

LOOK INWARD, ACCEPT AND PRACTISE THE LOVE OF CHRIST

by

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Never cease studying the Gospel till the end of our life.

[St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov) in *THE ARENA*, first published in 1867 under the title *An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*¹]

... the person who fulfils the commandments of the Gospel will not only be saved but will also enter into the most intimate union with God and become a divinely built temple of God.

[*THE ARENA*²]

Humility is that single altar on which it is allowed us by spiritual law to offer the sacrifice of prayer and on which the offered sacrifice of prayer ascends to God and appears before His face. Humility is that *single* (emphasis supplied) vessel into which the gifts of grace are put by the finger of God.

[St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov), *ON THE PRAYER OF JESUS*³]

When we become involved (if we do and pray we don't – smile) in the mechanics of the Church as an organisation and immerse ourselves in its administration and hierarchical problems, we lose sight of His Church. The organisational principles of the Church may not flow from its heart but, rather, are its external manifestation. The Church, then many times appears to be what it is not.

In solving administrative issues, it is allowable to utilise rationalistic principles. There is nothing *per se*, intrinsically wrong, with adopting systematic methodologies and strategies to attack the somewhat mechanistic secular life of this world. But these 'solutions' cannot be the focus of our spiritual preparation for what is *not of this world*.

OPENING THE DOOR

Looking *inward* to our hearts, not outward rationalistically, opens the spiritual door to the pure Christianity of the Fathers. Concentrating upon Christ, the Holy Fathers and softening our hearts leads us to "true wisdom". This is all we need:

all *human* wisdom is contained in the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church... One need only study them: there is *nothing* to add; *everything* has been said (all emphases supplied).

[Ivan Kireyevsky, quoted by Fr. Alexey Young in his *A MAN IS HIS FAITH: Ivan Kireyevsky and Orthodox Christianity*⁴]

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is His Church's cornerstone. We concentrate on Holy Scripture and the writings/testimonies of the Holy Fathers which generated the First Seven Ecumenical Councils. The Fathers of the Undivided Church proclaim Christ from the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition. We have a spiritual option: accept Him, or not. We cannot accept part of Christ and leave the rest. Christ cannot be a 'leftover'. He cherishes the freedom to choose that He gave to us. He will never violate His gift. Jesus does not compel us to come to Him. The choice He leaves to us!

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FATHERS?

Immense – they preserve and faithfully interpret the Lord's Truth:

The significance of the Holy Fathers is to be found precisely in this: that they are the most capable preservers and interpreters of the truth (i.e., the correct understanding of Scripture and Tradition) **by virtue of the sanctity of their lives**, their profound knowledge of the words of God, and the abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit which dwells in them... I do not presume to set forth this teaching in my own words, but I set it forth in the words of the holy and God-fearing theologians and great Fathers of the Church. Mine are *only* (emphasis supplied) the lips, but theirs are the words and thoughts. They present the Divine Meal, and I am *only* (emphasis supplied) the *servant*(emphasis supplied) of their Divine Banquet.

[St. Theophan the Recluse, cited in *A MAN IS HIS FAITH*⁵]

Remember, the Church considers Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition to be 'mirror images' of each other. Both are in effect a single manifestation of the *same* Holy Spirit:

The Church in her fullness, as a spiritual organism, is neither a collective nor an abstract entity; she is the Divine Spirit, who knows Himself and is unable not to know. The whole Church wrote the Holy Scriptures and then gave life to them in Tradition. To put it more accurately, Scripture and Tradition, as two manifestations of one and the same Spirit, *are a single manifestation. Scripture is nothing but written Tradition, and Tradition is nothing but living Scripture* (emphasis supplied).

[[Lay Theologian Alexei Khomiakov in his *On the Western Confessions of Faith*]

So, it is quite proper to spiritually consider each separately and/or together.

NO NEW DOGMAS AND THE FATHERS ARE NOT IN CONFLICT

It is irrelevant what the Max Lucados, Joel Osteens or new Rome bishops (popes) think. No new dogmas exist that were not accepted by the Fathers of the First Seven Ecumenical Councils time period. The true Church is not and never has been in conflict with Itself. The Fathers as the 'Mind' of the Church never contradict themselves.

Avoid all persons or groups who propagandise otherwise!

FINDING YOUR ORTHODOX STARETZ/SPIRITUAL ELDER

Finding a Staretz, who can guide you in the way of the Holy Fathers, is very important:

More important than all the books and every kind of thinking is to find a holy Orthodox Staretz who can become your guide, to whom you can communicate every thought and hear in reply not his private opinion – which might be more or less intelligent – **but the very judgment of the Holy Fathers.**

A MAN IS HIS FAITH, quoting Kireyevsky, *id.*, p. 17.

In previous centuries, especially in Russia wonderful Spiritual Elders existed. Today, in contemporary America they are extremely rare. The key attribute of a Staretz is humility. I can recall seeing an “ad” in a so-called orthodox publication where someone had advertised himself as a “Staretz”. Obviously, such a person is not a Staretz. A Staretz is sought after, he does not seek it as some kind of “office”. Such an ad certainly is not humble.

What do we do if we can't find a humble Elder? Emphasise reading of the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church and the First Seven Ecumenical Councils and sincerely try to experience the ethos of the true Church, all the time remembering that we are the lowest of the low. Avoid prelest/spiritual deception, which is difficult but must be concentrated on.

Brethren –

Love our neighbours as we love Christ. See in the neighbour what he is –the image of the Lord. How we treat him is of paramount importance to God “... Christ accepts what we do to our neighbour as if it were done to Him”.⁶ Adopt the Jesus Prayer as your foundational prayer and set aside definite times daily to pray it; also, as your prayer life proceeds work in the Jesus Prayer throughout the day with the goal being “unceasing prayer”! Concentrate inwardly on our heart with the goal to continue to soften it and spiritually mold ourselves in His image. St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov) sets out an excellent beginning for “true prayer”:

Through humility in your dealings with your neighbour, and through love for your neighbour, hardness and callousness is expelled from the heart. It is rolled away like a heavy rock from the entrance to a tomb, and the heart revives for spiritual relations with God for which it has been hitherto dead. A new vista opens to the gaze of the mind: the multitudinous wounds of sin with which the whole of fallen nature is riddled. It begins to confess its wretched state to God and implore Him for mercy. The heart assists the mind with mourning and compunction. This is the beginning of true prayer.⁷

To get to the state of the beginning of true prayer requires humility, struggle, sacrifice and, of course, spiritual follow through. Christ beckons us to Him and asks us to voluntarily accept His offer of spiritual pupillage for entry into His Kingdom, that which is *not of this world*. How can any of us refuse to take up His Chalice? Our spiritual future depends on it!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Holy Trinity Monastery, Fourth printing, 1997, p. 15.

² *ibid.*, p. 3.

³ Prayer and Life, p. 104.

⁴ 1980, p. 10.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov), *THE ARENA*, *id.*, p. 63.

⁷ *id.*, p. 65.