

I Love, Therefore I Am

by His Grace, Bishop Klemes of Gardikion

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Holy Hierarchs,
Reverend Fathers and Mothers,
Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

When St. Evthymios the Great was about to depart from this vain world, in the middle of the fifth century, he gathered together the Brotherhood of his monastery in Palestine and left them his final commandments:

Beloved brethren, I depart, following the path of my fathers. As for you, if you love me, carefully keep these commandments of mine. In every way, acquire sincere love, as the beginning and end of every good work; for this virtue is the perfecting link. Just as we cannot eat bread without salt, so also it is impossible to achieve virtue without love. Every virtue that is acquired with love and humble-mindedness becomes steadfast, through experience, the passage of time, and the Grace of God. For while humility raises man up, love does not allow him to fall from this spiritual height. As Scripture also tells us, ‘he that humbleth himself shall be exalted’ and ‘love never faileth.’ Greater than humility, however, is love, since God the Word humbled Himself and became like unto us through His love for us.¹

To be sure, St. Evthymios could proclaim, like St. Anthony the Great, that he did not fear God, but loved Him, and bring us in line with the exhortation of the Disciple of Love, St. John the Theologian: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (I St. John 4:11).

I wonder, are we able to live as Christians—and especially those of us who have dedicated ourselves to God as monastics—without love? Does anything other than love justify our calling as Christians?

If Christ loved “unto the end” (St. John 13:1), utterly and completely, forgiving even those who crucified Him, how can we come to

resemble Him and enter into His Kingdom without His seal and His garment—that is, without holy and live-giving love?

Having these and other questions in mind, our Most Reverend Father, Metropolitan Cyprian, with his sensitive soul, never ceased advising us with the same salvific teaching, one of paramount importance. At every opportunity, he would always stress that “I cannot live without love.” “Have love and sacrifice yourselves one for another.” “Whoever does not have love does not have God.” “Where love does not exist, God is absent”!

Moreover, his insistence on continual (not simply frequent) communion of the Immaculate Mysteries had a simple, though simultaneously very substantial, explanation:

“If we do not continually participate in the Mystery of Love, of Unity, and of Forgiveness, we will undoubtedly undergo spiritual disintegration.”

This brings to mind the Divinely-wise teaching of St. Kosmas of Aitolia, who hailed from the same region as our Most Reverend Father:

It is natural for us to love our brother; for we share the same nature, Baptism, and Faith, partake of the Immaculate Mysteries, and hope to enjoy the same Paradise. Blessed is the man who has been vouchsafed to receive these two loves in his heart: love for God and love for his brother.... Should we do myriads of good deeds, my brethren, with fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—even shedding our blood for Christ—without having these two loves, but rather hatred and enmity for our brothers, then all of these good deeds we have performed are from the Devil and we are heading for perdition. Yes, my brethren, for this enmity is the poison of the Devil.²

What else is this Grace-filled teaching other than a repetition, with power and simplicity, of all that the Holy Apostle Paul immortally expounded in his sublime hymn to the greatness of love?

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of Angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suf-

fereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth (I Corinthians 13:1-8).

Without love, all of the other spiritual gifts are fruitless. Love gives them life and worth; without it, spiritual gifts essentially do not exist. The same applies for the bearer of spiritual gifts: man. Without love, he does not truly live. He has a “name” that he lives, but is dead (*cf.* Revelation 3:1).

The title of our homily, “I Love, Therefore I am,” is spiritually altogether legitimate. The catchword of the rationalists, who emphasize the role of cold, unspiritual reason alone, is the famous Cartesian postulate: “I think, therefore I am” (*Cogito, ergo sum*). The spiritual principle of true life in man is different: “I love, therefore I am”!

But about what kind of love are we speaking?

Our Holy Triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—“*is love*” (I St. John 4:8). The three Persons, or three Hypostases, of the only true God, Who is One in Essence and Nature, love each other with an all-pervading and all-encompassing love.³ This Triune Love created Angels and man with the power of love within them; that is, with an inclination and dispassionate longing (*eros*) for God.⁴ This provided a communion of rational beings with God, such that Divine charisms and life could be imparted to creation.

