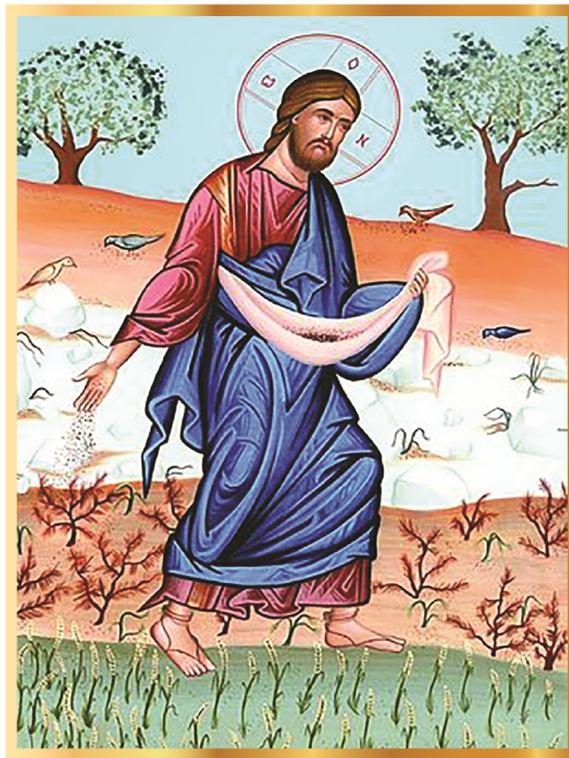


His Grace Bishop Emilianos of Melea

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The Spiritual Life in the World

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By

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FOREWORD

This booklet has been transcribed and edited from a talk given by Geronda Evagrios, Abbot of the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St John, Perth, at a youth retreat in Brisbane, Australia. The “Spiritual Life in the World” was the theme of the retreat. The talk has been modified into a readable form, maintaining the character of Geronda Evagrios.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Everybody has questions about the spiritual life in the world, thinking it is not easy. The spiritual life is simple, but we complicate things. Leading a spiritual life is to follow, hold onto and be united with the Holy Spirit. If we can be united with the Holy Spirit, this is success. This is our ticket to eternal life from now, and this is what makes us spiritual people. This is how the Saints of our Church became Saints.

Some might think that it is easier for someone who lives in a Monastery to be a spiritual person or that there is a difference in the spirituality between a monk and someone who has a family and lives in the world. Indeed, there might be some differences between the life of a monk and the life of a married person, but at the same time our God is one, the spiritual life is one, the Holy Spirit is One, and our Church is one. The difference in the struggle for spiritual life between monks who live in a Monastery and people living in the world is that people living in the world have more distractions and responsibilities. They have to care for their family, their children, their job, their spouses, and much more. A person living in a Monastery only needs to work on the salvation of his/her soul.

CHAPTER 2: THE JESUS PRAYER

Spirituality is not just for monastics; it is for everyone. This is why the Saints suggest that the deeper spiritual books, such as the Philokalia and the writings on the Jesus Prayer, are also read and practised by the lay people. For those who do not know, the Philokalia is a collection of writings from the Fathers of the Church. It is a very deep book that you cannot just read like a story.

The monastics follow their everyday Services, but they mainly practise the Jesus Prayer. It is a very simple prayer, just one phrase: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me a sinner”. Monastics try to repeat it all the time, no matter what we do, day and night. They also have dedicated times of the day during which they repeat this prayer, aiming at achieving complete self-concentration. We believe that this is a very powerful prayer.

This is a true story about the Jesus Prayer. In Russia, there was a house next to a forest where a family lived. The family had a parrot, which was taught to repeat the Jesus Prayer in Russian. One day the parrot found the window open and as it was not caged it flew out. An eagle tried to attack the parrot and when the eagle went closer, the parrot started saying "Lord Jesus Christ...". It didn't even finish the phrase and the eagle flew away. This demonstrates how strong the Jesus Prayer is regardless if we understand what we are saying or not, if we are focused or not. Because the parrot is not smart, it just repeats things like a tape recorder.

When we use Jesus' name, the use of His name becomes the presence of Jesus irrespectively of whether we understand it or not. This is so strong that nothing can beat it. This is the strongest thing we can do to go close to and be united with God. That is why the Fathers of the Church recommend the use of this prayer all the time, even when we cook, we have a shower, we work, even when we exercise or whatever we do. However, let us not forget that on this path of practicing the Jesus prayer we must have an experienced in prayer Spiritual Father to guide us. Otherwise, we run the risk to be tricked by the tempter, who can make us think that we have achieved something, and then we become proud. This is a trap that instead of bringing us close to God, it separates us from Him.

Now as we said at the beginning, the spiritual life is nothing more or less than the Holy Spirit itself. When God created us, He gave us the Holy Spirit inside us. But then Adam and Eve committed the original sin and in a way they covered the Holy Spirit with the dirt of sin. Then, although the Holy Spirit was there, It was not activated and could not help them. The Orthodox Church (the Church that was originally founded by Jesus and his disciples) baptizes us and through this reactivates the Holy Spirit inside us. This commences a new life. This is why when we are baptized we receive our name, because this indicates that we start a new life - the old person dies, a new one is born. No matter what sins we have committed before in our lives, all are forgiven, and we start afresh. It is the same when someone becomes a monk or a nun. They are given a new name and they start a new life. This is similar to confession, which is one of the Sacraments of the Church. We get rid of everything that happened in the past, all our sins, everything and we start afresh. These are different ways to reactivate the Holy Spirit inside us, because without the Holy Spirit there is no spiritual life and we cannot do anything.

CHAPTER 3: HOW TO MAINTAIN A SPIRITUAL LIFE

To be safe and keep growing in our spiritual life and spiritual work, we do not just need to make a good start, it is not just Baptism and Confession either, we must keep living the life of the Church. We must continue to obey the rules of the Church, participate in all the

Sacraments, and have a Spiritual Father. If we do not do this, it is like having a plant that we do not water to grow, and then one day it will just die.

St Symeon the New Theologian said that we should not get caught up in the cares of this life. This of course does not mean, for instance, that the mother will not cook. Otherwise everything will get upside down in the family, and this will be an issue. What St Symeon said means that after taking care of everything, we stop worrying about different things. We do everything to the best of our ability and then we leave everything in God's hands together with our own self. We do things with all our strength and all our heart and all our love, and then we do not worry about anything. If the food is tasty, good. If it is not tasty, what can we do? It is already done. Tomorrow we will cook something better. What I am describing is called *αμεριμνία*. This is very important because if we worry about these things, then we cannot focus on our spiritual life. Especially when someone is married with children and lives in this world, he has so many things to worry about that if he adds extra anxiety to them then the burden becomes too heavy and there is no space left for God to reside inside him. He will be full of worries.

The second thing that St Symeon points out is *απροσπάθεια*, which means not to be attached to anything. In our everyday life, we should not be fully or partially attached to anything, because this will separate us from God and from the people around us. For example, someone may be too attached to the internet. This is not communion with God, or with others, or with our own self. This is an issue because it detaches him from everybody else. It is attachment to something, which does not help him. It is helpful if you are using it in a healthy way and for as long as it is needed. For example, the knife is good to cut the bread, but not to cut your hand. And we do not sleep and wake up with the knife occupying constantly our mind.

