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A RUSSIAN PRIEST: MY WORK WITH ENGLISH- SPEAKING CONVERTS

PART III

In this concluding section a three-part interview, Fr. Artemy Vladimirov speaks about the state of both western and Russian Christianity in regard to spiritual guidance, prayer, fasting, the individuality and inviolability of the soul, depression and illness, spirituality in monasteries and parishes, and about coming to terms with our pasts and hope for the future.

RTE: Father Artemy, in the last two interviews we've talked about seeking guidance through Church tradition and good spiritual fathers, but this brings up a frequent problem for those of us from English-speaking countries. Many western converts are hungry for traditional Orthodoxy and spiritual guidance, but find themselves geographically isolated (churches can be very far apart) or in a parish where the priest, although a good, devout man, may not be someone that one feels drawn to seek guidance from. How does an Orthodox convert in this situation go about living a spiritual life if he has no means of obtaining traditional spiritual guidance or going on pilgrimage?

Opposite: Fr. Artemy Vladimirov.

FR. ARTEMY: This is the main difficulty of our times. We have sincere pastor-confessors and navigators who can help show us the way, but it's much rarer to find otherworldly witnesses of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who carry His Holy Spirit in their hearts and can transmit this grace. It is also difficult to find people who are rooted in real Orthodox culture. I think it is us who Our Lord addresses when He says, *"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."* If we find ourselves in the state of Nebraska or Arizona or Oklahoma, amidst cowboys and businessmen, we are to become like devout children who have consecrated our hearts to the Lord and are completely dependent upon Him and His grace. We are to become children of the Most Holy Theotokos, the Holy Virgin Mary, and we are to confess our blindness. We are blind, we are feeble, we don't know anything.

We cannot pray as we should, we are lost in the numerous psychological enigmas of our hearts. But if we are like children, not wicked, but mild in our hearts, mild in our relations with our neighbors and sincere with God – always seeking Him in prayer, He will give us everything we need. Despite the many mistakes we will inevitably make, if we don't stop praying, but plead for enlightenment..."Show us the way, O Lord Jesus Christ. Don't let us go astray." "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil..." If we are sincere and if we cry like children when we feel the power of sin oppressing our hearts, He will send us guidance as proof of His omnipotence and omnipresence. In any part of the earth, even if you live in Antarctica, He will send angels to guide you – or His saints – St. Nicholas. Another important help is the writings of the Holy Fathers, by whose explanations we can absorb and master the Holy Gospel.

Reading the Church Fathers

RTE: You know, one of the common problems as a beginner reading the Holy Fathers is that everything seems to apply to you. In the very first pages, you feel you are about to be forbidden everything and you see decades of grey, joyless abstinence ahead. Then, as you read on, you realize that the Fathers are talking about sins you didn't even know existed. A little farther, you come to a more consoling section, thinking that your prayer life is manifesting all the signs of imminent enlightenment. So, how do we keep from sinking into the swamp of our own misconstructions?

FR. ARTEMY: They say that pious reading won't bring you any help unless you read with discernment. If we want the Holy Fathers to be a cornerstone, rather than a stumbling block, we must understand how to read them. First of all, we should read them with great humility, understanding the difference between ourselves and them. It is the Holy Fathers and their writings that help us come to humility, because in reading their revelations we begin to understand their height and our lowliness. We read them not to imitate them, but to be awed by their fervency and by the heavenly gifts they attracted, and to feel our own poverty and feebleness in comparison.

The second point is to study those Holy Fathers whose writings correspond to our mode of life. It is well-known that before you begin to come to discernment, you shouldn't read the writings of anchorites. For example, in the *Philokalia*, the first or second volume is useful for everyone. However, it is one thing to enumerate the passions and their manifestations, but quite another to speak of inner enlightenment and the fruit of prayer of the heart. It is wiser to study the writings of holy bishops such as St. John Chrysostom, St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, or St. Dimitri of Rostov. It is unwise to read such things as St. Isaac the Syrian or St. Gregory Palamas before you have the inner understanding of how to use their writings; it is dangerous to sharpen your mind with deep texts, but to leave your heart uncured of its rude passions. I would guess that there are many professors of theology who are specialists in patristic studies, and who even know many writings of the Holy Fathers by heart, but who don't live according to their commandments or know anything about the cleansing of one's mind by prayer. They try to understand the precepts of the Holy Fathers rationally with their fleshly mind, but not spiritually. Of course, we are grateful to those scholars who try to provide us with commentaries on these ancient texts, but it is only the spiritual life of the Orthodox Church that can lead you to a real understanding of the spiritual essence of the Fathers.

RTE: Which of the other Fathers would you particularly suggest converts to read?

FR. ARTEMY: I think that one of the navigators is Fr. Seraphim Rose, with his traditional works in English. Also our Russian bishops, Saint Theophan the Recluse and, as I said, Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov are very instructive for those starting out on the path of discernment.

Developing an Orthodox World View

RTE: Do you think it is even possible for us to rid ourselves of the rational western thinking that stands in the way of the Lord's command to become like children? Obviously, rational thinking is also God-given and good in its place, but it seems to run every aspect of our lives. How do we develop a traditional Orthodox world-view?

FR. ARTEMY: They ask me for a miracle! I think that this is impossible for man, it is possible only for God. The only way to change our innermost self, our rational mind, our emotional nature, is to be reborn, to become a new being with a new perception of the world. The only way to evolve from rationalism to spiritual intuition, from practicality to wise hope, from slavery to freedom, is to enter the Church with all your heart, to become a stone in the edifice of the Church, a pillar of this holy temple. This means to absorb the services, to love church prayer. We are to exchange our rational and sinful mind for Christ's mind, to exchange it for the Church's wisdom. We are to acquire new notions and perceptions of the world by studying the Church's teachings, by subjecting our minds to the wisdom of the New Testament. It is a very simple thing to read, to think, to be interested, "What is the opinion of the church in relation to marriage, birth, raising children, in relation to life after death, in relation to human nature?" To become a Christian is not only to be baptized but also to acquire the fullness of the Church's world-view and style of life! If you want to become a real Christian you are to reject the worldly American and European lifestyles and acquire the Orthodox.

RTE: Can you explain more deeply how to go about this?

FR. ARTEMY: You are to come to know what piety is, life according to the Lord's commandments. Piety is not something conventional, it is your life. It is the Lord's commandments actualized in your life. As I said, we now have hundreds of professors specializing in early Christian history, studying the Holy Fathers, but they don't necessarily fulfill the commandments of Our Lord. However, if you try to live in the Church, everything will be given to you.

RTE: In America and Western Europe, it is very difficult for converts to adopt an Orthodox life-style and world-view. Jobs are often long and demanding, and there is little interest in Orthodox Christianity among co-workers or

non-Orthodox friends. Other Orthodox parishioners may live an hour or more away, and there is little chance to meet except on Sundays. Children are often forced to go to public schools with no Orthodox content...