Man, in particular, was created *in the image and likeness of God*, adorned with Divine gifts and an inclination toward perfection; that is, participation in deifying Energy and Grace, or deification.⁵ This was to take place freely, not coercively. Through the envy of the Devil, however, man was deceived and *voluntarily* chose to disobey God’s commandment, thereby bringing upon himself death, perdition, and darkness; in other words, absence of God and absence of true life, love, and light.

God had adorned man with *natural, or innate* love, such that he might be able to cope even after his fall into a life that is hereafter “in death,” full of difficulties and hardships. This *natural* love is love for one’s own blood; that is, the love that spouses have for each other and for their children, and, more generally, love for kindred and race. Far

from God, however, man is not able to remain even on a tolerable and acceptable level of natural life, but very easily perverts his power for love into an impassioned and sinful love. St. Cassiane very pointedly testifies to this in her well-known *Troparion*: “Woe is me, for night is for me a frenzy of wantonness, a dark and moonless love of sin.”

But glory to Thee, Christ our King, for Thy dread Economy for our sakes! The pure and chaste longing (*eros*) of God did not abate. Man distanced himself from God, but not God from man. God loved everyone, even those held in disdain, whom everyone avoids and abhors!⁶ For Him, all are of inestimable value. All for him are supremely precious. And He became our Father, Brother, and Friend, out of inexpressible goodness and immeasurable condescension.

As St. Nicholas Cabasilas ecstatically writes, so as to initiate us into preternatural Divine Love:

Just as human love brings those in love into ecstasy when it abounds, becoming too intense for them to receive it, in the same way God’s love for man led Him to ‘empty’ Himself for our sakes. Indeed, He does not call to Him the servant whom He loves while remaining in His own place, but rather descends to seek him out in person. The Wealthy One arrives at the pauper’s hovel. Approaching alone, He announces His desire and seeks reciprocation. When the poor man scorns Him, He does not go away; He is not indignant at the affront. When driven away, He sits in the doorway. He does everything to show His love; in pain, He suffers and dies.⁷

“For God so loved the world” (St. John 3:16), cries St. John the Theologian! But what was this world that God so loved?

Ungrateful and thankless, rebellious and apostate, impious and blasphemous, depraved and wicked, miserable and wretched—indecorous world! A vile world, worthy of abhorrence, repugnance, and destruction. And yet, God loved such a world. As for us, we love people who possess something attractive and appealing, in whom we find some kind of reciprocation. God, on the other hand, loves even the unworthy and the scoundrels! We love selfishly, while God loves selflessly. Nothing obliges God to love; He has nothing to gain by loving. God loves wholly freely and selflessly. God is everything that is good, but first and foremost He is love. The love of God is a mystery. Our finite and depraved nature is incapable of conceiving this.⁸

The Son and Word of God, the only Lover of Mankind, thus accomplishes the greatest miracle of His Compassion: Out of ineffable love, He becomes man, by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, not only so as to do good, to teach, and to work miracles, but so as to be crucified for our sakes! No one can imagine how greatly Christ the God-Man grieved over, and how much he loved, mankind. For He did not confine Himself to granting myriads of good things, but even chose to suffer by the most inglorious of deaths. He gave himself up into the hands of the most invidious and bloodthirsty of monsters in human form, in the midst of the most sadistic savagery that ever existed in the history of mankind, so as to take our sin upon Himself and to wash it with His Blood, and also to grant us forgiveness and to nourish us with His own Self! The mind of man reels and is seized by grateful love for Christ—if, that is, he wants to be called and remain human....

The God-Man redeemed us, giving “His life a ransom for many” (St. Mark 10:45). But where did the Redeemer offer His Blood? In addition to St. Gregory the Theologian’s well-known reply that His Blood was received by the Father—even though He did not ask for it or have need of it—for the sake of His Economy and to sanctify man,⁹ the Divine Cabasilas tells us that Christ offered His wounds, His passion, and His Blood *to man!* Yes, to man. Man is the recipient of the priceless ransom of his redemption, such that by this inestimable ransom his very *will* might be redeemed.¹⁰ That is, that it might escape from demonic influence and return to its natural state of freedom, namely love for God and neighbor.