The third thing that St Symeon discusses is *καθαρή συνείδηση* - to have a clean conscience. If we have a clean conscience, then our conscience inside us will be the voice of God. This will lead us closer to Him and will help us avoid sin. When we keep our conscience clean, it becomes sharper and it will lead us to the truth. Sometimes we think that our conscience tells us something that is good, but in reality we might be overzealous. We must be careful. If there is something we are not sure about, we must always ask our Spiritual Father to ensure this is not a thought from the right. We believe that the thoughts, even if it is the worst thought that comes to our mind, are not sins. According to the Fathers of the Church, when we start a dialogue with our thoughts, that is we start sinning (if the thought is sinful). Sometimes we have what we call thoughts from the right - these are worse than the evil ones. With evil thoughts, we can easily realize that something is black, and we know this is black, not white, therefore it is not good. If the tempter puts in your mind to go and steal something, then you realize

stealing is not a good thing. But sometimes the tempter puts in our mind something which seems to be good, but it can be a wolf in sheep's clothing. This is difficult to understand, and that is why we must discuss these thoughts with our Spiritual Father if we have even a small doubt inside us as to their origin and their potential effects in our life. For example, one such thought may be to give more pocket money to your children, thinking that this way they will love you and they will think that you love them too - but in reality, this can spoil them.

These three elements in our spiritual life that we have just discussed are very important. However, there are some 'short cuts' to speed things up in our spiritual life. But short cuts are not always easy.

CHAPTER 4: UNINTERRUPTED PRAYER

We must pray at all times. This is not an easy thing, but it is not difficult either if we know how to do it. Let me point out here that we are not referring to the uninterrupted Jesus Prayer, but to something different. Elder Sophronios of Essex knew a very spiritual professor of heart surgery in the University of Athens. This person once had a dream with Elder Sophronios and the Elder said to him: "My doctor, you must pray all the time". The doctor asked: "Father, I am doing open heart surgeries, how can I pray all the time? I will kill people". And Elder Sophronios answered: "You did not understand, you must do this", and he showed him his hands open. The doctor was already doing this because he was performing open heart operations, but Elder Sophronios explained to him showing him with his hands how to open his heart: "You must always have your heart open in front of God, this is what it means to pray all the time."

Prayer does not have to have words. We said before that the Jesus Prayer is the best prayer, but prayer does not have to include words because God knows before we pray what we want to ask for. God knows our hearts, and by having our hearts open in front of God it is like praying all the time. This means that no matter what we do, we should remember that God is watching us, He can see deep inside our hearts. If we want God to see inside our hearts and we constantly think of it, then this is praying all the time. This way, we ask Him to correct us and protect us all the time. Then, even if we do something wrong, He will find a way out, a way around our faults and mistakes. This is what it means to pray at all times.

CHAPTER 5: WAYS TO COME CLOSE TO GOD

Another way to get closer to God is to lead a life of service and sacrifice. A life of servicing Jesus is through the face of our fellow men. When we help others, we not only grow

spiritually, but we also “lend” God (“ο ελεών πτωχῷ δανείζει Θεῷ” - “he who helps the poor, lends God”, St John Chrysostom). And God will help us at the time of our own need, or even better, at His Heavenly Kingdom.

Another way to go closer to God, similar to the previous one, is to love everyone, even our enemies and to love everything. St Silouan used to say that if we do not love our enemies, you can't pray. Our prayer will not be accepted because we are not open to God's love. Even during His crucifixion Jesus prayed for the ones that were killing him.

We must also be grateful for everything that happens in our lives. There was a holy man in Mt Athos, named Papa Tryphon, who was spiritually connected with St Paisios. He said that St Paisios used to say that the “Lord have mercy” is worth 10 drachmas, but the “Thank God (Glory to God)” is worth 1000 drachmas. Being grateful to God for whatever happens in our life sometimes is the best prayer. When we suffer, either in our body or in our soul, or even spiritually, we cannot pray unless we have this spirit of being grateful to God. If not, then we just give up.

CHAPTER 6: THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The Parable of the Sower is important to leading a Spiritual Life in the world. *The Lord said this parable: A sower went out to sow his seed and as he sowed, some fell among the path and was trodden under foot and the birds of the air devoured it and some fell on the rock and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. And when His disciples asked Him what this parable meant, He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God, but for others, they are in parables so that seeing they may not see and hearing may not understand.” Now the parable is this, the seed is the Word of God, the ones along the path are those who have heard, then the devil comes and takes away a word from their hearts that they may not believe in the said. And the ones from the rock are those who when they hear the word, receive it with joy, but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of live and their fruit does not mature. And as for that in the good soil, they are those who hearing the word hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bring forth fruit with patience. As He said these things he cried out: he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Luke 8:5-15*

Before we discuss this parable, let us mention an example that demonstrates the importance of everything contained in the Bible for our everyday life and our decisions.

One day, St Anthony went to church and heard the priest reading from the Gospel “give up everything and follow me” (Matthew 19:21). St Anthony felt that Jesus was speaking to him personally on that day and he took it literally. He gave up everything and he became an ascetic. He became a Saint and was called the Father of the desert. The Gospel is not just words, the Gospel together with the Epistles, the New Testament, the Bible, is Jesus himself. It is the Word of God. When we hear the Gospel on Sundays, we must be very careful and try to understand what God wants to tell us personally. If we exercise this spiritual ability, then every time, through the Gospel, Jesus will tell us something different. This is Him telling us what to do and how to deal with any difficulties we are going through at the present time. The Gospel is more than just words!

CHAPTER 7: WHY SOME ARE APOSTLES, WHILST OTHERS ARE NOT

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God but for others, they are in parables so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.”

When we first hear this passage, we might think that Jesus discriminates between the Apostles and everyone else. We might think He only provides explanations to the Apostles and not to everyone else. This is not the case. God does not discriminate by making some people Apostles, and not the less faithful.

It is up to us if we want to become Apostles or be just an anonymous person in the crowd. The Apostles were simple fishermen, they were like everybody else, but they had an open heart, and then from catching fish they started fishing men. This is what God can do inside us if we really want to give ourselves to Him. We do not have to go to a mountain or a cave and become ascetics, we only need to want to work for God's glory and love God. It is therefore up to us if we want to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. If we properly prepare ourselves for it, the Kingdom of God will be revealed to us.

CHAPTER 8: SEEDS THAT FELL ALONG THE PATH

“Some fell along the path and was trodden under foot and the birds of the air devoured it.”