FR. ARTEMY: Forced? Where is your famous American freedom?

RTE: They aren't forced in that way. There aren't usually enough Orthodox people in one place to have a school. One woman has told me that she feels that she is swimming in a salt sea. No matter how much strength she uses to propel herself to the depths of spiritual life, modern society just buoys her back up to the surface. We don't want to live superficially, but we sometimes despair of ever escaping from this mind-set.

FR. ARTEMY: Our Lord Jesus Christ consoles us by saying, *The Kingdom of Heaven is within you*, which means that none of these exterior activities, these circumstances, determine the character of my inner life. If I want to be with Christ no one can hinder me from realizing this flaming desire. To live with Christ is to have my thoughts and intentions directed to Him. We are to stand before the face of God, and we are to try to glorify His name in our every deed and word and thought. It is very easy with the help of heavenly grace. If you are baptized you can master this task.

If you don't want to be a cork on the surface of the water you are to find some moments, a half-hour, an hour every day, to isolate yourself from everyone and everything. Then, stand before the face of Jesus Christ as if you have only one moment before the Last Judgement. You are about to come before your Heavenly Judge and you only have one minute to repent of your whole previous life! "Oh, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" You are to collect all your sins into one vessel of repentance and throw this vessel into the sea of God's mercy. This is what St. Ignatius Brianchaninov teaches us.

If you are successful in this prayer of repentance, you will come to understand that your prayer is your life, it is not a technique – "the technique of the Jesus Prayer." It is not something that you are to combine with your breath, or with the beating of your heart. No, it is your life. All technical advice is something functional. Your prayer is your life; your life is your prayer. And if you are constant in this secret standing before the face of God, you will see that your heart begins to change. You will find your prayer becoming deeper and more attentive, and one day you will understand what

it is to pray with all your heart, from the depths of your soul. When little children cry for something, they do it with all their being, and this is like real spiritual life. God will teach you how to conceal your pious intentions and thoughts, how to keep it such a secret so that no one ever guesses what you have in your heart. You will be living a life completely unknown and unnoticed by anyone, and you will begin to love solitude as the most satisfying way of speaking with your Creator. The moment you begin to pray from your heart, asking for everything that the Holy Spirit finds appropriate and necessary for you, you will be instructed and enlightened.

It is God Who will help you to be His servant in Washington, in Boston, in Chicago, in London, even if you live near the universal headquarters of masonry, or in San Francisco among the ultra-left.

RTE: If you somehow found yourself as a priest in America, where Orthodoxy is often foreign and unknown, and you were surrounded by a great sea of sincere Christians from other churches, as well as many who weren't believers – how would you reach out to them?

FR. ARTEMY: It is not a simple thing for me to imagine, but I know very well that if you are a sincere Orthodox priest, people who are not Orthodox will feel something. They will be interested, they will ask questions, they won't give you a moment's rest, they will hunt you down with their curiosity. And perhaps if they are a little tired of their Protestantism, when they hear a word about Orthodoxy their hearts will be touched. It is an easy thing to associate with people if you have sympathy and love, because the best witness of Christ is His love. It is something that persuades people that this is the truth.

Baptism and Confession

RTE: This is another topic, but over the past few years I have sometimes noticed a heavy-heartedness even among those who have searched diligently for spiritual life, found the Church and been baptized. A short time after baptism some of them find themselves depressed again. I have sometimes wondered if this happens when converts are not encouraged to give a confession of their whole life before baptism. In the West, they are often told that baptism washes everything away (which of course, we believe) but after they

Opposite: Guests gathered in the orchard of All Saints' Church.



are baptized they somehow continue to carry these burdens, with the added guilt of believing that they are full of grace from the sacraments and should not be depressed. I know people who have had recourse to psychologists, when their burdens seemed to be more a sorrow of conscience.

FR. ARTEMY: This practice of not requiring confession before baptism is a contradiction to the witness of the New Testament, to the Acts of the Apostles, and to the practice of St. John the Baptist, who preached to the people, led them to the stream, and heard their confessions. It is an ancient practice of the Church, which has its foundation in the words of the apostles: *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ*. It was the same with St. Peter, who, when the Jews asked what they should do, after their hearts were softened by his first sermon, said: *Repent, and be baptized...* Even Jesus Christ Himself, when saying farewell to his disciples and preparing them for the descent of the Holy Spirit, told them that they would be sent to every corner of the universe to teach, and that they were to preach repentance, urging everyone to turn from their evil deeds.

When we begin to study the practice of the ancient Church, we find that the catechumens were reckoned as unclean, and were to pray with the sinners – those who were publicly repenting of their sins after baptism. The catechumens were unclean because of the demons who torture the nature of a human being born after Adam's sin. Our natural state is not natural, it is subnatural. Therefore, these catechumens were to have the feeling of being sinners, of prodigal sons who had wasted their father's estate. They were culprits waiting for their sins to be remitted, to be justified by the charitable Father, and they were longing for the rich garments of grace instead of the old and ugly clothes of sin.

If a person repents of his unclean life, but does not confess it in detail, and is baptized, certainly he or she is enlightened by grace, is given the gift of the Holy Spirit and is purified; but the field of ascetic life is a battlefield, and demons have the power to touch your heart, to remind you of your crimes, because of this confession which has never taken place. They certainly will try to influence your mind with remembrances, to make you repeat what you did before baptism. As a young priest, I was taught from the beginning to help people open their hearts before baptism, and I am convinced that this is the most necessary thing for a catechumen. Its success depends mostly on the initiative of the priest, who is to help the soul reveal all of its wounds,

particularly the ones people hide in the depth of their memories because of their shameful nature. Not accomplishing this is often the reason for constant sadness, fallen spirits, desolation, dissatisfaction, depressions, and all the modern short-comings that people try to heal with the help of psychologists or occult “healers,” but without success.

The only way to get rid of demons is to reveal our evil acts before the face of Our Lord, Who came to earth to ruin the demons’ activities. This is especially true when we begin to pray in earnest because then we become real warriors of Christ, Who put the dark spirits to flight.

We should never agree with priests who are negligent with pre-baptismal confession. This confession, by the way, is not the sacrament of Confession, but is a revelation of those things which will be remitted by our Saviour through baptism. Baptism is the absolution. This first confession is the proof that we really want to be liberated, and that we will never, with God’s help, repeat our mortal sins; that we will never again soil our baptismal garment. This confession calms and softens our hearts and brings us to belief in the powerful Godhood of Jesus Christ. It makes us grateful to God, and helps us to feel that our baptism is something alive, something miraculous. To be grateful is the most important thing for a newly baptized person, and it was St. Gregory the Theologian who said that one adopts grace according to the measure of his purification, of his preparation for baptism.

