

The Threefold Gratitude Owed to One's Spiritual Father*

Our Much-Revered Metropolitan
and Beloved Spiritual Father,

I make bold yet again to take the floor and address you on the occasion of your Nameday. I admit, as always, to my inability to rise to the demands of this exceptional moment, but I hope in your prayers and the prayers of your spiritual children and my brothers in Christ, lest I weary you with my meager words.

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I.

It is said that an eminent musician, when on some journey, entered a Church incognito, while a service was in progress.

The choir had not rehearsed; the cacophony and the discord were indescribable.

The famous musician gradually drew near and took part in the choir unobserved.

A few minutes passed and he prevailed: the brilliant “artist” drew the whole choir to his melody—the discord turned into melodiousness.

This is how we always perceive you, Most Reverend Father, in our *caenobion*: an experienced “artist” of love, who has transformed the disharmony of our passions, our different characters, and our weaknesses into a harmony of love. Always, with discernment, wisdom, and humility, you have succeeded in making the spirit of forbearance, solidarity, love, tranquillity, and unity reign around you and in our Brotherhood.

We owe you great gratitude for this; and we pray to our Lord that He grant you strength and length of days, so that you might unceasingly bring us back to the harmonious melody of love when we go astray and become discordant.

II.

We also owe you profound gratitude, because we perceive you, much-revered Father, as the conduit and the means by which the Divine Comforter pours out His spiritual gifts upon us, your disciples.

However, in order to attract the gifts of the Holy Spirit, monks, and, more generally, spiritual children, must love, revere, and honor their Elders.

Reverence for spiritual Fathers is the wellspring of life and a precondi-

tion for salvation; it is a Divine commandment.

Let us hear what the great Father of the Orthodox Church, St. Gregory Palamas, says:

You owe all honor and love to your spiritual Fathers, since the honor ascribed to them redounds to Christ and the All-Holy Spirit, in Whom you received adoption as sons, and to the Heavenly Father, by Whom every family in Heaven and on earth is named.

Strive earnestly to have a spiritual Father throughout your life and to confess to him every sin and every thought, receiving healing and forgiveness from him; for, to them it has been given to loose and bind souls, and whatsoever they bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever they loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven; for, they received this grace and power from Christ. Hence, obey them and do not contradict them, lest you bring destruction on your soul.

For, if one who contradicts his parents according to the flesh in matters which are not prohibited by Divine law brings death on himself, according to the law, how will he who contradicts his spiritual Father not drive the Spirit of God away from himself and destroy his own soul?

For this reason, be advised by your Fathers in spirit and listen to them completely, so that your soul might be saved and you might become an heir of eternal and undefiled good things.¹

Our Holy Orthodox Tradition bears witness that the guidance of a spiritual child by an Elder is not confined only to counsels and spiritual teachings, but also develops into a genuine transmission of spiritual abilities.

Through the prayer and blessing of his spiritual Father, the disciple receives the gift of the Holy Spirit; this gift and the transmission of Heavenly charisms are portrayed in the lives of the Saints as something to be taken for granted.

Thus, when St. Sergey of Radonezh blessed the monk Isaaky to live in silence, the latter saw coming out of the fingers that blessed him a flash of light which enfolded and overwhelmed him.

Many of the brethren in the Holy Trinity Lavra shone with their virtues. Many of them became Abbots in other monasteries and Bishops. They all made progress through the counsels and guidance of the Saint [Sergey].

Among his disciples was one called Father Isaaky. Father Isaaky yearned to dedicate himself to the ascetic practice of complete silence, and for this reason he persistently implored the Saint for his blessing.

On one occasion, the wise shepherd replied to him: 'My child, if you wish to live in silence, I will give you my blessing tomorrow.'

The next day, after the Divine Liturgy, St. Sergey made the sign of the Precious Cross over him, saying: ‘May the Lord fulfill your desire.’

Father Isaaky saw a flame coming out of the Saint’s hands and surrounding him. From then on, he remained silent, and only once did another miraculous vision cause him to open his lips.²

More often in the lives of the Saints, mention is made of a joy and tranquillity that pass in a mysterious way from the soul of the spiritual Father to the soul of his disciple.

St. Seraphim of Sarov was once visited by one of his spiritual children, who was in the grip of deep distress. The holy *Staretz* comforted him by singing a hymn from the *Paraklesis* of the *Panagia*, the words of which are an entreaty for spiritual joy: “Fill my heart with joy, O Virgin, who didst receive the fullness of joy and didst make the sorrow of sin to disappear.”³

On that occasion, the serene state of the Saint’s soul passed over to the heart of the one in distress, and he returned to the monastery with a feeling of peace and full of spiritual joy and gladness.⁴

III.

Another reason why we feel especial gratitude and reverence for you, our much-revered spiritual Father, is that you are the cause of the experience in our lives the mystery of obedience.

In the eyes of the unregenerate people of our rebellious and arrogant generation, blessed obedience constitutes an enormous scandal.

In reality, however, obedience and humility always have been a scandal to the world, because the mighty ones of this world sacrifice, while the mighty ones of God are sacrificed.