The Kingdom of God is like seeds, and some of the seeds fell along the path. There is a story from Abba Dorotheos about the time when pirates existed. The pirates attacked a village and took some young children and men to sell them as slaves. Amongst the captives were two young girls the same age. When the pirates reached a port, these two young girls were sold to two different people. One of them was sold to nuns, who had collected some money and thought they had better go down to the port and buy at least

one person to save them from slavery. The other little girl was sold to a brothel, where she was used as a prostitute. Before these two girls were sold they were the same, they were just two little girls. They knew nothing about life, but after 15 years they were different. The one became a nun and everybody was saying what a nice person she was, what a gift from God for everyone around her. The other girl grew up in a different environment, she was the extreme opposite, and everybody was saying how can a person end up like this. But God knows that 15 years ago both these girls were normal little girls. We can say that this is like the seeds, where one fell along the path and the other on good ground. This is why we should not judge people.

St Mary of Egypt is a great example of this. She was a prostitute and she became a holy person, a Saint. Thus, let us go back to what we said before; it is up to us if we become Apostles or someone else. God does not discriminate, it is our personal choice. If we make the right choice, God will give us the strength, not the other way around. God does not give His strength to people that we think He loves more. He gave His Blood for every single one of us. In other words, even if we are like the seed that fell along the path, what can God do? God can blow His wind, His Holy Spirit, to move us to a place where there are no birds to eat us or feet to step on us and destroy us. He can plant us in good soil. This does not mean that we will not have difficulties in our lives. But if we keep our conscience clean, God will find a way to enlighten us at the right time. Even if we are the worse people, He can transform us into preachers of the Gospel, people who will help others, or at the very least we will be able to save our soul.

CHAPTER 9: NO DEPTH

“Some fell on the rock and as it grew up it withered away, because it had no moisture.”

In this situation, there was not enough soil, but the seeds grew anyway. This parable is told by three out of the four Evangelists, and the one we are discussing is from Apostle Luke. Apostles Matthew and Mark write this specific part a little differently. St Mathew writes: *“...immediately sprung up, because they had no depth of earth...”*, and St Mark writes: *“...immediately sprung up because it had no depth of earth...”*. There was no depth of earth and yet it is a paradox, but maybe for this very reason, the seeds sprung up straight away. Sometimes we see people performing impressive spiritual things, but this might mean that they have no depth. We might see people trying to impress others spiritually, or going to church all the time, but they overdo it in some things. Then, as the Gospel tells us, when the sun rises in the hot weather, because they have no depth, they will die. In other words, when they are tempted, they give up and they cannot improve spiritually. The point here is that we have to be realistic in our spiritual lives. Not to try to do everything at once, because we have to grow our roots first before our branches. If

we do not have spiritual roots, we will not be able to grow fruit that will last. Instead of trying to impress others, or even our own selves, with our spiritual and Christian life - for example if we try to fast from oil for 40 days -, we should try to gradually train ourselves. Then, we will be able to do more in the future. We will become more humble and spiritually safe and secure. Then, if we have a difficulty, we can deal with it more easily. If we use all our strength to do something greater than our capabilities, then we will fall into temptation. It might be a small temptation, but we will likely not be able to deal with it. We will completely wither away.

If we want to do more in our spiritual lives, we must always first consult our Spiritual Father. If he gives us the blessing to do more, then we can do more, but if he tells us to go slower, then we must go slowly. There was a monk who did not tell his Elder (Spiritual Father) how many prostrations he was doing. Prostrations are a spiritual exercise, the purpose of which is to humble our body with the physical exercise, whilst at the same time we repeat the Jesus Prayer. In a Monastery, the spiritual routine and prayers of a monastic must be according to the blessing of his/her Elder. This monk was doing more and more prostrations without telling his Elder, and he ended up becoming proud. He was doing thousands of prostrations every day. His ego and the tempter gave him the strength to do them, encouraging him to keep it a secret from his Elder. One day, his Elder realised that something was wrong because the monk was becoming more and more proud, and he asked him what was his daily spiritual routine. And the monk proudly replied "I do thousands of prostrations". His Elder then told him to do only five from tomorrow. The next morning the monk tried to defy him, but he did not have the physical strength to do even the five prostrations his Elder allowed. Forced to obey his Elder, his ego was hurt and the tempter was not helping him anymore. It is good therefore to know our limits, our measures, and to act accordingly.

In relation to the seed that fell on the rock and grew but withered away because it had no moisture, I wanted to mention that even if our heart is like a rock, God can make rocky soil like rock dust, if we truly want this. Rock dust is very beneficial for vegetables and fruits, because it has minerals that are released and absorbed by the plant slowly and help the plants produce bigger and tastier fruit. Therefore, even if our hearts are like rock, God can turn them into rock dust, which is full of beneficial trace elements. This way, although we might have a hard heart at the beginning, we end up becoming soft. Everything is possible for God if we wish it, and everything is possible for us if we believe in God.

CHAPTER 10: WHO CAN CLAIM TO BE FREE FROM THORNS?

"Some fell among thorns and the thorns grew with it and choked it."

Thorns could be our thoughts, our bad habits, difficulties, ambitions, our ego, the incorrect ways that we were raised, and any trauma we went through and carry since we were children, and so on. Who can claim to be free from thorns? There is a story from the Geroticon saying the following. There was an Elder who asked his disciple to cultivate a piece of land, and pull out all the weeds as it was full of them. When the disciple saw this piece of land, he was discouraged, fell into despair, and thought there was no way he could do this. The elder then told him to only work on it half an hour a day. The disciple obeyed his Elder and within a month the piece of land was finished. This is what we must do with our thorns. If we try, we can get rid of all of them, little by little, with the help of our Spiritual Father. God can give us the strength to uproot everything around and inside us that is harmful to our spiritual lives and suffocates us.

CHAPTER 11: ANXIETY AND LOVE

God created us in His image and likeness - this means that everything that is good inside us is the image and likeness of God. We must become gods by grace so that we have love for God and for others. Sometimes, there is anxiety inside us, even when we try to love others and do the right thing. To avoid anxiety, we must love without expecting anything in return. If we expect in return love, respect or recognition, then we become demanding. Then, we tie up others in our expectations and we ourselves become unhappy, depressed and anxious. Anxiety and depression are in a way our reward for the imperfect love we give to others. And this type of love fills us with thorns, expectations and demands.

When we give, we should not expect to receive something in return. When a father loves his son or daughter, he should not expect them to love him back. It is a natural expectation that the children return the love of their parents. However, Jesus gave His Blood for us without forcing us to give our blood for Him. Of course, there are people who gave their blood for Christ and became Saints. What is greater than this? But it is our choice if we want to follow His example, or not. In our families, sometimes we demand understanding and love, but this expectation leads to anxiety. This results in us always being unhappy and wanting, and then because of our "love" we cannot lead a spiritual life.

When we give love, we should not expect love in return. But if we do love, and if we love with all our heart, then God will give us His love, which is above every other love. If we realise that we have such issues and demand things from others and we cannot control this, we should be careful. We should be gentle with ourselves and try not to uproot at once all these thorns from inside us. Or as the Gospel says somewhere else, we might even uproot the good things from inside us together with the thorns. Whatever we do,

we must do it wisely to avoid damaging ourselves whilst trying to create a spiritual foundation inside us.

CHAPTER 12: SELF-EMPTINESS AND OBEDIENCE

“Some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.”