RTE: What would you say to someone reading this, who is in the situation of not having given a confession before baptism. I’ve even had people tell me they didn’t really feel anything at their baptism, and wonder if something is wrong? Do you think the two are associated?

FR. ARTEMY: It is not a surprising thing that these people didn’t feel anything if their hearts were unsoftened by confession. It is their podvig for the remainder of their lives to help this grace come to the surface and bear fruit. At the same time, we shouldn’t put an accent upon “feeling” something in our spiritual life. Why? Because the action of grace is *supernatural*, and cannot be “grabbed” by our earthly feelings.

RTE: So, the grace is there, but they must help it manifest?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes. This lack is not something for them to be ashamed of, it was not their fault. It would be very useful for them to recall all the years

of their life before baptism, and perhaps even to make some notes, to write things out. While knowing that all of these sins were absolved through baptism, and being grateful to God for this, it would still be beneficial to retell them in detail in Confession. This is just as if we were to have a physical examination before going on an important mission to a foreign country, or before becoming a schoolteacher – we are to tell the doctor everything about our childhood diseases, our teenage injuries, our adult pains. Although they are cured, it is important for our service. This is the same.

RTE: You've already said that many times depression can be cured by a thorough confession, but don't you think that there are also cases where a baptized Christian could have some psychological abnormalities, where they would have to go to a psychologist or a psychiatrist? Do you see value in this?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, I do see value in it, and more than that, I am convinced that an Orthodox priest should have friends in this field, hopefully practicing Orthodox Christians who understand the nature of fallen man. In one of the most interesting manuals on the priesthood, written by Fr. Cyprian Kern of Paris, is included a chapter on pastoring and psychiatry, where he acquaints priests with the differences between the various neuroses, psychoses, etc., and where he gives lists of mental diseases and their descriptions. He wants to teach priests to discern between spiritual diseases and physical ones, between organic diseases of the brain and possession. If he has a little of this knowledge, a priest won't overlook the need of a person for psychiatric help. Inattention in these cases could even end in tragedy. When we priests come across these extreme and dangerous inner states, we certainly should advise relatives to consult a psychiatrist, to use some medicine.

RTE: How can you tell the difference between mental illness and possession?

FR. ARTEMY: Very often these phenomenon are mixed, but an experienced priest mostly discerns it by the person's inner state. He may have some mental shortcomings, some organic changes, but if his heart is calm and he is not tormented by passions, it is often a physical illness. In other cases, we might observe aggression or desperation, or we might sense the presence of fallen spirits in his heart by the expression of his face, his eyes, his words, his behaviour. You can sometimes see that he needs both psychiatric help

– some medicine to soften his mental state – and spiritual help, Confession and Holy Communion.

The Value of Fasting

RTE: Thank you. This is another topic, but would you speak a little about the value of fasting in general? It seems to be one of the easiest things for Orthodox Christians to let fall by the way, along with daily prayers from the prayerbook. I've even heard people say that keeping the fast strictly is only a habit for the very pious and that they don't feel any difference in their inner disposition or belief if they neglect it. What are the spiritual fruits of fasting, and why do we see them so rarely?

FR. ARTEMY: If we know and feel that the Church is our Mother, we recognize all of her commandments as something essential for our inner life. We know that the Church calls the commandments of Christ "Life-giving." When fulfilling them with belief and repentance before the face of Jesus Christ, we gain the fruit of holy grace enlightening our soul. The moment we do the opposite – obey our self-love or please our fallen nature – we feel a spiritual darkness penetrating our soul and embracing our heart as if a snake has bitten us and spread its poison.

So, when we break the fast we do so because of our passions; gluttony, voracity or the fear of being noticed. We may fear to confess our membership in the Church. These are passions, and all the passions bear darkness in their wake. It is an interesting thing that in the spiritual life, even petty details are important. One more gulp of liquid, one extra bite of food – if it is not necessary for your body but is something that pleases your passions, you know in your heart that you are betraying Christ. You feel an inner change, similar to a change in the weather, when all of a sudden a pure blue sky is covered with clouds, and we are a traveler caught by a tempest. Our mind, darkened by passion, becomes blind, and our heart, a stone. It seems like a small thing, but it is a real fall. I would like to repeat that one bite of food is enough to darken our hearts, particularly if it is a violation of the fast.

Therefore, I don't believe people who say, "We don't feel anything. It doesn't change our heart." This only means that their hearts are already darkened and that there is no inner prayer. Certainly, in such a state they will not notice one more impulse of darkness. However, the moment you are



reborn through repentance, you are no longer a slave, you become a warrior. The moment you feel the sword of prayer in your right hand, the shield of hope in your left, and your waist girded by the belt of abstinence, you become attentive to even small things, including the details of your meals. Once a person is accustomed to fast, then it doesn't seem difficult for him to abstain from meals until twelve o'clock, or three o'clock in the afternoon. This is not a joke, it is not a trivial thing. It is a battle where the war could be won or lost owing to seemingly unimportant details.

RTE: You've very clearly described the spiritual effects of breaking the fast, but saying that we are only to eat to sustain the body, seems to rule out things that aren't essential to our physical well-being but are still part of our life with friends and family, such as a glass of wine, or coffee, or sweets. Isn't there a time and place for food that simply lightens the heart?

FR. ARTEMY: Everything comes right when you begin to treat food and sleep like a remedy, and therefore you should simply be attentive. While eating, so long as you feel that it is a remedy for you, and your conscience does not protest, you can eat and drink rejoicing like a child. But there comes a moment when you know for sure that it is enough, and if, nevertheless, you continue eating to please your passions, this is certainly a sin. We do understand that for many people the process of eating is one of the main consolations of life, but let us remember what the first sin was. The more you enjoy earthly goods, the less you can enjoy holy grace; this is a fact that cannot be argued about. If you want to have the right of rejoicing in Christ, you should consciously restrain yourself from indulgence.

Here, the demarcation line is gratitude. While you are grateful to God, you are not committing any secret crime, but the moment your heart becomes silent and you begin to serve your belly, things become serious. I have no intent to sound like an ancient ascetic or anchorite. I am quite sure that we need good food, that we modern people badly need food rich with nutrients and that we shouldn't neglect this. We must be careful with our body because it is the God-given instrument of the soul. It is never reckoned a sin to nourish our body, but let us be honest before our Saviour Who was crucified on the Cross. Let us sacrifice for Him. He calls us to spiritual consolation. He has prepared the heavenly kingdom for us, which is not, as St. Paul says: *Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them.* St. Paul speaks here not of food itself, but of indulgence, voracity, the bad use

of something that is good in its nature. Let us be honest with ourselves and confess that being a gourmand leaves no hope for rejoicing in heavenly grace. You are to make your choice, and you cannot serve two masters.

