

# THE TRUE ORTHODOXY OF SAINTS BENEDICT AND SERAPHIM OF SAROV

by

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The purpose of earthly life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.  
St. Seraphim of Sarov<sup>1</sup>

In 1804 the Saint was attacked by robbers and beaten almost to death. The Mother of God appeared to him in his affliction, together with the Apostles Peter and John the Theologian, saying of him: 'This is one of our kind.' After this attack he was bent over and walked always with a staff.

Now the Saint undertook yet greater struggles. Returning to his forest desert, he undertook an exploit like that of the ancient pillar saints of Syria: for a thousand days and nights he spent the greater part of his time kneeling on a stone not far from his cell, constantly calling out to God with the prayer of the publican: 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' Strengthened by divine grace for this humanly impossible task, he entered into open battle with the demons at this time, like St. Anthony of old in the tombs; often he would see the demons, whom he could only describe as 'foul.'

Father Seraphim Rose about Saint Seraphim of Sarov<sup>2</sup>

...

'Where is he then?' quoth God's servant (note: Saint Benedict)

He answered that his body lay at the gate of the Abbey: to which place the man of God came with his monks, he kneeled down and lay upon the body of the little child, and rising, he held up his hands towards heaven, and said: 'Behold not, O Lord, my sins, but the *faith* (emphasis supplied) of this man, that desireth to have his son raised to life, and restore that soul to the body, which thou hast taken away.'

He had scarce spoken these words, and behold the soul returned back again, and therewith the child's body began to tremble in such sort that all which were present did behold it in a strange manner to pant

and shake. Then he took it by the hand and gave it to his father, but alive and in health...

Saint Gregory I (Dialogos), Pope of Rome (+604), *Second Dialogue Life of St. Benedict*<sup>3</sup>

Saints Benedict (+543) and Seraphim of Sarov (+1833) are extraordinary spiritual vessels of Holy Orthodoxy. Each struggled for the true Faith. Both contributed to the Orthodox goal of deification in his own inimitable way. They experienced the solitary spiritual life in the 'desert,' and had the gift of prophecy and miracle making. Of course, these prophecies and miracles were God-given, not something they achieved on their own. All grace is through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Christ worked miracles through their individual efforts!

Each was a spiritual leader/elder/staretz, if you will; both were chosen by God to be beacons of His Light, spiritual sanctuaries for those who voluntarily chose Christ as their Saviour. They provided hope and direction to those pilgrims struggling and suffering to find and remain on the Royal Path, the golden mean of true Orthodoxy.

One was from the so-called West: the other, the East. But this is too simplistic because even the Christian West is from the Christian East. Remember Jerusalem, Bethlehem, our Orthodox praying to the East, the monasticism (angelic life) deriving from Scripture and Christ's example as practised in the East and as adopted and used in the West; and, above all, remember that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is returning to us at Judgment Day from the East. The Orthodox East is the Christian foundation for Orthodoxy in the West. There is but one true Orthodoxy for both. It cannot be any other way, so help us God:

*Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners!*

Both saints are considered by all fair-minded members of the Royal Priesthood (laity, priests, monks, bishops, other clerics), i.e., all true Orthodox, to be true Orthodox Christian saints. St. Seraphim of Sarov is probably the greatest of the wonderful Russian saints, and Saint Benedict one of the finest and most practically-minded saints of the true Church. Both are completely Orthodox. Their eastern and western origins are of no spiritual significance. Saint Benedict's wonderful Rule owes its derivation to the spiritually-rich Orthodoxy of the Christian Desert East.

Those who only connect Saint Benedict to the heretical Roman Catholic papacy do the holy one a spiritual disservice. By doing so, they impliedly, at the very least, suggest that he would not have stood shoulder – to-shoulder spiritually with the Fathers of the Undivided Pre-Schism Orthodox Church. This is, simply put, blasphemy. He was the epitome of Orthodox spirituality. His Rule had tremendous spiritual and practical application in true Orthodoxy. He was a Pre-Schism Orthodox Father of the caliber of Saints Pachomius of Egypt (+346), the founder of coenobitic monasticism, Basil the Great (+379), whose Shorter and Longer Rules so greatly influenced and directed the angelic (monastic) life in both the East and West, and John Cassian (+435), whose *Conferences* and *Institutes* so influenced him that Saint Benedict required them to be read in his Rule.