Even the good soil needs patience, prayer and watchfulness. The Fathers of the Church have written about prayer and watchfulness – *nepsis* (νηψις). Watchfulness is to empty our mind from every thought, the good and the bad, from everything. The Buddhists are good at this, they can have full control of their mind, but the issue is that they do not believe in the person of God and do not connect this emptiness with God but with something empty. As a consequence, they get tricked by the demons and fill themselves with demonic visions and energies. When we empty an area, we must fill it with something. The Orthodox ascetics do not just empty their minds from thoughts. Otherwise, as the Gospel tells us, we will become like the house someone cleaned and then instead of one demon that was initially there, another seven demons came, worse than the first, because it was clean and tidy (Luke 11:25-26). Therefore, when we empty our mind, we have to give it a meaning, we have to give it something to work on, and this is the Jesus Prayer or any other canonical prayer. Then, we are secure and we are on the right path towards God. The prayer fills our mind and we become complete as we fill ourselves with God.

The Kingdom of Heaven starts from this life, not from the next life. If we do not get a full taste of the Kingdom of Heaven from now, then as some of the Fathers of the Church say, we will not get it in the next life. We have to establish the Kingdom of Heaven inside us from now. The Saints talk about these spiritual experiences, the Uncreated Light, which is God, with whom they talk.

Jesus emptied Himself, became human, and obeyed God even unto death. Self-emptiness and obedience to God’s Will is the safest way to acquire a spiritual life. By emptying ourselves via practising watchfulness, we allow God to transform us and do as He wishes with us. There are people that wanted to become ascetics, but God made them bishops. Other people wanted to become monastics, but God gave them marriage and family. What is right for our spiritual life is not necessarily what we think. This is how we become Apostles, by following God’s will for us. The monastic life can in some ways also be achieved in the house, in the family. Although there are a few differences, the family of Christ, the Church, is the most important thing, in other words to be honest members of His Body, the Church. Because becoming monastics will not guarantee our salvation or

sanctification. For our specific character and according to God's will, sanctification may be easier for us through marriage.

It is important to remember that Jesus obeyed His Father even unto death. In Jesus' death (the crucifixion), even the demons did not realise God's plan. So, when they influenced the Jews to crucify Jesus, they thought that this would be the end. By killing Him they thought they would get rid of the One who wanted to help humanity. But through death we have the resurrection, and this is amazing! Through obedience, through an act that kills our own will, we obtain something that gives us a new life, and this is what obedience achieves. Obedience is not us trying to convince our Spiritual Father what we think is right for us to do. Obedience is letting God transform us so that we can do His will. Death is weaker than obedience!

Our mind empties, our thoughts die, and God is born inside us. The seed dies and produces fruit.

CHAPTER 13: GOD GIVES US NUMEROUS OPPORTUNITIES

Before we discussed the explanation of the Parable of the Sower from one optical angle. However, if we take our mind away from what we discussed previously, we can discuss its explanation from a different angle and with different experiences. As we said previously, God does not discriminate. The seed is God's Word. Now, the different types of earth do not refer to different people, but to our own receptiveness. It is therefore up to us if we give to the Word of God a piece of land (of our own self) inside us along the path, or on the rock, or amongst thorns, or on good and fertile soil.

A sower (the Father) went out to sow (through the Holy Spirit) his seed (his Son). And the seed was united with our land (the incarnation of the Word). And it is sowed inside us numerous times, with prayer, the Sacraments of the Church, His miracles in our life - either manifest or silent -, and with the difficulties we encounter that soften our stone heart. If we properly look after even one of those sowings, this is enough to establish and increase the Kingdom of God inside us.

CHAPTER 14: GOD'S OBEDIENCE TOWARDS US

"At that time, as Jesus arrived at the Country of Gadarenes, there met Him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes and he lived not in a house but among the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out, and fell down before Him, and said with a loud voice "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most High God? I beseech you, do not torment me!" For He had commanded the unclean spirit to

come out of the man. For many a time it had seized him, he was kept under guard and bound with chains and fetters but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert. Jesus then asked him: "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. And they begged Him not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hill side and they begged Him to let them enter these so He gave them leave. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. When the herdsmen saw what happened, they fled and told it into the city and in the country. Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man, from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. And those who had seen it told them how he who had been possessed with demons was healed. Then all the people from surrounding Country of the Gadarenes asked Him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So He got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with Him. But He sent him away, saying: "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." And he went away proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him." Luke 8:26-39

This reading gives us a taste of God's obedience towards us. Most of the times, God obeys us instead of us obeying God.

"The demons begged Jesus not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hill side and they begged Him to let them enter these so He gave them leave. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned."

Jesus allowed the demons to enter the pigs. On one hand, He did this to stop these people from sinning since the trade of pork was illegal at the time according to the Mosaic Law. But what is amazing is that God was obedient even onto the demons. Think about this, if Jesus obeyed the demons, wouldn't He also obey them if they asked to be restored back to their angelic nature? The demons were initially angels, who fell because they became proud. They wanted to take God's place, and from angels they became demons. If God obeyed them in this instance with the pigs, how much more would He forgive them if they were humble enough to repent and ask for His mercy?

Once St Paisios was praying for the salvation of the demons. Whilst he was praying, he saw a black thing laughing at him. This shows that the demons do not want to repent, to be restored back to their initial situation. Here, we are not discussing their inability to be restored back to their angelic nature, but rather their personal will.

We, as humans, have the Sacrament of Confession and through this, repentance can open heaven for us. And if we, in all honesty, ask God to help us in our spiritual lives, He will immediately obey to us too and will help us. This means that our prayers are being heard.

CHAPTER 15: FORGIVENESS

What happens if someone does something terrible to us and does not apologise, what should we do?

What did Jesus say on the Cross? He said "*My Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*" Jesus forgave them and prayed for them. Let us follow the example of Saint Dionysios, who forgave the murderer of his brother. If we do not forgive, how do we expect God to forgive us? In our mind, we think that someone sinned greatly, but what is great and what is small in front of God? God is God Almighty, there is no such thing as a small sin in front of God. For example, if you do something to an adult, the adult will react. But if you do something bad to a policeman, you put yourself in a more difficult position and are likely to go to jail. If you do something bad to a king, you have ruined your life. If we do something bad to God this is even bigger because we have done something bad to the One who is the greatest. Even the smallest thing that you do to the One who is greater than everything is a great thing, a great insult. This refers to our personal sins. But when it comes to the sins of others, we are not the ones to judge what is big and what is small in front of God's eyes. Someone might have committed a huge sin, like killing someone or having done an abortion, but only God knows this person's heart, the psychological state he/she was in when they did this. how weak this person was at the time, as well as the understanding of our faith that this person had. Therefore, we are not the ones to judge other people and we are not to hate anyone. The Fathers of the Church tell us to hate the sin but not the sinner. This way God will give us the strength in our hearts not to worry when someone hurts us and to keep going.