Such has always been “the scandal of the Cross,”⁵ of the Christian life, which the world has never understood.

The monk experiences this voluntary sacrifice daily through obedience and the renunciation of his own will.

It is he who is truly mighty, because he crushes his egotism and denies himself for the sake of God and his neighbor; and in this way he acquires true love.

It is indisputable that we love to the extent that we deny ourselves.

The mystery of obedience is great and the benefit that a monk derives from it is indescribable, since by means of obedience the disciple imitates our Savior Christ, participates in His obedience to the Heavenly Father, and becomes Christ by Grace. “Obedience,” says Abba Hyperechios, “is the treasure of a monk. The monk who has acquired obedience will be heard by God and will boldly stand next to the Crucified One, for the Crucified Lord was obedient unto death.”⁶

All blessings come to a monk through obedience: “Obedience responds to obedience; if one obeys God, God obeys him.”⁷

Blessed and thrice-blessed are all those who are deemed worthy of “the obedience attained by the Holy Fathers,”⁸ because they are delivered from demonic presumption and self-assurance; they feel secure and calm; they have entrusted themselves to the mercy and compassions of God through their spiritual Father.

So God-pleasing is obedience, and so indispensable is it for the monk to be well-pleasing to God, that our Lord does not accept even the martyrdom of a disciple, unless this takes place with the blessing of his Elder. Let us recall an example of this from recent times:

Near the *Kellion* of St. Demetrios in the Athonite Skete of Kerasia there was a *Kalyve* that had no spring water. A certain virtuous Elder lived there as a hesychast with his disciple. One day, the disciple departed and went to Constantinople, where he underwent a martyric death at the hands of the Turks. The Elder agonized over the fate of his monk, and since, by reason of his old age, he was unable to provide for himself, he left his *Kalyve* and took the path to St. Anne’s Skete. When he reached the Cross above St. Basil’s Skete, he saw his disciple coming towards him; he welcomed him kindly and asked him what had happened. The monk told the Elder that he had been martyred for the sake of Christ, but that, because he had departed without his blessing, the Lord had sent him to ask forgiveness and to warn the Elder not to leave his *Kalyve*, since he would depart from this life after forty days, which indeed happened.⁹

The greatness of obedience can, moreover, be fully understood with reference to the God-given authority of the Elder, an authority which is respected by the Heavenly world, as the following wondrous story demonstrates:

In Kerasia there was a *Kellion* dedicated to St. Demetrios. The Superior of this *Kellion* was Elder Hadji-George, who was renowned for his virtue. He started out with a *synodeia* of forty monks, who fasted even from oil. On Pascha, they would dye potatoes instead of eggs. Many of these monks, in fact, reposed in a wondrous and miraculous way. While they were praying in Church, an Angel of the Lord would summon all those who were going to depart from this world. On one occasion, at the time of the Divine Liturgy, a Holy Angel came to one of the Brothers and told him, ‘We are going to the future life.’ The brother immediately ran to the Superior and reported to him the invitation of the Angel. The Superior then replied to the Brother: ‘Tell the Angel to wait until the Liturgy is finished.’ And so it happened: the Brother reposed after the Divine Liturgy.¹⁰

Another striking episode, preserved for us by the sacred books of the Church corroborates the foregoing narratives in a particularly forceful way and leaves us with no doubt about the spiritual meaning and power of a blessing from, or of the authority of, a spiritual Father and Elder, that comes down “from above, from the Father of lights.”¹¹

On 15 October, our Church honors the memory of an anonymous Monk-Martyr.

This monk lived in a skete in Egypt and for a number of years did obedience to an Elder. But, out of the envy of the demon who hates what is good, he violated his obedience and abandoned the Elder’s guidance, though he had no reasonable cause for so doing—by reason, for instance, of the Elder harming his soul. He even despised the penance which his Elder imposed on him

So, he departed and went down to Alexandria. But there, the idolatrous governor¹² arrested him, stripped him of his monastic habit, and put pressure on him to sacrifice to idols. But since he was unable in any way to persuade the monk to do this, the governor ordered that he first be flogged without mercy and then beheaded with a sword. And so it happened. The idolaters seized the monk, cut off his head, and threw his body outside the city for the dogs to eat.

However, some pious Christians came by night and took up the body. They anointed it with myrrh, wrapped it in linen cloths, and put it in a coffin. Later on, they placed it in the altar of one of the city Churches so that it might be honored as the Relics of a Martyr.

But every time the Divine Liturgy was celebrated and the Deacon exclaimed, ‘All ye who are catechumens depart, ye catechumens depart,’ they all saw the coffin coming out of the altar by itself! Without any human hand touching it, it reached the narthex of the Church, where it remained until the dismissal. After that, it returned to the altar, again on its own.

Everyone was astounded by what was happening. One of the Fathers endowed with discernment was informed about this occurrence and he besought God to explain it to him.