Christ took upon Himself the sufferings of all of mankind and of every person individually. Let no one ask himself where Christ is in the midst of human pain and why so many terrible things occur in the world. We are the ones who chose and created them. The Lord alleviates and transforms them. And, as St. Maximos the Confessor assures us, *Christ continues to take upon Himself with love the sufferings of every one of us; and until the end of this life, in proportion to what each person suffers, He will also always suffer mystically out of love!*¹¹ We have such a Commiserating God, Whom we continually pain not only by our sins, but also by our infirmity and weakness. Let us be moved to the core; let us ponder the magnitude of His love; let us be ashamed; let us repent; let us endure; and, primarily, *let us not charge Him with “negli-*

gence,” and “absence” from our world and our lives! Such a charge would be a sin, an injustice, fearful blindness, and insensitivity!

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The Lord of Love and Mercy defined love as the greatest of all the commandments:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (St. Matthew 22:37-40).

We prove our love for God by keeping His commandments. For, as we well know, whomever we love we also willingly obey. And the chief commandment is the “new” commandment of love for one’s neighbor, which is characterized by unselfishness and self-sacrifice.

“As I have loved you, so ye also love one another. By this shall all know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one for another” (St. John 13:34-35).

Christ is the *prototype* of love. He did not only teach, but also *showed* perfect love unto death, even death on the Cross.

Indeed, He demanded something never heard before among fallen mankind, which could not preserve or show even *natural* love. He called for love towards, and forgiveness of, one’s enemies, and even—if circumstances so require—that we lay down our life for our friends (St. Matthew 5:43-44, St. Luke 23:34, St. John 15:12-13).

Hence, according to St. Symeon the New Theologian, love acquired two degrees: first, love for our neighbor as for ourselves; and, second, love that is greater than our own selves: love and forgiveness of enemies and sacrifice on behalf of our friends.¹²

In this way, man increases in likeness with the Person of Christ, Who is Love Incarnate, becoming a genuine son by Grace of the Perfect and Merciful Father!

Man thereby becomes a bearer of the Holy Spirit and passes from death to life, learning from experience that “he that loveth not his brother abideth in death” (I St. John 3:14).

Yet how are we to pass from *natural* love—which we are not able to keep without difficulty, since we do not even love those who love us!—to the *voluntary* love that is demanded by our Lord? How are we

to transform our postlapsarian, impassioned love into holy, evangelical love?

Elder Sophrony (Sakharov, †1993) of blessed memory, succinctly answers this question in a letter to his sister Maria as follows:

People cannot love Christ with true love. They, like animals, only love those who approach them with the same animal ‘feelings.’ Now then, this ‘animal’ love is dictated by the inevitable worldly course of natural life. The love of Christ, however, embraces the entire world in all of its dimensions of place and time; that is in the ages that have passed and those that are to come. *In order to acquire this love, it is absolutely necessary to vanquish our pride, which impedes us from loving.* When we humble ourselves, condemning ourselves and only ourselves, then there is no sin in us, and in this way the Holy Spirit is given the capability of acting within us. And if the Holy Spirit Himself enters the soul, then victory over death becomes more manifest than the material reality of this corruptible world. Then everything that seemed impossible, senseless, ruinous, and so on, to the man-beast, now proves to be true meaning, wisdom, and justice; a unified, authentic life; outside of corruption, of darkness, and of all of the evils by which mankind destroys itself.¹³

Moreover, our Lord Jesus Christ gives us His Holy Mysteries as an answer to our desire and our repentance, granting us healing, a new life, and love. Our inability to approach and receive Divine gifts lies in our inability to transcend our chief impediments: our ruinous passion for material things and for pleasures, our lack of repentance, and, first and foremost, our self-love and egotism.