If you hold a grudge, the only person that you are hurting is yourself. We believe in God and leave everything up to Him. Sometimes we have to think differently, who am I to take it personally that this person did something wrong, even to me, or even to my family? Do I love my family more than God loves them? I can't, it is impossible. Because I am human and my love is human. God loves my family infinitely more than I love my family. God created my family. Therefore, if we leave justice to God, this is like emptying ourselves. Then, God will do the right thing, which will include the salvation of the person that hurt us. But if I try and take justice in my own hands, if I look for revenge, then I make myself god and this not good, this is a form of idolatry.

If we do not ask for forgiveness because we do not want to, we are too proud or we do not think we have done something wrong, will God forgive us?

He can forgive us, but that is not the issue. The issue is if we will do the right thing or not. Because as the psychologists say, the treatment starts from the moment you realise that you need help. Only then you can accept help. And only the realisation that you need help is a big step. If you do not go for confession, if you do not act realising that you need help, then this is an issue and you will keep repeating the same mistakes. But even if you confess the same mistakes all the time, it does not matter, because God knows your heart even if you commit the same sin many times. He is aware of your alertness and He might let you fall in the same sin several times. Maybe to humble you, maybe to teach you, maybe to help you find your own path. Then through this experience you can help others. There are lot of reasons why God allows certain things, but we should not rely on the knowledge that God knows our heart, we still have to ask for forgiveness.

CHAPTER 16: THE ONE LOST SHEEP

“All the people from surrounding Country of the Gadarenes asked Him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So He got into the boat and returned.”

The Gadarene people asked Jesus to leave and He just left. He did not try to prove to them that He did something good to one of their fellow men. They knew it and it was obvious, but they cared more for their pigs. Jesus also obeyed them, and left. God is gentle and respects the freedom He has given us. He could have forced them to want Him, but this is not true love. It is amazing that the Gospel says *“all the people of the surrounding country”*. Jesus knows everything, so He already knew that they would reject him. As He was going to this country, He knew that only one person would listen to Him, and this was the one that was possessed. The only person with good soil inside his heart was the possessed man. Everybody else rejected the Seed. Nevertheless, He went there for the one lost sheep. This demonstrates that if we truly want to lead a spiritual life, God will find the right way to visit us, even if we are the only ones seeking Him, and under adverse external and/or internal conditions.

The people were seized with fear because they were afraid for their pockets and their comfort. Neither did they care that one of them got his life back nor did they have a conscience. The other interesting thing is that according to the Mosaic Law eating pork (pig) is illegal. Therefore, the pork trade was also spiritually forbidden for Jews.

The man who was freed from the demons begged that he might follow Him, but Jesus sent him away saying *“Return to your home and declare how much God has done for*

you." And he went away proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him. Now, this man was the only one who was obedient to Jesus, he even literally obeyed Jesus, who asked him not to follow Him. But he followed Him spiritually! And this was a man nobody cared about since his salvation from the demons left them all spiritually untouched and everybody wanted Jesus, this man's savior, to get out of their country. In contrast, this man loved everyone and he went back to these people, who did not care about him, to preach them, telling them that the Man whom they just kicked out can help them as He helped himself. This is an example of forgiveness, because this man did not think that no one cared about him, he just did the right thing, he obeyed Jesus. He became an Apostle to the ones that could not care less about him.

Jesus knew how grateful this person would be, He knew that he wanted help when he was not even able to ask for it. He was demon-possessed and he did not even know who to ask for help. This way, Jesus was obedient to the desire of his heart, when the demon-possessed man did not even know for himself what he wanted. Here, we see that this demon-possessed man did not even say a prayer for his life to change. Jesus knew what was in his heart. Jesus heard his prayers before he had the ability to pray. This shows that we are safe when we suffer, even psychologically, when we go through difficulties and get to a dead end. When we think that we do not know how to pray or we cannot pray. When we cannot do anything more, this is when God takes care of us and this is when we should worry less, regardless if this does not make sense.

CHAPTER 17: FROM PERSECUTOR TO APOSTLE

"Brethren I would have you know that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I was advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my father. But when He who had set me apart before I was born and had called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me in order that I might preach among the Gentiles." Galations 1:11-16

Before Saint Paul became a Saint and an Apostle, he did not just ask Jesus' followers to depart from his place, like the Gadarenes did, he actually personally persecuted the Church. This means that he not only would not have accepted Christ if he was there Himself, but he would also have tried to kill Him, like his fellow Jews did. But Saint Paul was doing the wrong thing whilst he was actually trying to do the right thing. In his heart he wanted to follow the faith of his father, he wanted to do God's Will, but he did not know what God's Will was and ended up doing the extreme opposite, persecuting the

Church. As soon as Jesus appeared to him and revealed in his heart that what he was doing was wrong, within a second he changed from a persecutor to an Apostle.

Similarly, we have examples of executors who were just about to kill the martyrs, but saw a vision or a miracle in front of their eyes or were amazed by the faith of the martyrs. And they instantly became Christians, denied the idols and believed in Christ, becoming Saints themselves by being executed at the same time. This is what happened with Apostle Paul. Jesus obeyed St Paul's heart, but not his actions. And St Paul, as soon as he realised the truth, he accepted it.

As long as our heart is in the right place and our conscience is clear, it does not matter if we make mistakes. We can always learn from our mistakes, and God will not let us make huge mistakes. However, when we make ourselves gods with our pride, ego, hate, over zealotry, magic actions, demonic related religions and any other demonic associated behavior, then we become like the demons who do not want to repent to become angels again. We want to keep living in the darkness. But even then, when we pray, Jesus will obey us like the demons. They asked to go to the pigs and Jesus allowed them to do so, but this does not mean that we will be saved if we do not ask for it. We will also see miracles in our lives and prayers to be heard, but this does not mean that we will be saved unless our heart is in the right place.

Therefore, we have to be watchful and keep our conscience clean. Somebody said that Hell is like having our hearts, which are like sponges, dipped in paint. Then you take this sponge out of the paint and it dries. It cannot absorb anything else, it becomes like a brick. When our hearts are full of sins, pride, ego etc, then we cannot absorb God's love. This is Hell even from this life. If we are full of rubbish, we will not inherit eternal life because God respects our freedom and He will not violate any completeness we may have replacing it with His. You cannot fill up a place that is already full. We will remain bricks and we will never receive God's grace and love. When we are focused on idols like money, beauty, human glory and power, we become like the ones who asked Jesus to depart from their place not to interrupt their business. We do not realise that the interruption of our comforts and our business (the drowning of the pigs) is a wakeup call, because we do not want to wake up.

CHAPTER 18: WHY DO WE SUFFER?

There comes a time in life when we may lose everything we have, or a loved one, someone we relied on. Then we may think "Why did God do this to us, why is God so cruel?" God is not cruel, He can make us win the lotto next week if He wants to and if it was to our spiritual benefit. But it is a miracle both if we win and if we do not win the lotto. We must

understand that there is always a reason for both the things that happen and those things that do not happen in our lives. When we cannot control what happens to us, as discussed before, when we suffer we are safe. The sufferings can purify us and make us more spiritual.

