

A FEW WORDS ON HOW TO ACQUIRE THE GRACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (FROM THE WONDERFUL RUSSIAN SAINT, SERAPHIM OF SAROV)

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I rely on the wise counsel of St. Seraphim of Sarov in his Conversation with Motovilov. [See LITTLE RUSSIAN PHILOKALIA Vol. I: St. Seraphim of Sarov, *The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit*, The Conversation, , St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, , Platina, CA, 1996, pp. 63-112.]

St. Seraphim is probably Russia's greatest saint. His words spiritually reverberate through one's mind and heart as he is read. He tells us nothing different from the 'Mind' of the Fathers, of course, because no true Orthodox innovates from the Truth. But his words and heartfelt mode of spiritual expression vividly brings the Faith to us, making everything as clear as it can be. Perhaps like no other man, St. Seraphim's conversation with Motovilov brings to life the objective of Christian life: the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God:

Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian practices, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of achieving this end. The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, they are *only* (emphasis supplied) the means for acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.

[*ibid.*, p. 79.]

What Kind of Good Deed Do We Need?

These Christian virtuous practices including good deeds are means to achieving the grace of the Holy Spirit. A good deed must be for the sake of Christ, in such a case it "brings us the fruit of the Holy Spirit". [*id.*] If the good deed is not done in Christ's sake, it is good but doesn't bring future reward to us or God's grace in our lives. Good works even though good in themselves provide the opportunity for reward in the future life *if* we begin "with a right faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God". [*id.*] The good works we do can be transformed into being done for His sake by merely having faith in Him. When we have faith in Christ, our good then becomes good for His sake and "not only merits a crown of righteousness in the world to come, but also in this present life fills us with the grace of the Holy Spirit; and moreover, as it is said: *God gives not the Holy Spirit by measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand* (Jn. 3:34-35)". [*id.*, p. 80.]

Earthly Goods

According to St. Seraphim, good works coupled with the essential Faith in Christ are considered earthly goods. These are “good works done for Christ’s sake and conferring the grace of the All-Holy Spirit”. [*id.*, p. 81.] Our good works are to come from our faith in the Lord, not for some other reason. Only when we acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit can we be saved. So our concentration and struggle must be on acquiring the grace of the Holy Spirit with His abiding in our soul “which prepares in our soul and body a throne for God by means of His all-creating indwelling with our spirit, according to the unlying Word of God: *I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be to them a God and they shall be my people* (II Cor. 6:16)”. [*id.*, p. 81-82.]

We must keep our spiritual lamps burning by being vigilant. We must act timely during our lives before it is too late. ‘In whatsoever I find you, in that will I judge you.’

[Christ in this ‘unwritten saying’ recorded by St. Justin (Dialogue 47) and cited, *The Conversation*, *id.*, p. 82.]

Remember also these words of counsel by St. Seraphim to Motovilov:

... the oil is not good deeds but the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God which is obtained through them and which changes souls from one state to another—that is, from corruption to incorruption, from spiritual death to spiritual life, from darkness to light, from the stable of our being (where the passions are tied up like dumb animals and wild beasts) into a temple of the Divinity, into the shining bridechamber of eternal joy in Christ Jesus our Lord, the Creator and Redeemer and Eternal Bridegroom of our souls.

[*id.*]

The Primary Tool

All good deeds done for Christ’s sake provide us the Holy Spirit’s grace, but prayer is the most accessible tool for us to acquire it. We always have the opportunity to pray; whereas, in some instances good deeds might be not feasible, even possible, or we lack the will to do them. On the other hand, prayer is free for the doing. “Prayer is always possible for everyone, rich and poor, noble and humble, strong and weak, healthy and sick, righteous and sinful.” [*id.*, p. 83.]

Our aim should not be simply to maximise the numbers of our good deeds. This mechanistic bent might bring us dangerously close to the Roman heretics’ approach where the deeds are totaled up in a secularist utilitarian way. Instead, we concentrate upon “acquiring the most abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit”. We need to be in the Spirit of God, Whose divine grace is never used up, is ubiquitously abundant to us if we just come to Him. In we are in the Spirit of God, we are ready for Him to come, ‘In whatsoever I find you, in that will I judge you’. [*id.*, p. 87.]

God's Grace Is Inexhaustible; It Has No Limit

If God has graced us with His gifts of inexhaustible grace, we are to distribute them to others. Such a spiritual distribution increases God's grace in us:

Distribute the Holy Spirit's gifts of grace to those in need of them, just as a lighted candle burning with earthly fire shines itself and lights other candles for the illumining of all in other places, without diminishing its own light. And if it is so with regard to earthly fire, what shall we say about the fire of the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God? For earthly riches when distributed are diminished, yet the more the heavenly riches of God's grace are distributed, the more they increase in him who distributes them. Thus the Lord Himself was pleased to say to the Samaritan woman: *Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst, but the water that I shall give him will be in him a well of water springing up into eternal life* (Jn. 4:13-14).

[*id.*, pp. 87-88.]

The "water" above is the grace of God, which continuously increases. The saints do not hoard God's gifts of grace "Rather, having accepted these gifts as seeds of virtue, they put them to use and thus increase them." [Blessed Theophylact, *The Explanation of the Gospel of John*, Chapter 4:13-14, p. 67.]

Baptism and the Seal of Chrismation

In Baptism, our sins are washed away, but we often fail through life in various ways and by different means to live up to the Lord's grace given to us in Baptism and the sealing of this gift of the Holy Spirit by anointing in Chrismation. By negligence or perhaps even intent including malice, we lose the grace of the Holy Spirit through post-Baptismal sin(s). The Lord still gives us more spiritual chances until our repose from this world. A sinner must regain humility, or develop it, and fully repent "for all his sins and must practice the virtues which are opposite to the sins committed. Then through the virtues practiced for Christ's sake, he will acquire the Holy Spirit, Who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom of God... *The Kingdom of God is within you* (Lk. 17:21)...". [The Conversation, *op.cit.*, p. 94.]

Repentance Includes Interior Change and Exterior Action

Please note that St. Seraphim emphasises the Lord's insistence that repentance must be for all our sins and our future actions must be consistent with our repentance. I.e., we must practice what we preach, here, by our repentance. Subsequently, we are *not* free to go on blithely doing the same sinful thing(s)! Some Protestants appear to emphasise faith so much in relation to works, justification by faith alone, which is incorrect by Christ, His Church, the Apostles, that their

statements seem to infer that faith, indeed, is enough, thus leaving one to conclude that no internal correction in our living patterns is necessary. We can only say to them and others perhaps holding similar views “You can’t be serious!” as former tennis great John McEnroe used to scream at the ref who had just called his shot out!

Brethren,

We must recognise our sins for what they are, repent fully, throw ourselves upon Christ’s mercy ask Him to help us soften our hearts and dramatically revolutionise our behaviour. Of course, all the time recognising that we can do nothing without God’s grace. The door to our salvation will not close until our repose. Let’s not let it shut *before* we’re spiritually ready!

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