If we do not release ourselves from the suffocating iron collar of our “self”; if we do not accustom ourselves to respecting all other people; if we do not continually reproach ourselves; if we do not force ourselves to do works of love; if we do not accept the burdens and faults of others as our own; if we do not pray for the alleviation of other people’s pains; and, in a word, if we do not love, do not practice self-restraint, and do not pray, how will love in the Holy Spirit blossom within us?

If we do not love our every brother and sister, or if we willingly have an aversion for even one brother or sister, then we are not able to pray purely—and especially not noetically—and even Holy Commu-

nion is of no benefit to us. How can we approach the supreme Mystery of Love and Unity with a divided and fragmented heart?

To avoid any misunderstanding, we would like to stress at this point that we are speaking about the *Love of Truth*, which knows no compromises in matters of the Faith. Just as there is a love that is sick and impassioned, so also there is a kind of love that is made up of words alone. This tendency, which holds sway in the contemporary ecumenical movement, leads to error and heresy. Love for the heterodox dictates a call to repentance and a return to the Truth and Unity of Faith, within the true, loving mindset and ethos of our Orthodox Church.

What other power, then—to return to our subject—apart from love will compel us to renounce our conveniences and comforts? And how will we progress until we reach the point of forgiveness of our enemies? What is more, we must love them not with condescending pity, but with a compassionate and loving heart!

Our Most Reverend Father, whom we are honoring this evening, succinctly taught us—and continues, of course, to teach us from his bed of pain—with the following pertinent words: “If you wish to feel repose of soul and inexpressible joy, find a way to render some great good deed for the evil that your enemy has done you. *‘Retaliate’ with kindness!*”

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The example of St. Dionysios of Zakynthos (†December 17, 1624), who wholeheartedly forgave the murderer of his beloved only brother, Constantine, is well known to us. St. Dionysios benefited the murderer both materially and morally: He saved him from death, led him to repentance, confessed him and granted him remission of his sin, provided him with necessities, and helped him to escape the island with his holy blessing!

This is why we marvel at him to this day. His Holy Relics, whole and untouched by decay, exclaim the victory of life over death, and of love and forgiveness over hatred and revenge.

Please allow me to conclude with a reference to a modern-day example of love and forgiveness that is very moving indeed.

Elder Kallinikos (Moustikos) was born in Samos in 1914, and reposed just a decade ago, on May 18, 1999, here in Athens. He was the

fourth and youngest child in his pious family and became a Hieromonk, like his three older brothers.

In July of 1944, while Father Kallinikos was serving as a Priest in a Church in Athens during the difficult years of occupation, he received an urgent message to hurry to the region of Edessa, in Greek Macedonia, where his third brother, Father Demetres, served in a village near Lake Arnissa. When Father Kallinikos arrived, the villagers greeted him silently. At his puzzled and worried questions as to where his brother was, they led him to a clearing in the forest. There, he beheld a horrific sight: His beloved brother, Father Demetres, lay chopped to pieces before his eyes! His body lay in one place, his head in another, his arms elsewhere... Father Kallinikos staggered, called out, and fainted.

He learned that his beloved brother was the innocent victim of an iniquitous and savage slaughter in the guerrilla warfare raging at the time. His murderers were Greek rebels.

Henceforth, Father Kallinikos' health broke down. The sight he had beheld never left him; his pain was unbearable, and he would frequently break into sobs, murmuring:

"My dear brother, what did my dear brother do? He didn't do anything! They hacked him to pieces for nothing! Such a death!" But he would continue: "If I knew his murderers and if they came to find me, I would still forgive them!"

Father Kallinikos' life centered around serving others with love, ministering to the suffering, confession, and the Divine Liturgy. And our Lord, in return for his love and forgiveness, adorned him with an abundance of spiritual gifts, which the holy Elder kept carefully hidden in the treasury of his humility.

He put love into practice in his life and insisted on love. To his many spiritual children, he would often repeat the phrase from the Prayers of Thanksgiving After Holy Communion: "For love unfeigned." He would then ask: "Do we have unfeigned love?" And he would shake his head....