In the Old Testament, some people did not believe in life after death. They were wondering why some bad people had an easy life whilst some good people had a terrible life, like the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And then Jesus comes and teaches life after death, telling us that it does not matter what we go through in this life. Instead, what matters is what happens after death. It does not matter if we are born in Africa and we have nothing else to eat except for bananas. Even then we must be grateful to God. This life will come to an end and what matters is the next life. It does not matter if we lose everyone around us and we are by ourselves, because God will always be with us. And we can still be spiritual and we move closer to Him. We can still inherit eternal life, and we may see again the loved ones we lost here.

St Augustine said "Love and do whatever you want." This does not mean that we should go and do stupid things. It means that even if we are persecutors of God, like St Paul, but we love God, He can transform us into Apostles, depending on the measure of our love. Even if our life is full of thorns, we might see some roses coming out of these thorns if we love.

CHAPTER 19: THE TWO GREATEST SINS

The two greatest sins according to the Fathers of the Philokalia is **ignorance** and **forgetfulness**. Amazing, they do not even sound like sins - ignorance and forgetfulness, and we are all pretty good at both of them. Ignorance is not when we do not know something, but when we do not want to know God's Will, God Himself, in our lives. For example, when the Gadarenes saw their pigs being killed, they got rid of Jesus instead of trying out to find what the right thing was. They wanted to be ignorant, they did not want to accept the Knowledge. They preferred to stay in the darkness. We have to be careful because many times we complain that we do not know God's Will. God reveals His Will and Himself to us when we have an open heart, as we said before. And if He has not done so yet, it is because it is not the right time, not because God wants to hide something from us. If we are ignorant of God's Will in our lives, either this is our fault or the right time has not come yet. You could even say that St Paul had to do the wrong thing first in order to feel guilty for the rest of his life and become one of the greatest of Apostles, trying to make up for his mistake. There is always a reason for everything. Yet, we cannot say that the demon-possessed man or St Paul, when he was a prosecutor of the Christians, did not know God's Will. If we do not know God or His Will, this is a sin

because the reason for it is not the thorns (the demon of the possessed man) or our terrible mistakes (the prosecution of the Christians by Paul), but our own will (like the Gadarenes).

Forgetfulness is when we forget or do not appreciate what God does for us. When we have spiritual experiences, a moment that we felt God's love inside us, we should constantly remember them and reactivate them inside us. When we begin from the reactivation of existing spiritual experiences and miracles that occurred to us, then we experience new ones. There are occasions when God gives us a part of His grace and we can feel His love, peace and joy inside us to exist and act. We must remember and treasure these. If we do not remember them, if we do not remember the love, peace and joy in Christ whilst we had them, then we are forgetful and these experiences, which are the presence of God, do not work inside us to help us grow spiritually. It is a sin to throw away God's Gifts. And we miss out when instead of walking on the water if we are focused on Christ, we choose to focus on the waves, risking our life.

CHAPTER 20: THE WAY OF THE SAINTS

The Fathers of the Church tell us that it is not the place but the way that makes us spiritual people. About 20 years ago, someone said something different. That "it is not the place nor the way, it is the love".

We could say that love is the way and the place of comfort and action for ourselves and for everyone around us. This love, the Holy Trinity, will make us one with the Holy Spirit. Then we will embrace the whole humanity with our humble prayers - the living, the dead, and the ones who have not yet been born. Our spirit then becomes universal. For a person like this, God can keep His Holy Spirit still on Earth, regardless of what everyone else is doing.

If we live for God's love and in God's love, if everything inside us is about this love for others and for God, unconditionally without expecting anything in return (and we have our hearts open), one day we will find ourselves, when we least expect it, to be one with God. What happens then is that without us being anything special, nevertheless with God inside us, through our humble prayers we can help the whole humanity! The ones around us, the ones who have departed, and the ones who have not yet been born. This is the way of the Saints! This is the spiritual life!

God created us to become Saints, every single one of us. God does not make mistakes! If we forget this, then there is no spiritual life. If we do this, then not only is there a spiritual life for us, but we will also make a positive difference in others' lives without us actually

doing anything. Orthodoxy does not go around to preach. Orthodoxy preaches with our own example. If we are as we should be, people will learn for themselves by looking at us or by trying to understand why this person is so peaceful and his words transmit peace, why this person is so loving, why this person helps everyone without worrying about themselves. There is something here, let us try to imitate a little bit of it, and then we will be on the right path to become Saints ourselves.

We take this life too seriously, but in the wrong way. I am not trying to say that we should not be responsible and do our best, but we should do our best and leave our lives and those of our loved ones in God's hands. At the same time, we should take more seriously the spiritual part of our lives, as this will lead us to the eternal life.

So as we said before, we should focus on these three things: *αμεριμνία, απροσπάθεια, και καθαρή συνείδηση*. Have no anxiety about anything, not to be attached to human and material things or to want what we think is right, and to keep a clean conscience.



QUESTIONS AFTER THE TALK

Question 1

Attendee

What is your opinion about buying technological things? How can one decide what is responsible and what is extreme or extravagant?

Geronda Evagrius

Sometimes we have to be practical. If you need a good phone for a certain reason, for your job or for something else, then you can have it. But it is not good if you just want it to impress others.

Attendee

There is more to it than just myself sometimes. If I get a better car, it is not because I care what everyone else thinks. Everyone has the latest phone model, but it is not because of that, it is because it is the lightest thing and more fun to use. Whereas I probably did not need to spend as much money as I did, to get something half the price of this model is not as much fun. I am just using my phone as an example, there are many, many other things, such as cars, clothes, anything. Each of us do our own extravagances. So how do you know where to draw the line?

Geronda Evagrius

Every answer has to be personal. What I mean is that I would give you a different answer than what I would give to someone else. And the reason is because for you, let us say that you need a good phone for your job – you run a Christian bookstore, which will help so many people spiritually - so, go and buy the best phone if you need it for this purpose. But for you again, because I know that you want to have a spiritual life, you can try to have a more ascetic life, not to become a nun, but do not use things that you do not need to use. So the both apply to you, and you are the one to judge which one is more important. So, I am not telling you that for the sake of your ascetic life you should sacrifice helping others if this phone allows you to help others. But if this phone does not help you help others and if it is only for show off, would you have this in this your spiritual life? You would not. Eventually you would give it up yourself. For everyone it is different. For example, if it is for someone with low self-esteem, get him a good phone to have something to be happy about. Because if he does not have this, he may do something else that will hurt him more spiritually and ethically. So, get him the phone. Everyone is different, and also who are we to say that technology is not a good thing when God gave the mind to humans to invent technology? It is like a knife. You can use it in a good or a bad way, but do not spend all your life looking at the knife and thinking how to use it.

You get nothing out of it. And you do not sleep and wake up with the knife constantly in your hand. Just use it, do your job and put it back, and move forward.

Question 2

Attendee

I think Geronda that it is hard if we think of what Jesus says in the Gospel. If you have two coats, give one away. All of us, I think, have wardrobes full of clothes, not just one or two, you know, but five of this, seven of that, etc. We live in a consumer society, so I think we should constantly have in mind what you said before, if we really need something. For example, do I need to have that t-shirt in three colors when there is someone living in my suburb who has nothing to eat? I do not know, but it is very hard in the world, especially for our kids growing up.