RTE: This is rather mundane, but people tell me it is often trying, particularly for Orthodox families in non-Orthodox countries, to keep the fasts during holidays. For example, if one is an Orthodox Christian in America, the Nativity Fast often falls at the time of one of the biggest American holidays, Thanksgiving (and for old-calendarists, New-Style Christmas as well), which are traditionally celebrated with family with large meals of non-fasting food. We want to be with our family and neighbors on these days, but we don't want to offend or hurt them. How do you think we can keep a charitable and realistic balance and yet remain faithful to Orthodox practice?

FR. ARTEMY: It is interesting that no one becomes anxious or irritated when he finds out that you are a Buddhist and eat only raw grains, or that you eat only fresh vegetables, not even boiled or fried. However, the moment that they know that you are fasting as an Orthodox Christian, tolerance vanishes – they become offended, they are hurt, and you are an egotist in your desire to keep the fast! “You are to eat this turkey or we become enemies!”

I think that an Orthodox Christian must be very wise, and we are also to have a sense of humor. One ancient novice approached his Abba and asked him, “How should I save my soul?” His teacher answered, “If you live in the desert you are to be quite natural. You don't need to conceal anything. You may raise your hands in prayer and stay in this position for hours, you may prostrate yourself in a cross on the sand... but if you live among men, you are to joke with them.”

So, we don't have to be too serious, or display our zeal for fasting. We shouldn't drag our neighbor's attention to our pious habits. When we associate with people who are not Orthodox, our speech should be engaging. At the table we are to maintain a deep and interesting conversation, and at the same time abstain in a very secret manner, “Oh, it is my favorite thing – mashed potatoes... beefsteak, thank you, not yet, a little later, potatoes are my passion.” Or even, “Yes, a small piece of beefsteak, please...” Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow had a very wise habit in this regard – he operated with his fork and knife, cutting the rich food on his plate into numerous pieces, but didn't touch it. Why on earth should we transgress the holy fast...?

RTE: I think it is more of a situation where families go to their grandmother's house. They feel that they have to eat the food she has worked so hard preparing. It isn't that they are ashamed of fasting. They just don't know what to do.

FR. ARTEMY: But, if we are talking of our close friends and relatives, why should they not know that we are Orthodox Christians? Let them know and give them the chance of doing something good. Let them prepare something for us if they love us. They are accustomed as western people to have respect for others' freedom, to observe their rights. If I am a strange person, a little crazy because I don't eat turkey on Thanksgiving, let them prepare fish.

RTE: Yes, it's common sense. Now, can you describe some of the spiritual benefits of fasting? We need some inspiration to maintain the effort.

FR. ARTEMY: The main benefit of abstinence from food, in the broad sense of the word, is the constant *inner thirst* for God's grace. Without it you will never understand the beatitude of our Lord Jesus Christ: *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.* What they will be filled with is the Holy Spirit. This is the special state of a heart longing for the Holy Spirit, praying for His coming. It is something that is totally unknown to the culture of comfort, the philosophy of self-satisfaction, and the religion of earthly progress. But when you begin to feel it, even to a minor degree, you understand that the servants of this world – even the most prosperous millionaires – are destitute; they have nothing and their hearts are tormented with spiritual hunger. It is only God Who can satisfy and satiate the human heart with His visible Shrine, the Holy Chalice of His Body and Blood. So, the essence of the fast is the sensible rejection of food in its quantity or variety, and instead, to see the Holy Chalice as the fulfillment of all your hopes, desires and dreams. It is the constant hunger for this Chalice that ennobles you as a human being, raises you above the beasts, liberates you from earthly enslavement, and finally, gives you the right to be called a child of God.... When you understand the real aim of the fast, you will embrace it, you will kiss it, you will praise it, you will preach about it, you will want the whole universe to keep the fast together with you!

Redemption and Suffering

RTE: Thank you. One of the other most difficult things for converts to grasp is the idea of redemptive suffering. We catch glimpses of it in stories of ascetic saints, or in the writings of Dostoyevsky, but to many people at the end of the twentieth century, voluntary suffering seems life-denying. The avoidance of suffering has been built into our very natures. Obviously, the Lord Himself gave us another example of voluntary suffering, but His example is so high that it is hard for most of us to grasp. Can you explain this very Orthodox (and Russian) idea of suffering as something that bears fruit?

FR. ARTEMY: We shouldn't seek suffering, certainly, but we are to know that evil, in the general sense, wants to hurt our nature in two ways; through conceit and through giving pleasure to our bodies. Conceit – that is pride or vanity – brings death to our soul. Pleasure hurts our body (and soul, certainly). If you want to be victorious over Satan and your passions you should protect your nature against this double-pronged attack with two spiritual activities. The first of these countering activities is self-rebuke – you are to condemn yourself constantly in all situations; there is no other way to heaven, as the Holy Fathers assert.

Secondly, the shield against the pleasure of the flesh is suffering. This doesn't mean voluntary suffering as in masochism, but simply to restrain yourself, to be abstinent in general and not to indulge in anything. In ascetic literature this is called suffering. We are to gird ourselves with abstinence. We are to abstain from sin, and this also is suffering. We are to be in constant tension, we are not to give way to our passions. Certainly, our body needs sleep and relaxation, but we cannot seek for the constant comfort of our flesh. It is a suicidal intention to let your body have everything that it wants. Giving in to the flesh means to give way to our fallen nature and to become an eternal slave of sin.

So, we are to embrace, we are to meet with joy, all of the pains and difficulties of this world, knowing that they have an eternal moral sense. *For he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin*, says the Apostle Peter. It is through much suffering that we attain the kingdom of Heaven. *If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*. These and other commandments show us that the essence of Christianity is being on the cross of abstinence. We are not to let sin master

our nature. Our personal experience proves that in the battle against sin we find peace only when we mark those boundaries that we will never again transgress. The moment we violate them we begin to suffer, that is the suffering of our fallen nature, devoid of holy grace. All of our attempts are to be directed towards preserving this grace, to being in a state of war against sin, to being at peace with God.

The moment we become friends with this world, the moment we begin to fulfill its pretensions, we lose our spiritual freedom. Every Christian comes to know this fundamental fact by his own experience. We cannot be reconciled with this world. We are citizens of another world. So, Christian suffering is our readiness to be grateful to God for all the unpleasant things that help us to destroy the kingdom of sin in our heart. We know by our own experience that even heavy illnesses, the real suffering of our body, are useful to us if we are grateful and try to bear this cross with patience. Certainly, we are not forbidden to seek health, but we are not to transform the care of our body into pleasing the flesh.

