



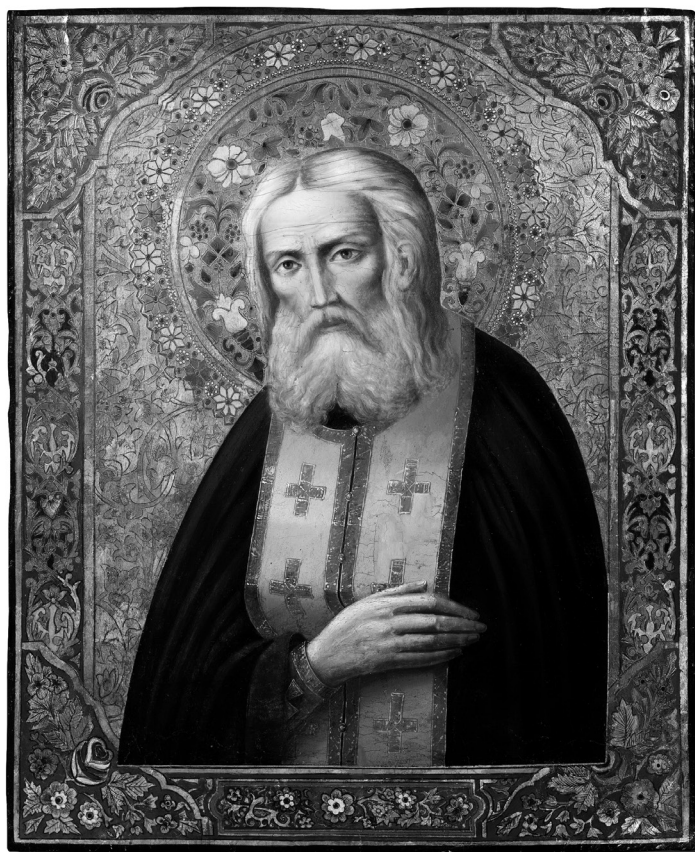
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AS BRIGHT AS THE SUN

Excerpts from the Conversation
of St. Seraphim of Sarov
and Nikolai Motovilov

Nikolai Alexandrovich Motovilov (1809-1879) was a Russian landowner, Justice of the Peace, philanthropist, and the contemporary biographer of his elder, St. Seraphim of Sarov. Motovilov wrote down many of his conversations with St. Seraphim, including a talk he had with the elder on the purpose of the Christian life in 1831, two years before the saint's death. The conversation is now one of Russian Orthodoxy's greatest literary treasures.

After his marriage in 1840, Motovilov settled on his estate near Simbirsk, where he published articles and wrote letters to Orthodox Church and Russian government officials (including Tsar Alexander II) calling for St. Seraphim's canonization. He also organized business ventures, including a bank which assisted in the migration of millions of peasants from Central Russia to Siberia. Motovilov used his business acumen to support the Serafimo-Diveyevsky Women's Monastery, which he had promised St. Seraphim to provide for, and he was buried in the monastery at his death in 1879. His beloved elder was canonized by the Russian Church Synod in 1903 at the urging of Tsar Nicholas II, and during the lifetime of Nikolai's wife, Elena.

Motovilov's manuscripts were mostly left unpublished and stored in baskets in the attic of his house until, in 1902, Elena Motovilov gave permission for the Russian philosopher and religious writer Sergei Nilus to publish any worthwhile material. Under what seemed to be discarded rubbish covered with feathers and bird droppings, Nilus found an old exercise book in Motovilov's writing containing the spiritual gem we now know as "The Conversation of St. Seraphim and N.A. Motovilov." It has since been reprinted in both Russian and English, and for several decades was familiar reading in the English-speaking Orthodox world. However, with the wealth of Orthodox and patristic texts now available in English, a new generation of converts may need to be reintroduced to this spiritual classic. Following are excerpts from the larger text.

The Aim of the Christian Life and the Grace of the Holy Spirit

It was Thursday. The day was gloomy. The snow lay eight inches deep on the ground; and dry, crisp snowflakes were falling thickly from the sky when Father Seraphim began his conversation with me in a field adjoining his near hermitage, opposite the River Sarovka, at the foot of the hill which slopes down to the river bank. He sat me on the stump of a tree which he had just felled, and he himself squatted opposite me. "The Lord has revealed to me,"

the great elder said, “that in your childhood you had a great desire to know the aim of our Christian life In acquiring the Spirit of God consists the true aim of our Christian life, while prayer, vigil, fasting, almsgiving and other good works done for Christ’s sake are only the means for acquiring the Spirit of God.”

“But how,” I asked... “can I know that I am in the grace of the Holy Spirit?”