Geronda Evagrius

It is hard because we compare ourselves with our materialistic environment, and we are either proud if we have something more or depressed if we have something less than the others around us. But let us say we take a holiday, a spiritual retreat in Africa for a week. You see different standards there, you see what people go through there, and when you come back you appreciate things differently. You understand for example that if you are weak and like fine and expensive clothes, you may get new ones, but you will not throw away the old ones, you will instead give them to someone who needs them. Then at least you compromise.

Nevertheless, all this depends on how much our soul can handle psychologically because most of these things play with our mind. If someone will end up being depressed if he does not have a nice car, well this person may be more spiritual if he realises that the car is just a tool and he likes expensive tools. This way he will be humbled by realizing what his weakness is. But if he cannot understand this, well let him get the nice car and at least go to church with it.

Question 3

Attendee

What are talents mentioned in the Gospel? How do you increase your talents and not bury them? Especially sometimes I feel like all I do is eat, sleep and work. And I wonder if I have any talents. What does God want from me?

Geronda Evagrius

God has given us our character for a reason. Our character, which is engraved in us, - that is what it means in Greek *χαράζω, χαρακτήρας*. It is what it is, beautiful or not.

Attendee

But we constantly talk about improving our character, changing and improving ourselves. But what does it mean when our character is engraved in us, when it is who we are?

Geronda Evagrius

The difference is that we do not know that our character is a gift from God. If we have bad things in our character, these are not from God. These are things that we, or our environment, paint in our character, and we can get rid of them with God's grace. Our character is what is engraved in us, and it is engraved in us for a reason. It is like what we said before, when Jesus took the Apostles that were fishermen and changed them into be fishing men.

Let us say that you like collecting flowers. From collecting flowers one day, you might think how about if I collect nice verses from spiritual books and then how about if I give these to people to read, and then from fishing fish you end up fishing men. God can transform our character, which includes all the gifts that He has given us. It is not for us to think what we have best or what we are missing, or what we were gifted from God and what we were not gifted. We should empty ourselves and give ourselves to God, and then it does not matter what our talents are or if we are the most untalented person on earth. God will give you everything you need for your salvation and the salvation of everyone around you. I am not explaining what you asked, I am just telling you not to worry about it. And when the time is right, through your readings and prayers, you will receive a personal understanding of this parable and this will be God's answer for you personally, and not what I will tell you.

Attendee

That is not very easy.

Geronda Evagrius

But this is the way. If I give you a lollypop, it will be sweet now and afterwards it will mean nothing. But if you inherit a lollypop shop from your father and operate it properly, then you will have lollypops for the rest of your life. That is why they say in Africa, do not give them food but teach them how to cultivate grain and then they will have food for the rest of their lives. Instead of giving you prepared food, I am telling you to keep digging and you will find the spring yourself. And then you will not have to ask anyone,

God will talk to you personally. Just make sure that you clean your character, and throw away whatever you think does not originate from God. Whatever you think is from God, try to develop it and then you will end up with all the answers that you need.

Attendee

Someone asked me once if God already knows what we are thinking, why do we have to pray and tell Him? As you said before, God looks into our hearts and He understands us before we start to pray. Why do we then pray? Why do we have to say it?

Geronda Evagrios

If we do not become fully aware that we need something, then we cannot start the process of healing. God does not need our prayers. We need to pray because this is the way to communicate with Him. Without this connection how will we be saved? We must connect ourselves to Him, and we do this through prayer. It does not matter if we pray for something and instead we receive something else. What we try to do is to establish this connection with God, this is what prayer does. Then God will give us whatever He thinks is right for us.

Question 4

Attendee

When we get up in the morning, how do I know that it is God's will to work?

Geronda Evagrios

The Fathers of the Church advise us what to do if we cannot ask our Spiritual Father, because we do not have him next to us all the time, when we need advice on how to deal with something. When we do not know what is the right thing to do, we pray and we follow what brings peace in our heart. Whatever is peaceful inside you, that is where the Holy Spirit is (“Και εγεννήθη εν ειρήνη ο τόπος Αυτού”, ψαλ. 75,3), that is God's will for you. And even if you make a mistake, which you cannot once you truly practice this and you get to know how your heart feels, even if you make a mistake, you will be like St Paul, who was persecuting the church and then God revealed Himself to him, saying to him that he was doing the wrong thing. And he changed. As long as we follow the peace in our heart and we act with a clean conscience, we will definitely find God's will.

Question 5

Attendee

What about when it feels like the tempter is constantly attacking us?

Geronda Evagrius

We talked a lot about spiritual things, but we have to be realistic as well. To be able to do the best we can spiritually, we have to make sure that we are not tired, we do not have any vitamin deficiency, and that we take a break every now and then and some time to relax. In the Monastery, when we were discussing with our Elder, Elder Amilianos, about our spiritual program as monks, he would always start not from the Jesus Prayer or from how much we should kneel, how many prostrations we should do, but he would always start from our rest, how many hours we sleep. This is because when you are tired you are useless for yourself, for your family and for God, totally useless. If you do not make sure that you get enough rest, you cannot deal psychologically and physically with what the day has in front of you. Make sure that you rest and be healthy to the best of your ability. Of course we cannot be in perfect shape, but do your best. And if you have done this but you still are stressed out, dedicate half an hour to go for a walk in a park or do something that recharges your batteries physically and psychologically. Then deal with things spiritually, otherwise you cannot. It is wrong to consider everything a temptation if we first do not make sure that we are stable and we know ourselves. Otherwise it is natural to get angry easily, to be annoyed easily, to lose our self-control easily, and to blame the temptation for all these. But the blame is not on the temptation, it is on us since we are not aware of our strength.

Attendee

How do you go for a walk at those crucial hours when you have 6 to 8 children who need you?

Geronda Evagrius

You will not go for a walk at those times that your children need you, but at other suitable times. Before they wake up in the morning, go for a run, do some exercise, this is proven that it will help you psychologically. If you do not do this, you will not be as happy as you can be, so this is very important. It is a priority, not a luxury. And we talk about being holy, but if we do not do the simple things that help us as humans, then how are we going to become holy? Physical exercise has been shown to make us happier due to the secretion of endorphins in our body. If you try this you will see that you will have more patience. Of course you should keep praying for patience, but you will also have more patience. There is a story about St Anthony and his disciples in the desert. One day a hunter went close and he heard St Anthony joking around with his disciples and he got scandalized, saying "You are the great ascetic and you are joking around with your disciples, what is this?" Back then people were hunting with the bow and arrow, and St Anthony told him "Can you stretch it?", and he did. Then he said "More", and he did. He says "Now even more", and the man complained "It is going to break". St Anthony said "If your bow is

going to break, do you think my disciples will not break if I keep pushing them?". This is how we are, fragile.