RTE: On a practical level, I've sometimes heard Orthodox people, although not disdaining doctors, wonder if they should seek medical help when they are moderately ill, because they are unclear about what one should bear for God's sake and what one should seek to heal. They ask, "If this illness comes to me by God's Providence, should I just endure it?"

FR. ARTEMY: We should be obedient to the Bible. In the book of Jesus, the Son of Sirach [Ecclesiasticus], we are forbidden to turn away from the doctor. It says, "*Honour a physician with the honour due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him; for the Lord hath created him. For of the most High cometh healing, and he shall receive honour of the king. The skill of the physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration. The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them... My son, in thy sickness be not negligent: but pray unto the Lord, and he will make thee whole... Then give place to the physician, for the Lord hath created him: let him not go from thee, for thou hast need of him. There is a time when in their hands there is good success. For they shall also pray unto the Lord, that he would prosper that which they give for ease and remedy to prolong life.*"

So, we see that at certain times, "success is in their hands," especially when we repent of our sins and attribute the positive results of our therapy

to God. My own spiritual father says that we shouldn't be blind in this respect, and in obedience to his advice I have a thorough consultation each year with a doctor.

In speaking of monasticism, St. Theophan the Recluse says that it is a useful thing for a monk to take care of his health, but not to be too concentrated on it. We should apply some medical measures so that an illness does not progress, but St. Theophan also adds that it is a very useful thing for a monk to endure his illness. I would insist that at the end of the twentieth century, when people are so weak and feeble, it is not a good thing to neglect the body or to exhaust it beyond its measure, but we should be careful and treat it with discernment. It is the precious instrument of the rational soul.

Physical and Spritual Illnesses

RTE: What if one has a chronic illness, something that is a serious, painful burden? How should you look at this and how should you bear it? Also, I often hear Orthodox people attribute chronic illness to their sins. Is this always true?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, we should be very sensible, attentive and wise, foreseeing the development of this or that illness as the result of using God's creation wrongly. No one is to provoke illness by his unwise behavior.

However, in many cases, chronic illnesses are not dependent on our behavior. In these cases "God has visited us" as the Russian people say. We are to believe that our God, Who is all-loving, cares for us and gives us this cross to bear for the salvation of our soul. When people have no heartfelt belief, everything here on earth loses its mystical, moral sense and becomes absurd and chaotic. These people perceive life as a play and are prone to think that our life is a stage and that we are actors on it. However, when we perceive all the events of our life spiritually we understand that not a single detail of it is accidental, that everything has been foreseen by our Heavenly Father.

St. Paul says that even though he had many revelations and was raised to the third heaven, he was given a thorn in the flesh to preserve him from arrogance. Certainly, when we are healthy we are close to pride. Through the workings of our spoiled hearts we begin to believe in our own strength,

Opposite: American and European Orthodox guests at one of Father Artemy's Russian teas.



ascribing everything to our talents but forgetting about God's omnipotence. When we turn to ancient *patericons* we find that the most spiritually enlightened fathers and anchorites loved their illnesses. Many of them said that they would never exchange their illnesses for health, because through grateful patience and endurance, they had become partakers of the heavenly kingdom. They felt this holy grace sensibly and were fully conscious that it was because of the illness that they endured with gratitude.

It is important to know and believe that such spiritual qualities as nobility, gratitude, courage, joy, peace, refinement, a sharp perception of the invisible world – are the fruit of appropriate attitudes toward illness. They say that to have the Orthodox belief and to be grateful is enough for an ill person to be saved, and that he or she will be crowned together with the martyrs. Our Lord requires no more, just that you be grateful and patient.

RTE: Does that mean that you shouldn't pray for your own healing?

FR. ARTEMY: You may, but with humility – without impatience, confusion, rebuke or revolt. You are to give yourself into the hands of the merciful heavenly Physician, Who knows better than you what is useful for your salvation.

RTE: We have been speaking of physical illness, but could we talk now about chronic spiritual maladies? How should we look at our habitual shortcomings, which are not mortal sins but seem to have been part of our nature, perhaps for decades: impatience, gluttony, not being consistent in prayer...? Sometimes we feel hopeless of ever ridding ourselves of them.

FR. ARTEMY: Some wise people assert that all sins take place because of our lack of concentration, inattentiveness, absentmindedness, and superficiality. In the normal progress of spiritual life, as you become more attentive your perception of these small sins changes. You won't see them as something unimportant, because we have before us the words of our Saviour: *He who is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much*. Although this sin may be only a small betrayal, it is a betrayal none the less – it is the movement of passion, a dark stain on your white bridal garment. Therefore, you shouldn't just make excuses but you should humble yourself, knowing that the moment you become truly humble you will be delivered from this slavery.

But also, you are to be tolerant and patient towards yourself. It is an art to be patient when you cannot correct your own shortcomings. The process

of the birth of humility is very laborious, but if you become accustomed to covering every petty sin with inner mental repentance, you will come to ceaseless prayer. You will find yourself in constant self-reproach, which is a state very near salvation.

RTE: There are so many of these things that if you really pay attention, you feel that you fall every ten minutes, at least in thought and intent.

FR. ARTEMY: Not every ten minutes, but every thirty seconds. But if you rely on God and give yourself to His power, you will be consoled like a bird taken by the wind. You will understand what it is to have God's grace cover your faults and immerse your sins in the sea of His mercy. Let us see ourselves as New Testament harlots and tax-collectors, sitting at the feet of Christ and enjoying His forgiveness.

The best remedy to rid yourself of this tiresome slavery to everyday petty sins is attentive and constant prayer, which will soon prove to you that there are no insignificant sins, but that there is a demonic war waged against us at every moment of our existence. We are to become vigilant warriors, protecting ourselves with a shield of faith, so that the flaming arrows of our enemies will be extinguished by the cloud of God's grace enfolding our hearts.

When Spiritual Life Becomes Dry

RTE: Even among those of us who rarely become despondent or depressed, there are times when seemingly without any outward reason (such as mortal sin), spiritual life becomes dry: prayer is a podvig, services seem long and uninspiring and heaven itself feels far away. It is hard to even want to pray to rid ourselves of this heaviness. What do we do at times like this? You said earlier that we are not to place too much attention on "feeling." Should we just wait patiently for this to pass?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, each Christian will have his own experience of traveling through the desert like the ancient Israelites, whose faith was tested by the Heavenly Teacher. You are quite right, we are to be patient, and not only patient but grateful, because early ascetic teachers assert that heavenly grace can leave a human heart not only as a punishment, but for instruction – perhaps so that a person will be deeply convinced that it is not by his or her effort

that he will be saved, but by God's almighty hand. As we are all very close to pride, self-conceit can easily deceive us; we may not even notice its appearance. These minutes or hours of spiritual "abandonment" are God's charity. We are to be trustful, patient, grateful, and to judge ourselves. It is a very useful thing to remember that God will never give us something that is beyond our endurance, but seeing our brave struggle to oppose the barrenness, the depression, He will help us and console us sooner than we think. Therefore, we shouldn't fall into despair in moments of abandonment, nor should we be overly bold when we feel that we are strong and in a good state.

