins in the Erie prayer book or another, but using this to prepare only on the day you go to confession. Don't allow yourself to brood over them outside that allotted time of preparation for the Sacrament. For this period, you shouldn't need more than an hour, at the most, to prepare for confession. Once you're done, you're done. No cheating. After you go to confession, drive away by the Jesus Prayer all thoughts which try

3 (Ed. note) The Jesus Prayer: A traditional prayer often used by Orthodox Christians: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

to remind you of the sins confessed, or make you think you're still not "really forgiven". Don't be discouraged if they return, and don't make yourself more upset by castigating yourself over it. Just try, as peacefully as you can, to keep saying the Prayer. You may also find help by saying several knots, or a rope, to the Mother of God. She's very good at helping us up when we feel lost in the uttermost depths. So, pray simply, and simply pray. Don't brood over the unchangeable past. Self-accusation time should be limited to once a week, or whenever you prepare for confession, for now.

Don't worry if you don't feel joyful on feastsdays or other times when you "ought" to feel joyful. Joy is a gift, like life and sunlight and air and flowers and food. It comes and goes, according to its own rhythms and seasons, and its presence doesn't mean someone's holy, any more than its absence means someone's doomed. For beginners in spiritual life, feelings are not as important as acts and habits. We must build the habits of prayer and life in Christ, and let the feelings follow when (or if) they may. When you pray, don't get all worked up into a fret by monitoring yourself constantly, trying to measure how many seconds of compunction you achieved or whether you felt 1.5 degrees more repentant than yesterday. Just say the Prayer, and keep your mind on the words of the Prayer. The more we scrutinize ourselves, the less we're paying attention to God. Might as well chuck the prayer rope and spend an hour looking in the mirror instead. If your mind wanders, don't make a mental note to accuse yourself of being distracted from 1:06 to 1:09 on Tuesday. Just gently put your thought back on the words of the Prayer, and use the words as an anchor to tug you back to the here-and-now if you drift away. That's enough.

It may be, as you suspect, that you've collected a few mistaken ideas about how to live an Orthodox spiritual life, and that these mistaken ideas have colored some of your experiences and influenced some of your decisions, especially those having to do with monastic life. Well, mistakes are just mistakes: chances to learn better and different ways of being and doing, not indictments of our right to exist or our hope for salvation. Give thanks to the Lord that in His mercy He is opening your eyes to see these things now, and to think and act upon them with His help. It's spring now in the natural world, and springtime for the soul too. You have a chance to do a little spring cleaning in your natural house, and start off a summer of new growth with cleaner windows on the world and fresher, brighter rooms inside your heart. Do not be tricked into believing the demons who tell you that you are

"committing a blasphemy even at Liturgy, because you do not ever seem to get better." It is they who are locked in their hatred of God and man, and who blaspheme, full of rage because they know they will never change, and hatred for us because we can. First of all, it is not our task to judge whether we are ever "getting any better." That is the Lord's business, not ours, nor yet the devil's. Secondly, you are a beloved child of the living God, Who died and rose that you might also die and rise, and live forever in joy with Him. The Lord Who broke the bars of death and harrowed the pit of hell is quite capable of bringing you safe home to Heaven, if you will get out of the way and let Him in. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Be of good cheer. I wish you well, and hope to hear from you again.

In Christ,
M.