The cause of the miracle was soon revealed. An Angel appeared before him and said to him: ‘Why are you amazed and perplexed about what is taking place? Do you not know that the Apostles of Christ received authority “to bind and loose,” and that from them their successors received this authority, and on down? Now, as for this Brother, who was counted worthy to shed his blood for Christ, and yet is not allowed to be in the altar while the bloodless Sacrifice is being celebrated, know that an Angel drives him out as far as the narthex. This is because, while

he was a disciple of such-and-such, a fellow-ascetic of yours, he set aside his obedience. And when his Elder, quite reasonably, imposed a penance on him, this disciple forsook him and departed under a ban. As a Martyr, he received the crown of martyrdom, but because he is under the ban of his Elder, he cannot remain in the Altar while the Divine Liturgy is being celebrated, unless the Elder releases him from the penance with which he bound him.

When that holy ascetic learned these things, he took his staff, went to the Martyr's Elder, and related everything to him. He then took the Elder with him, and together they went down to Alexandria.

They went to the Church where the Martyr's remains lay. They opened the casket that contained his body and both of them read the prayer of forgiveness for him. Then, after kissing him, they stood there and prayed, giving glory to God.

Thereafter, whenever the Divine Liturgy was celebrated, the martyred monk remained immovable on his spot inside the holy altar...¹³

IV.

So far, Most Reverend Father, I have enumerated three reasons why we feel especial gratitude and reverence towards you:

- a) because you are an experienced "artisan" of love;
- b) because you are the means by which we receive the gifts of the All-Holy Spirit; and
- c) because you are the cause of the experience in our lives of the mystery of blessed and all-blessed obedience.

We call upon your holy prayers that we not appear ungrateful for these great gifts of God, since other brothers of ours suffer hardship, seeking after those things which we enjoy in abundance.

It is said that, in order to produce a single kilo of honey, bees make at least 50,000 flights and settle on around 1,500,000 flowers!

But we, in this blessed cœnobitic community, in this spiritual beehive, have the most sweet honey of the Holy Spirit ready-made, provided we revere our Elder, have confidence in him, embrace holy humility, and aspire always to thrice-holy obedience.

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We thank you, our much-revered spiritual Father, because your Nameday has given us the opportunity to examine our monastic identity more closely, at least for a short time.

We sincerely pray that our Lord, through the intercessions of the Most Blessed *Theotokos* and of all the Saints, may grant you health and length of

days, joy and gladness, “every good gift and every perfect gift,”¹⁴ so that—with the holy discernment and wisdom of the Fathers of our Church—you may steer the sacred ship of your rational flock towards the harbor of salvation, to eternal delight and bliss, in the blessed communion of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

3 October 1985

† Fr. G.

Notes

* This work, with the title “The Threefold Gratitude Owed to One’s Spiritual Father,” was delivered as a panegyric, in the year 1985, at the special “Thanksgiving” tribute, “Honor Thy Father in Deed and Word,” which the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Fili, Attika, organized in honor of the Nameday of its spiritual Father and Abbot, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili.

1. St. Gregory Palamas, *The Decalogue According to the Law of Christ, Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, cols. 1096D-1097A.

2. Archimandrite Timotheos, *Ὁ Ὁσίου Σέργιου τοῦ Παντωνέξ* [*St. Sergey of Radonezh*] (Oropos: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 1981), p. 61.

3. Service of the Small *Paraklesis*, Ode 9, *Troparion 2*.

4. From the Life of St. Seraphim of Sarov.

5. Cf. Galatians 5:11.

6. Abba Hyperechios 8, in *Τὸ Γερωντικόν, ἦτοι Ἀποφθέγματα Ἁγίων Γερόντων* [*The Gerontikon, or Sayings of the Holy Elders*] (Athens: “Astrir” Publications, 1961), p. 123b.

7. Abba Mios 1, in *ibid.*, p. 78b.

8. St. Theodore the Sanctified, accepting with humility and understanding the efforts of St. Pachomios the Great to free him from self-satisfaction, praised his Elder and admitted, in self-reproach: “So I, a sinner, am obligated to mourn for myself, until the Lord directs my heart to the good and I become worthy of the obedience attained by the Holy Fathers. For, without the help of the Lord, a man’s works are dust and ashes, especially when he bases them on self-assurance” (Monk Paul, *The Evergetinos*, Vol. III of the First Book, Hypothesis XXXV, §C, “From the Life of St. Pachomios” [Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998], p. 156).

9. See *Ἁγιος Κυπριανός*, Nos. 190-191 (October 1984), p. 376 (“An Elder Said”: “Profound Stories from Mount Athos”).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Cf. St. James 1:17.

12. “This event took place during a period when Christians were being

persecuted, most likely during the persecution that occurred in Alexandria under Maximinus between 308 and 311, at which time many monks were also martyred” (*Θαύματα καὶ Ἀποκαλύψεις*, see footnote 13).

13. *Θαύματα καὶ Ἀποκαλύψεις ἀπὸ τῆς Θεῆς Λειτουργίας* [*Miracles and Revelations from the Divine Liturgy*] (Oropos: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 1997), 2nd ed., pp. 111-113 (“The Disobedient Monk-Martyr”).

14. Cf. St. James 1:17.