RTE: Do you think that some of this dryness has to do with modern lifestyles, particularly in the West where more and more is demanded of people, both at work and in daily life?

FR. ARTEMY: Metropolitan Philaret used to say that the best rest, the best recreation, is a change of activity. Therefore the western manner of working like tractors or robots, can certainly lead not only to physical, but to moral exhaustion. Therefore, we Christians are not called to go out on strike, but we should be sober and sensible, and when our work seems to overwhelm us, we should be like wise serpents and hide in some secret den.

RTE: But sometimes this just isn't possible.

FR. ARTEMY: (*smiling*) Then let them come to Russia.

RTE: We have talked quite a lot about abiding by Church canons and conforming ourselves to Orthodox standards. Could you speak for a moment about the individuality of the soul, and how this fits into the picture of Orthodox life? Often in close-knit parishes and monasteries, there is an insistence on conformity so that daily life will run smoother, and that there will be a sort of unity of mind. In the best sense, of course, and with an experienced spiritual father, this may be a necessary suppression of the distorted self which then leads to real freedom, but at the worst it is an excuse to isolate or put pressure on those who are "not with us" (as we see it.) What is the difference between God-given individual traits and personal indulgence? How can we discern and respect legitimate differences in character and temperament?

FR. ARTEMY: I think that the modern West, which was very proud of its political freedoms, compared to the communism of socialist countries, hasn't

really progressed very far in the realm of individuality. We have heard of the pressure of standards in the West, and Russians feel horror when they come to know first-hand what these standards of living and thinking really are.

RTE: Can you give us some examples of things that strike horror into Russian hearts?

FR. ARTEMY: (*smiling*) I mean just everything – for example, that everyone in the West is to be smiling at his work. Why should I smile if I have some sorrow? As a Russian man, I have a need to share my sorrow with my colleagues, to tell them about my toothache, or that I don't have money enough to go to the Mediterranean for a rest; I need to cry and I want to see that they feel compassion for me. I have no fear that I am going to lose my job because of my sincerity. And when in the West I find out that I have no moral or even social right to *complain*, that I am to hide everything, even from myself, and to persuade myself that I am the happiest man in the world... no, it is too much for me. Certainly, I suppose that even in the field of Christian relations this state of things can make an impact on a Christian life in a parish or monastery.

But I wouldn't like to idealize our Russian life, because even here, we rarely meet an *igumen* [abbot] who can instill and develop real spiritual life in his monastery. Pseudo-spirituality can easily take dominion in our hearts. One can see substitutes in many ways. Although we might have some orderly external manifestations of monastery life; a well-planned schedule of the day, rather full services according to the typicon, some conventional behaviour with bows, asking for forgiveness in the evening.... Although we may go to and fro in our monastic garb and don't transgress any rules of external behaviour, at the same time we may have nothing in our hearts, or even worse, well-masked passions of self-conceit, vanity, rudeness, an absence of love, compassion, pity, gratitude – it is very noticeable to any attentive person. It can be the most dreadful revelation if you live for a month or two in a monastery and then begin to understand that you haven't felt a real manifestation of spiritual life, of hearts that live with Christ.

So, when we turn to the New Testament we see that Jesus Christ never suppressed the individuality of his own disciples, that they were all different. They each had their own characters, inclinations, peculiarities of temperament. We know ardent, sincere Peter, and John the Theologian with his deep love. When, through our reading, we come to know real *startsi* of the past, we see with great pleasure and joy that they helped uncover the individual

features of their disciples and never trampled upon their souls. They were careful gardeners who guarded the God-given souls of their flock, and were very wise, tolerant, patient, and clever in distinguishing what people could or could not do. They had a personal approach to the soul that was never rude or oppressive. Therefore, we should always remember the main commandment of St. Paul concerning people: *to bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ*. This means that we should adopt a person with all of his lacks, his falls, with all of his individual traits, and that we should not try to remake him in our own image, but that we should be tolerant. It is only through meekness that we can help our neighbor accomplish something good; it is only our meekness that helps him change.

So, the real spirit of Christ is a spirit of freedom. This means that, respecting one's individuality, God always keeps a soul intact. Our Lord cleanses us, but He preserves the soul in its uniqueness. We should be very, very delicate when approaching a person because I am persuaded that real Christians (and especially priests) are to see and to feel this mystery of personality. *Sobornost* means that we are all together, but we are all different. We are all permeated with the love of Christ – Christ is with us, we are His limbs, but we don't look like one another. Although our union is founded on one faith in God, one baptism, we are not a collective of individuals devoid of personal traits, and I think that it is only Orthodox Christianity that gives the full idea of the integrity of the human personality.

On the other hand, when people begin to sin they lose their individuality and become very similar because every sin has its typical features. Drunkards, for example, are people with suppressed personalities. Real righteousness gives you spiritual freedom and enables you to manifest the treasure of your soul, to open the talents that you have been given by God and that are meant to be devoted to Him. It is one of the greatest miracles of the Church that we all need one another and that we each add to our neighbor's glory, as in a meadow where the flowers grow together but each with its own fragrance and beauty. This is a divine carpet that is not to be trodden underfoot.

The Western Character and Spiritual Freedom

RTE: It is interesting to see ourselves through the eyes of someone from another culture. What other things in the West seem to keep us from unfolding this God-given individuality?

FR. ARTEMY: I have not been so often in the West that my observations and musings have any absolute value. I have heard however, that many people who have been brought up by the western system of values have certain notions about how to spend their weekends and holidays. The idea of a weekend as time for continuous fun or amusement certainly doesn't allow one to cast a glance into one's own soul or to think about the meaning of life. This modern cultural "relaxation" often excludes any time for serious meditation.

The other thing that is troubling is the persuasion of modern young people that if you love a person everything is allowed. Everything is permitted, marriage is something quite different and unnecessary and can wait; children can be planned or postponed. It is as if we are not living organisms with specific laws, but are robots or computers to be programmed. Switched on, switched off. Few of these young people think about the consequences, or understand that these sexual abuses are a kind of slow suicide. This pattern of behavior, which was at first western, is now being spread in Russia, and we see that it has a heavy impact upon personality. It deprives a person of the ability to pray, to ponder upon the sense of one's life. It makes you a sinner of monotonous conformity with no brains and no soul.