In gatherings with his spiritual children, he would begin and end with love: "Love! Do you have love amongst yourselves? Do you have love? I am asking you! Have love and harmony!"

He would always speak with pain of soul and tears in his eyes: "Love everyone the same way. We should not discriminate between any-

one: between the rich and the poor, enemies and friends, sinners and the pious. Love everyone the same way. The same way! Do you understand?” He would then continue: “Grieve over the sadness your brother feels. Assure him of your love.”

He would advise the married: “Have love, because here where we live, life is difficult.” And to a couple he knew, he would say: “Chrestos, love Katerina. Katerina, love Chrestos. And do not quarrel. Before night falls, speak with each other, so that the next day does not find you giving each other the silent treatment.”

Sometimes he would give a “penance” to those confessing to him to read the Holy Apostle Paul’s *Hymn to Love* daily. He insisted on showing one’s love with deeds, on forbearance, and on forgiveness.

Even animals, like cats—or even ants—were not excluded from his loving care.

Father Kallinikos passed his life in the hope of the Resurrection, while internally the wound of Crucifixion bled from his pain over his murdered brother. And, finally, he lived the Resurrection of Love, as a luminous garland of flowers in his fragrant course of martyrdom.

In November of 1994, when the Elder had turned eighty years old, precisely fifty years after the murder of his brother, he was given the honor of winning the good victory of his life and of resembling St. Dionysios of Zakynthos. Just what happened?

According to one of his spiritual daughters, things took place as follows:

“I was outside the confession room door, waiting to go in. The door opened and two men exited. One was wearing a cap. I entered and found the Elder upset and crying. I said to him:

“Father, what is wrong? Do you not feel well?”

“Emotion had choked his voice. He did not speak.

“I asked again: ‘Can I give you some water? What did those people do to you?’

“‘Eleftheria,’ he replied, ‘Now I have grown exhausted. I can bear no more. I will stop hearing confessions. I’m old... I’m tired. I’m an old man....’

“‘What happened? If it helps, tell me what upset you. Who were they who left? What did they do to you?’

“I forgave them. I always pray for them. Today they came. Oh!’ and he wept like a small child. It broke my heart. I could not bear seeing our good Father crying like that. I was afraid for him... When he had calmed down a bit, he said with a voice full of pain:

“I was waiting for them. I knew who they were. Oh, my poor brother... unjustly...’ and he began to cry again. I dared only whisper: ‘Whom were you waiting for?’

“For the killers of my unjustly murdered brother!’

“For his murderers?’

“Yes. I forgave them. I forgave them... and here...’ and he showed me the epitrachelion that he wore around his neck...”

Another of Elder Kallinikos’ spiritual daughters, who heard the story, added: “I marvelled at Elder Kallinikos’ power of forgiveness. Today there is no forgiveness in the world. We do not forgive our fellow man, not even a word he says to us. I cannot hold back my tears. I am sincerely moved to the core!”¹⁴

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We too have surely been moved by this astonishing, modern-day example. The responsibility that lies before us is great. Our Lord constantly asks us, through each of our “least” brethren, with whom He identifies Himself: “*Do you love me? Do you forgive me?*” He asks us and judges us! Moreover, will we not be definitively judged by our attitude towards love at the Dread Judgment Seat?

Daily, we take exams in the school of life, which is a school of strict implementation of active love and forgiveness. Christ’s question is persistent and continues to be addressed to all of us: “*Do you love Me? Do you have love amongst yourselves?*”

Brothers and sisters, let us prove to be worthy children of our spiritual Father, who is a *Father of Love*, and let us answer the above question in the affirmative, with our consciences and deeds bearing positive witness thereto! Let us live and exist *truly*—that is, with love!

Let us fearlessly and steadfastly cross over from earth to Heaven through love, which “is the only bridge over the abyss of death, from this world to the next, and from temporal life to eternal life.”¹⁵

St. Herman of Alaska lovingly exhorts us: “For our good, for our happiness...at least let us make a promise to ourselves, that from this

day, from this hour, from this minute we shall strive to love God [and our fellow man] above all, and fulfill His holy will”!¹⁶

“God is love, and he who abideth in love abideth in God, and God in him”! Amen.