“It is very simple...” he replied. “That is why the Lord says: *All things are simple to those who find knowledge*. The trouble is that we do not seek this divine knowledge which doesn’t puff up, for it is not of this world. This knowledge, which is full of love for God and for our neighbor, strengthens every man for his salvation.... And how simple it is!”

“Nevertheless,” I replied, “I do not understand how I can be certain that I’m in the Spirit of God. How can I discern for myself His manifestation within me?”

Then Father Seraphim took me firmly by the shoulders and said: “We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don’t you look at me?”

I replied: “I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain.”

Father Seraphim said: “Don’t be alarmed!... Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you wouldn’t see me as I am.”

Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: “Thank the Lord God for His unutterable mercy to us! You saw that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God...: ‘Lord, grant him to see clearly with his bodily eyes that descent of Thy Spirit, which Thou dost grant to Thy servants when Thou art pleased to appear in the light of Thy magnificent glory.’ And you see, my son, the Lord instantly fulfilled the humble prayer of poor Seraphim.

“How then shall we not thank Him for this unspeakable gift to us both? Even to the greatest hermits, my son, the Lord God does not always show His mercy in this way. This grace of God, like a loving mother, has been pleased to comfort your contrite heart at the intercession of the Mother of God herself. But why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look, and don’t be afraid! The Lord is with us!”

After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light

Opposite: St. Seraphim in the forest.



of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snow-flakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder. You can imagine the state I was in!

“How do you feel now?” Father Seraphim asked me.

“Extraordinarily well,” I said.

“But in what way? How exactly do you feel well?”

I answered: “I feel such calmness and peace in my soul that no words can express it.”

“This...” said Father Seraphim, “is that peace of which the Lord said to His disciples: *My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives, give I unto you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world....*”

“What else do you feel?” Father Seraphim asked me.

“An extraordinary sweetness,” I replied.

And he continued: “This is that sweetness of which it is said in Holy Scripture: *They will be inebriated with the fatness of Thy house; and Thou shalt make them drink of the torrent of Thy delight.* And now this sweetness floods our hearts and courses through our veins with unspeakable delight. From this sweetness our hearts melt, as it were, and both of us are filled with such happiness as tongue cannot tell. What else do you feel?”

“An extraordinary joy in my heart.”

Father Seraphim continued: “When the Spirit of God comes down to man and overshadows him with the fullness of His inspiration, then the human soul overflows with unspeakable joy, for the Spirit of God fills with joy whatever He touches. This is that joy of which the Lord speaks in His Gospel... Yet, however comforting it may be, this joy which you now feel in your heart is nothing in comparison with that of which the Lord himself by the mouth of His Apostle said: *That eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him.* Foretastes of that joy are given to us now, and if they fill our souls with such sweetness, well-being and happiness, what shall we say of that joy which has

been prepared in heaven for those who weep here on earth?...What else do you feel?"

I answered: "An extraordinary warmth."

"How can you feel warmth, my son? Look, we are sitting in the forest. It is winter out-of-doors, and snow is underfoot. There is more than an inch of snow on us, and the snowflakes are still falling. What warmth can there be?"

I answered: "Such as there is in a bath-house when the water is poured on the stone and the steam rises in clouds."

"And the smell?" he asked me. "Is it the same as in the bath-house?"

"No," I replied. "There is nothing on earth like this fragrance. When in my dear mother's lifetime, I was fond of dancing and used to go to balls and parties, my mother would sprinkle me with scent which she bought at the best shops in Kazan. But those scents did not exhale such fragrance."

And Father Seraphim, smiling pleasantly, said: "I know it myself just as well as you do, my son, but I am asking you to see whether you feel it in the same way. It is absolutely true!... The sweetest earthly fragrance cannot be compared with the fragrance which we now smell, for we are enveloped in the fragrance of the Holy Spirit of God.... With this fullness of His Holy Spirit the Lord has now filled us poor creatures to overflowing. So, there is no need now... to ask how people come to be in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Will you remember this manifestation of God's ineffable mercy which has visited us?"

"I don't know, Father, whether the Lord will grant me to remember this mercy of God always as vividly and clearly as I feel it now."

"I think," Father Seraphim answered me, "that the Lord will help you to retain it in your memory forever, or His goodness would never have instantly bowed in this way to my humble prayer and so quickly anticipated the request of poor Seraphim; all the more so, because it is not given to you alone to understand it, but through you it is for the whole world, in order that you yourself may be confirmed in God's work and useful to others." ✦

Translated by Fr. Lazarus Moore

Courtesy of the Father Lazarus Moore Foundation and Anaphora Press

For a life of St. Seraphim of Sarov and the full version of his conversation with N.A. Motovilov see: Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *An Extraordinary Peace: St. Seraphim, Flame of Sarov*, Anaphora Press, Port Townsend, WA, 2009, pp. 111-138. (www.anaphorapress.com)