Perhaps it is the standards of life in the West that are especially strange for us. Everything seems dependent on finances – a very well-planned system of enslaving man through bank loans and credit. You are accustomed to owing money, to being obliged to pay for months and years, and are like a real slave with your hands and legs bound with chains. Even your medical system seems to us a very original way of curing people: the young lady in a chemist's shop [a pharmacy] does not even dare to sell you the specific drug you need without a doctor's note. So, we have an impression that western people, surrounded by technical devices and swimming in a system of social wealth, are in reality completely unprotected, like children who will perish without authorities to care for them.

We have a joke here in Russia, that the most awful event in the history of Germany would be a crisis in the production of toilet paper. When German

people won't have the opportunity to buy toilet paper, it will be the toppling of their society. They will fall into despair and one will just be able to invade the country and occupy all the state buildings.... This is not acrid irony, but mild humor, because we know the proverb, "He who laughs best, laughs last." We have many more serious problems of our own here in Russia.

RTE: You said earlier that a state of mind of uniformity could have a real impact on a parish or monastery. Can you speak more about how we can correct this?

FR. ARTEMY: One of the most important virtues of a Christian is to have a fresh outlook, to have a fresh and pure perception of people and events. We shouldn't have patterns in our minds when associating with people. If you want to acutely feel the mystery of personality, you should try to perceive every man with a pure heart. Your heart is to be balanced, not biased. You shouldn't have any preconceptions. Many Christians, when they come to know the commandments of the Lord and the rules of the Church, think that they know and understand everything. For example, on hearing that this or that person was the victim of an accident, these people immediately begin to think, "What was the reason for this event? It was obviously a punishment. For what? For this... for that." This is how the friends of Job thought, but God rebuked them; they didn't see things correctly, although Job did.

A real Christian constitution is the state of being like a simpleton or an infant child, who is not at all convinced of his righteousness. When we read the old *patericons* and *matericons*, we see that the most experienced and spiritually endowed people didn't judge their neighbors at all. They didn't seize God's right to judge for themselves, but gave everything over to Our Lord. They were not mental executioners of other people. They preferred to cover a sinning brother with a mantle of love, and not to believe their eyes or ears even when seeing or hearing something wrong about their neighbor.

So, if we are taught to conform to patterns of thought and judgement, and in every situation behave according to outward earthly rules, our soul is close to death. When your soul is alive and you pray and think and feel the unutterable mystery of the world, when you begin to comprehend the extra-rational depth of the human soul, you are taught by grace to leave it to God to utter the verdict. It is God Who knows everything in its essence. We don't know anything for sure. No one can be convinced of the truth of his assessment unless the Spirit of God Himself testifies to it. Therefore, a

real Christian, a spiritual one, will try to perceive a person with his intuition and not be too quick to stick a label on his forehead. If you have an original Christian outlook you are not to characterize a person by his present state. Christian discernment understands that God's Providence, God's help, is over us all and that your neighbor will certainly change. Life flows on, and tomorrow he will repent of his sins and be forgiven, as we are all forgiven in God's foreseeing love.

I think the thing that is most often missing in parishes and monasteries is mildness; indeed there is often a kind of callousness there. People know everything about what is good and what is bad, but they have no patience, no tolerance, no mild manner of communication: they become irritated when someone transgresses a monastic rule, or the order of the service. In their righteous indignation they don't heal the wounds of one's soul but make it ache even more with their piercing manner of correction. This is the greatest illness. As St. Paul said, "*You who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness...*" I think this is the great lack of our century, that we don't have people whose hearts are noble and generous, who are filled with inner joy, compassion, and spiritual light. All of these external patterns and knowledge are nothing when you have no love. You are like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal, you are just nothing... an ornamented coffin filled inside with corruption.

The Golden Middle

RTE: You have been very clear about our need to look at people in a simple and child-like way, realizing that they can always change, but what if we see situations where authority is being abused, or innocent people are being physically or spiritually hurt? When is it our duty to say something, and when should we be quiet? For instance, I know that a few years ago you told a man that the next time he beat his wife, you would bring the militia to his house yourself. What should we do in those cases?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly there are situations when each of us is called by his conscience to intervene. We are to conquer evil with good, and in some cases we are to actively oppose evil through the force of goodness. It is Our Lord who says that the highest degree of love is to give your life for your friends. Therefore, it is our moral duty to get a person out of danger, out of physi-

cal or moral corruption, and to apply all possible means for success. Let us remember our saintly Archbishop John of Shanghai who waged a pious hunt, seeking abandoned Chinese children. Although risking his life, he wandered about the Chinese ghettos, finding infants in trash bins or redeeming them from infamous people for a bottle of rice-vodka. Very often he came across drunk Chinese bandits, but he was led by the Holy Spirit and he combined the gift of deep-hearted prayer with outward activity, knowing when and where he was to fulfill the commandments of the Lord.

RTE: Yes, St. John has been a great benefactor for many; pulling Chinese infants out of trash bins and Americans out of spiritual disaster. However, most of us do not have his deep-hearted prayer and discernment. How can we tell if a situation warrants stepping in, if it isn't a matter as clear as abandoned babies – for example, in a moral situation where you feel there is psychological or spiritual damage, or even cruelty?

FR. ARTEMY: Certainly, the best way is to consult your confessor, because not all earthly situations can be understood according to our rational ways of solving problems. Our conscience does not always give a right indication because sin living in our nature distorts our perception of the world and hinders us from analyzing the situation correctly, according to God's will. We should be sober and choose the royal way, not transgressing too far to the right or the left, but pursuing the golden middle. We shouldn't take too much upon ourselves, but ponder our modest forces and capabilities before we act positively. Holy Metropolitan Philip of Moscow had a rule: not to intervene in situations where he couldn't foresee success. We also have a very wise Russian proverb: you are to "measure seven times and cut once." If you don't want to be mistaken, you should first think and analyze the possible consequences of your action in the spirit of prayer. Then, having in mind all possible variants and asking God for help, you may do something – not relying upon your own strength, but completely hoping in God's grace.

You know, here in our parish, I have a few women, some ladies, who don't obey me. I don't want to command them, to rule over them, I only ask them, "Don't behave so badly. Your behavior is awful. You are to be sober." But they hunt the priests in a very sophisticated manner. They want to be the object of the priest's attention, to have him speak to them constantly, to cater to them. I want to be calm with them, but they are like a chemical

reaction that cannot be controlled. I do not battle with them, but I can see that they are corrupting their own hearts, and I want nothing to do with it. They try to approach the Chalice every day that I serve, but I feel that this is not correct, it is not useful for them. The best remedy for them is not to pay them any attention. They don't want to listen to the priest and they don't make use of the attention you give them. They may pray for five hours in vigil, have Holy Communion, but are still sad and even irritated. They do not want to be satisfied spiritually, they only want more attention, and it makes no sense. All of their oaths of fidelity and their promises to be obedient come to nothing. No matter what you do, they simply don't want to capture their hearts. For me it has become a matter of breaking all diplomatic ties.