Both saints were spiritual warriors for Christ. Saint Benedict's Rule involves a seeker of Christ renouncing his own will and arming himself with weapons of obedience to aid in engaging the enemy, the Old Man, in unseen warfare. His Rule and spiritual approach are as holy and Orthodox as those in the classic *Unseen Warfare* edited by St. Nicodemus (+1809) of the Holy Mountain (Mt. Athos) and as revised by the Blessed Theophan the Recluse (+1894).<sup>4</sup>

Spiritual warfare is absolutely essential. We must engage in spiritual warfare if we are to achieve Deification in God's energies. Obviously, we can never achieve Deification in His *essence*. We cannot become God, but we can become Godlike in our conduct. Saint Nicodemus states the "most trustworthy and unconquerable" invisible weapons we must arm ourselves with are:

- (a) never rely on yourself in anything;
- (b) bear always in your heart a perfect and all-daring trust in God alone;
- (c) strive without ceasing;
- and (d) remain constantly in prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Saint Benedict's spiritual warfare and martyrdom in monasticism, including his tremendous influence upon 'community monasticism,' attest that he stands with all other true Orthodox saints, no matter their locality or ethnicity. Orthodoxy knows no 'political correctness'. You are either Orthodox, or you're not. Simple as that. Benedict was pure Orthodox as was Seraphim. Clearly, with God's grace, both achieved Deification, Christian Perfection in God's energies, which in St. Nicodemus' explanation is "I will tell you plainly; the greatest and most perfect thing a man may desire to attain is to come near to God and dwell in union with Him."<sup>6</sup> Obviously, this applies to everyone, man and woman alike!

What is required from the Christian 'volunteer,' for Christ does not compel anyone to follow Him, is *utter humility*, renouncing our own wills, accepting and obeying God's instead:

Therefore, to reach your desired aim, it is first *necessary* to stifle your own wills and finally to extinguish and kill them altogether. And in order to succeed in this, you must constantly oppose all evil in yourself and urge yourself towards good. In other words, you must ceaselessly fight against *yourself* and everything that panders to your own wills, that incites and supports them. So prepare for this struggle and this warfare and know that the crowning attainment of your desired aim – is given to *none except to the valiant among warriors and wrestlers* (all emphases supplied),<sup>7</sup>

The holiness that Saints Benedict and Seraphim of Sarov, as well as all other holy Christian saints acquire is not through their own strengths but by the grace of Christ. The more contemporary highly-revered Russian Orthodox Saint John of Kronstadt (+1907) points out the critical significance of this spiritual fact in the first paragraph of his chapter "The Nature of the Spiritual Warfare".<sup>8</sup>

What is the Grace of God?

It is the blessed power of God, given to the man who believes and has been baptised in the name of Jesus Christ – the power that cleanses, hallows, enlightens, that helps us do good, and withdraws us from evil, that comforts and encourages us in misfortunes, sorrows, and sickness, that is a pledge of everlasting blessings, prepared in heaven for the chosen of God.<sup>9</sup>

We, you and I, need not be monastics to travel this arduous, yet thrillingly-rewarding path toward Christian Perfection; what, we Orthodox call, Deification. Asceticism, involving struggle, is required both by those seeking martyrdom through monasticism and all other Orthodox Christians. All of us must engage the enemy, the Old Man, Evil One, who sets traps, snares for us *throughout* our daily lives. We must *continually* struggle. It may seem very difficult, overwhelming perhaps at times, to us. We ask ourselves “How can one person win this arduous spiritual battle?” The answer is the same as for Saints Ambrose of Milan (+397), Basil the Great, John Cassian, John Chrysostom (+407), John of Kronstadt and Vincent of Lerins (+450) (to name just a few). Christ gives it as admirably stated by St. Anthony the Great (+356):

I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning. ‘What can get me through such snares?’ Then I heard a voice saying to me, ‘*Humility*’ (emphasis supplied).<sup>10</sup>

According to Elder Herman of Mt. Athos, humility is the one virtue capable of saving us:

Humility is the *only* thing we need; one can still fall having virtues other than humility – but with humility one does *not* fall (all emphases supplied).<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Saints Benedict and Seraphim of Sarov were, plain and simply, absolutely true Orthodox, witnessing for Christ through their respective Elderships and deriving their grace from Christianity’s faith fountain – humility. Remember that although we have spoken of them in the past tense, that is not true spiritually. They live in the Church Triumphant and stand ready to ‘take our prayers’ on behalf of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as does Christ Himself for our direct prayers.

Our own paths need not take the route of voluntary monasticism. Remember God loves the family. But also never forget that true Orthodoxy expects and requires our humility in struggling for and seeking Christian Perfection. Do we have it in us?

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

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<sup>1</sup> See citation by I.M. Kontzevitch, *The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 1996, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> See *Little Russian Philokalia Vol. I St. Seraphim Spiritual Instructions (Fourth Edition)*, Introduction, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996, pp. 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 22-23 of 27 at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/g1-benedict1.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by E. Kadloubovsky & G.E.H. Palmer, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> See Father John of Kronstadt (ed./introduction by W. Jardine Grisbrooke), *SPIRITUAL COUNSELS: Selected Passages from 'My Life in Christ'*, Section 8, Chapter 1, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> *Sayings of the Fathers*, p. 8 at <http://landru.i-link-2.net/shnyves/sayings.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.