Attendee

There are so many things that push us and we focus on them instead of taking time for ourselves. "I will miss that show", "I really have to do this or that", etc. We think we do the best for our family by baking 3 trays of cookies.

Geronda Evagrius

Try some simple changes. For example, on Saturday just prepare a simple meal and take everybody for a picnic. Everyone will be happy and you get the break that you need. And this will connect you with your family more. There are ways, just do not focus only on your spiritual life. We talk about the spiritual life, but do not look at spirituality by itself, because Jesus is man and God, not just God. We have to take care of ourselves physically and psychologically to be able to improve spiritually.

Question 6

Attendee

I fall in the trap of feeling like I have failed, because I am not as patient as I should be with my children or with my husband. So I pray for more patience.

Geronda Evagrius

It is good to pray for more patience, but I will tell you something else. When you do all these things you just said, make sure that you have a little bit of strength reserved extra. Because if you do not, when the tempter will attack you, you will have no more energy to spend. Try to do a little bit less than your best, to be able to do your best when you are being fully attacked. If you do not take care of yourself, you cannot take care of your family. It is not selfish to take care of yourself, you do it for everyone else who is dependent on you. That is how things are.

Question 7

Attendee

Father, could you touch on fasting and how it improves our relationship with Christ?

Geronda Evagrius

The Saints say everything about fasting. What I would like to say is that fasting should be done according to the blessing we have from our Spiritual Father, and we cannot ignore him if he tells us to limit our fasting. For example, if a mother works full-time and

then she has to take care of her children and her family, it is not easy, you cannot tell this mother to fast strictly. She may faint, she will not make it. Or if a lady is pregnant or breastfeeding, she should not fast at all, we cannot ignore our specific situation. Even the monks suggest to ladies who breastfeed or are pregnant not to fast, they must eat everything at the times that they need it. Otherwise it is selfish to care about their personal “virtue” to the expense of their baby, who will not get what it needs to get and may not develop properly. We can push ourselves in fasting, but we have to know our limits. We must discuss everything with our Spiritual Father and he will tell us what to do. For example, if someone has to take blood pressure pills or antibiotics, you cannot tell him to fast strictly. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and fasting is not meant to kill the body, but our passions.

Question 8

Attendee

What if I am praying to God about something and I fast so that my prayers can be answered?

Geronda Evagrius

To do this you have to get the blessing first. It is like a tamer, you should first ask your Spiritual Father and he will tell you if you should do it or not. And even if he gives you the advice you do not expect, you must follow it, otherwise you need to change Spiritual Father. But seriously, we are free to change Spiritual Father until we are comfortable with one, but then we have to be obedient.

Now, how do we make sure that our motives are from your heart if we are fasting for a specific reason? Let us say that you want to fast and your Spiritual Father tells you no. Wednesdays and Fridays you have to eat oil or even a little bit more than oil because of your health or because he thinks that by fasting you will become more proud. Now what you could do, with which your Spiritual Father will agree, is to fast spiritually, which is more difficult. And to fast spiritually means to empty yourself from thoughts, from your will, from everything, and pray all the time as we said before.

For example, there is a young person who walks down the street and instead of any other fasting, it is more important to keep his eyes away from bad things than fast from oil. This is the type of fasting which helps our souls more.

I will give you an example which is a true story. Once, there was a father with his son, very strong men, but the son was diagnosed with cancer. The father went to a Confessor in our Monastery in Simonopetra. He asked him, what can I do, how can I fast for my son

so that God gives him back his health? The Spiritual Father asked him what he was more attached with (as we were saying before) and he replied “I cannot give up smoking, I do not care about anything else, I just cannot give up smoking”. And the Spiritual Father told him that if he gives up smoking, God will give back to his son his health. He gave up smoking and it was very difficult. He was thinking that it would be better to be killed by someone than to give up smoking. That is how difficult it was for him. But he did get a miracle and his son got cured. When we do something with all our love and with the blessing of our Spiritual Father, God listens and answers. There are other situations that are difficult, but we must always discuss them with our Spiritual Father.

Question 9

Attendee

You talk about the Spiritual Father and do whatever the Spiritual Father says to do. It just sounds as if I cannot make up my own mind. We are so used to being independent. We are not accustomed to having to rely on a Spiritual Father.

Geronda Evagrius

We have to be taught from our parents that you do not only go to Church, but you also go for confession. When you go for confession, you listen to what the priest tells you and you try your best to do it. Now, if you get someone who has no idea about this and you tell him to change his ways, it is difficult. I do not expect someone who has never been taught these things to find it easy, but at least for the more important spiritual issues we must ask someone. And nowadays, people listen to their psychologist or doctor. If you do not feel comfortable with the Fathers in our city, you may have one in Greece instead for example. And you write or call them once in a while, and they tell you how to deal with things, but you can still have a confession here. So, sometimes there is a difference between a Spiritual Father and a confessor. And sometimes, if you have deeper issues, you can ask someone who does not necessarily need to be a priest. Saint Paisios would give advice, he would express God's will to people and he was not a priest, he was a simple monk. There are other examples, like Gerontissa Gavrilia; she was a nun, but people would ask her advice because she was a very holy person and she could tell them what God wanted for them.

Attendee

Is it good to ask questions during confession?

Geronda Evagrius

It is good to have questions. Without questions you will never find answers, but eventually you will grow out of this stage.

Attendee

Out of the questions?

Geronda Evagrius

What I mean is that at the beginning it is very important that we have questions. But it is like the little children: "mom, how does this work", but then they know. You do not ask the same thing twice if you already know the answer. Eventually you will run out of questions. Or you will become a source of answers yourself. That is how it is. It is good that we all have questions, but eventually we grow up and then we can be a source of answers to other people. Do not worry about the Spiritual Fathers getting tired with your questions, as long as these questions relate to the salvation of your soul and they are not just for encyclopedical knowledge. I wish that everybody had questions, so that eventually we would have answers for others.

Question 10

Attendee

We do not have a lot of Spiritual Fathers here.

Geronda Evagrius

It is an issue that we do not have enough Spiritual Fathers in Australia, but I can assure you that God gives us according to our heart. Even if you have no priest around you, God could teach you through the writings of the Fathers of the Church, for example. Or you might meet a person that you trust and you could write or call them, or these days you can send them an email. And you could get a very important answer that you need and then you just keep going.

Question 11

Attendee

I do not want to impede on the Fathers here because they have so much to do.

Geronda Evagrius

This is not necessarily a thought from God. Because if you do not go to confession, you will lose your soul. But when you go, you do not have to stay there for hours, because we have other things to do as well. Just get to the point, five minutes, even after the service if we see him on the street, Father, this and this, what do I do? That is it.

Question 12

Attendee

What about people who do not want to share their sins with someone else like a priest?

Geronda Evagrius

That is the tempter, he puts in our minds that something can never be forgiven or can never be said. And this is worse than seeing the devil himself, because it deprives us from the opportunity to repent. If we know this, we realize that we need to spit it out so that our stomach is not destroyed by the poison of sin. Then we receive forgiveness by going to confession. After you go to confession once, twice, then it becomes easier.