I am not a rude man, but I see that it is an artificial necessity to be rude to them. Now, as I leave the church and see them trying to claim my attention in the larger group of people who want to talk about real troubles, I say, "The authorities have given me one vacant wagon in a train going to the Moldavian concentration camps (the most cruel camps in Soviet history), so I am now forming a group of women from Krasnoselskaya for these camps. The candidates are (*pointing*) you, you and you."

Sorrow and Gratitude

RTE: I can imagine that it is very difficult, especially when you have so many other people with real needs. Father Artemy, there are not many of us who have lived through the second half of the 20th century unscathed by false beliefs, moral falls, or materialism. In the West, much of this came to us under the guise of "spirituality." Those of us who found Orthodoxy are particularly grateful, in a way that we wouldn't be perhaps if we hadn't first experienced the barrenness of these wrong paths. Even so, we look back and grieve over lost years and lost opportunities. Can you say something about this?

FR. ARTEMY: St. Anthony the Great says that we are never to grieve over our lost years, but are to be grateful to God. We shouldn't even admit this bitter sorrow over the past into our hearts because one can easily be bitten by unfruitful remorse. It can also lead to rebuking God with some bold questions; "What for? Why did You allow...?" This is a crime because it isn't God who is guilty. It was God who had patience with us, who didn't allow the evil to swallow us but kept us from perishing in our sins.

Perhaps modern people are so proud, and their feelings of self-dignity and egotism are so enormous that the only way to humility is to feel ourselves as repenting harlots and tax-collectors. We know from the New Testament that the proud Pharisees were not accepted by Jesus Christ, who told them, *Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* The most important thing in the mystery of our salvation is humility. If you have humility you have everything. As St. David says in the Psalms: *The Lord is nigh unto them with a contrite heart; and saveth the humble of spirit.* Even if you find yourself in the golden garments of an archbishop, if you don't have humility you haven't anything. Perhaps the only way for a modern man, crazed by inner pride, to come to humility is to be crushed by life, to be cut into pieces by his sins, and to understand that he hasn't any strength to live without God. Our ancestors were like birds who soared to our Lord; now we must crawl to Him.

It is very important for us to know that although we are like demons in our crimes, unlike demons we are able to repent and God will save us. All of the tragedies and pain of modern life is to teach us that we are weak, that we are very poor, and that our Heavenly Father is the One, and only One, who can save us. The moment you feel yourself to be a repenting harlot or tax-collector, sitting near the feet of your Lord – Who absolves your sins, who doesn't reject you when you cover His feet with your bitter tears of repentance, Who allows you to dry His feet with your hair, and Who loves you, forgives you, and is ready to forget all of your filthiness – you feel yourself to be a child again. You feel God miraculously healing you. He takes away your cynicism and cruelty and releases you from the nightmare of disbelief, arrogance, and despair. He gives you back inner light, peace, consolation, joy, prudence, wisdom, the strength to resist evil. Then, you begin to understand the super-rational mystery of real Christianity and the spiritual meaning of His words: *I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.... They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick... for the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.* These words are beyond the rational; they can't be understood by the proud.

RTE: You say that we shouldn't ask bold questions of God, but isn't it human nature to think: "Perhaps if I'd been born into a Christian family...", or, "If only my father hadn't been an alcoholic...", or "Why did God allow me to meet this or that person when I was so young and naïve as to be led astray?"

FR. ARTEMY: We shouldn't dare to repeat the pious mistake of St. Anthony the Great who, after a hard, purifying fast asked God why some people are born poor and others rich; why some are born in luxury with all they need, while others are born in the ghetto, live amidst corruption and die before the flower of their soul opens; why some people enjoy many years of calm life, and others die in their childhood. The answer was, "Anthony, the things that you ask are God's Providence, and their investigation could harm your soul. Watch over yourself."

We shouldn't admit any doubt about God's Providence over this world, but we should explore the Scriptures. In the Wisdom of Solomon, we hear: *For the whole world before Thee is as a little grain of the balance, yea, as a drop of the morning dew that falleth down upon the earth. But Thou hast mercy upon all; for Thou canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend. For Thou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which Thou hast made: for never wouldst Thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it. And how could any thing have endured, if it had not been Thy will? Or been preserved, if not called by Thee? But Thou sparest all: for they are Thine, O Lord, Thou lover of souls.*

God foreknew our hearts. He has created them not to perish, but to be saved. No matter what your circumstances, if you only have one thought, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," you will be saved. When darkness becomes especially oppressive, it means that you yourself are guilty of the disappearance of the light... but even if you don't know the face of the Lord, if your soul struggles against the darkness, and you cry, "Oh, help me, help me," He will certainly appear.

God is close to us, not only close to us but within us and amidst us, and we should be very discreet with our questions and meditations because His Providence is a very high theme and one cannot see the beams of sunlight when your eyes are damaged by illness. You are to cure your eyes, and then you will enjoy the light of day.

But I also think that if you ask these questions timidly, reverently, not urging an immediate answer, He will make everything clear. You are to wait and be ready to receive His answer.

RTE: Thank you, Father Artemy. We've covered quite a lot of subjects, and you've made so many things clear. Is there anything you would like to say in closing to our readers?

FR. ARTEMY: Yes, I think that the days we are living in are the very days that were prophesied by the holy King David: *Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men*, and we are to understand the spiritual measure of modern people – both shepherds and sheep. It is a naïve thing to look for spiritual giants. Our Lord was especially insistent when He said, *“Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth; behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.”* The last decades have brought us great changes; our real spiritual fathers have gone the way of the earth and now abide where *“there is neither sickness nor sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.”* We live on the earth by God’s Providence, but we are all chicks and neither the shepherds nor the sheep have yet broken out of their shells.

We are all in darkness. What are we all talking about? No one knows. What does this or that statement mean? Nothing! Who can say anything for sure? No one! Who is truly enlightened? I don’t know! Therefore, the only thing left to do is to pray and to wait for the time when God Himself will help us to peck through the shell, when we will become sons of Light and walk without stumbling. Until this day comes, let us cry without despair, smile without arrogance, pity one another without sentimentality, be patient, be tolerant, bear our neighbor’s burdens without irritation – for we are all patients of one hospital. Each of us taken separately is a foul sinner, but taken together, we are the Body of Christ, the limbs of the Church, a royal priesthood called together for good deeds from all eternity.

My final hope is that our readers will remember that all these questions were answered by a chick who hasn’t yet managed to break out of his own shell of sin and ignorance, and that having read this interview to the end, our readers won’t utter a just word of rebuke, pronounce a righteous verdict, or turn away in disdain, but will just give a prayerful sigh, “Oh Lord, have mercy on him.” ✦