Notes

1. Cyril of Skythopolis, *Βίος τοῦ Ἁγίου Εὐθυμίου τοῦ Μεγάλου* [Life of St. Evthymios the Great], trans. Archimandrite Nikodemos Giannakopoulos, Vol. III in the series *Ἄνθη τῆς Ἐρήμου* [Flowers of the Desert] (Halkis: Ekdoseis Evagous Hidrymatos Osiou Ioannou Rosou, 1972), pp. 105-106.

2. Bishop Augoustinos Kantiotes, Metropolitan of Phlorina, *Κοσμάς ὁ Αἰτωλός* [Kosmas of Aitolia] 10th ed., Teaching I, (Athens: Ekdoseis “Ho Stavros,” 1988), pp. 111-112.

3. Abbess Evthymia, *Ἡ Ἀναδημιουργία τοῦ Ἄνθρώπου (Κατὰ τὴν Θεολογία τοῦ Ἁγίου Νικολάου Καβάσιλα)* [The Recreation of Man (According to the Theology of St. Nicholas Cabasilas)] (Athens: Ekdoseis Tenos, 2002), p. 43.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 44. Cf. St. Gregory Palamas, “One Hundred Fifty Chapters on Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life, Intended as a Purge of the Barlaamite Scourge,” §40 (Thessalonica: Paterikai Ekdoseis Gregorios ho Palamas, 1994), pp. 120-122.

5. Archimandrite Damaskenos, *Ἡ ἐν Χριστῷ ὀραιοποίησις τῆς ζωῆς* [The Beautification of Life in Christ], in *Ὡδὴ ὑπὲρ τοῦ Ἀγαπητοῦ* [Ode to the Beloved], (Megara: Ekdoseis Evergetis, Hiera Androa Koinobiake Mone Hagias Paraskeves Maziou, 1998), p. 426.

6. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Alphabetical Chapters*, ch. 14 (Holy Mountain: Ekdoseis Hiera Mone Stavroniketa, 2005), pp. 198-200.

7. [St.] Nicholas Cabasilas, *On Life in Christ*, Discourse VI, §7 (Thessalonica: Paterikai Ekdoseis Gregorios ho Palamas, 1979), p. 516.

8. Nikolaos Soteropoulos, *Τὸ Εὐαγγέλιο τοῦ Ἰωάννου* [The Gospel of John], Vol. I (Athens: Ekdoseis “Ho Stavros,” 1996), pp. 252-253.

9. St. Gregory the Theologian, “Oration XLV, ‘On Holy Pascha,’” §22, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXVI, col. 653BC.

10. Abbess Evthymia, *Ἡ Ἀναδημιουργία τοῦ Ἄνθρώπου*, p. 53.

11. St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy*, §15 (Thessalonica: Paterikai Ekdoseis Gregorios ho Palamas, 1985), pp. 156.

12. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Alphabetical Chapters*, ch. 8, p. 130.

13. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Letters to Russia*, Letter 47 (November 28, 1972), (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of the St. John the Baptist, 2009), pp. 218-219.

14. Panagiotes Hagaliotes, *Γέρον Καλλίνικος ὁ Ἐξομολογών, Ὁ τελευταῖος τῆς παλαιᾶς φρουρᾶς* [Elder Kallinikos the Confessor, The Last of the Old Guard] (Athens: 2006), pp. 78-79, 87, 190, 20, 262, 263, 264, 304, 318-319 (testimonies concerning Elder Kallinikos's forgiveness of his brother's murderers); pp. 392, 416.

15. Archimandrite Justin (Popovich), *Ἑρμηνεία τῶν Ἐπιστολῶν τοῦ Ἁγίου Ἰωάννου τοῦ Θεολόγου* [Explanation of the Epistles of St. John the Theologian] (Athens: 2006), p. 85

16. *A Treasury of Saint Herman's Spirituality*, Vol. III in *Little Russian Philokalia* (Ouzinkie, AK: St. Herman Press, 1989), p. 49.