

EDIFICATION AND CONSOLATION

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men for edification and exhortation and consolation”

(I Corinthians 14:3)

Simple Catechism Through the Experience of the Orthodox Church

A TRI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION BY THE HOLY CONVENT OF THE HOLY ANGELS

APHIDNAI, ATTICA, GREECE

Volume 5 • September - November 2014

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“Incidental Comments”

We Reject the Culture of Depression!*

A consistent Orthodox ecclesiastical life necessitates a complete rejection and radical transcendence of the contemporary *culture of depression and pessimism*.

This *culture of depression* subtly and methodically pervades every sphere of our daily life in various ways.

Let us say **No** to dispiriting music and depressing songs, since they clearly *wound* our souls.

Let us say **No** to demoralizing publications, since their emptiness has nothing to offer us.

Let us say **No** to downbeat television shows and movies, since we have no need of their *pessimism*.

Let us say **No** to sinful and egocentric entertainment.

Let us say **No** to any place that cultivates an atmosphere of disheartenment and despair, which lead to the *void of nowhere*.

Let us say **No** to alcohol and drugs, and to all other addictive substances that plunge one into the darkness of delusion.

Let us say **No** to the *utter vacuity* of such pastimes, since in no way are they able to bring us joy or increase our happiness.

Let us say **No**, ultimately, to anything that does not bring gladness; that does not inspire optimism; that is not genuinely joyful; that does not project a vision of life and of self-sacrifice for others; that does not have the love of God as its source; and that does not originate with the Cross and lead to the wellspring of the Resurrection!

(*) † Metropolitan Cyprian, September 1, 2014 (Old Style), at the Outset of the New Ecclesiastical Year.

“The time has finally come for Christianity to become a religion of deeds.”

Piety and Religiosity*



The Greek enlightener of Russia, St. Maximos the Greek (1470-1556), spent the last five years of his life at the Lavra of the Holy Trinity, founded by St. Sergius of Radonezh.

He was visited there by Tsar Ivan the Terrible, who, together with the Tsarina Anastasia and their young son, the Tsarevich Dmitry, was setting out on a pilgrimage to the St. Cyril of Belozersk [or White Lake] Monastery.

Putting his life in danger, Saint Maximos made every effort—though in vain—to convince the outwardly religious ruler to set aside the pilgrimage in favor of rendering assistance to the poor women and unprotected orphans who were victims of the war against the Tartars during the annexation of Kazan.

The Saint welcomed the Tsar into his cell with the words:

“I give thanks to Almighty God, Tsar Ivan, that He has deemed me worthy to see you with my own eyes before the time comes for them to close. May God's protection be with you, great Emperor of Orthodoxy! And, if it pleases you, you have my own humble blessing as well.”

“That is why I am here, Elder,” replied the Tsar, “because I want to have your blessing, as do the Tsarina and the young Tsarevich, who is not yet a year old.”

“I have heard, my Tsar, that you are thinking of making a long journey. Is it true what they say?”

“It is so,” replied Ivan. “I am going to Belozersk to venerate the Relics of St. Cyril. I have made a vow to do so.”

“When you were gravely ill,” the Saint then said, “I prayed to all the Saints. I even prayed to the wonderworking Icon of the Panagia of Vato-pedi, but I did not go to Vatopedi! From here, in

my cell, I prayed to her, and the Panagia heard me....”

The Tsar was perplexed. It was not so much the Saint's words as his tone of voice that he did not like. Possessing an observant mind, Ivan understood that he was supposed to decipher the meaning behind the words he was hearing. He asked:

“So it is not a good thing for me to go and fulfill my vow?”

“It is not,” came the immediate reply.

Ivan was by now bewildered.

“But I am going to venerate St. Cyril at his own monastery!”

“Tsar Ivan, when you are called upon to do a great good deed, but do not do it, and instead of the great good deed you do a different deed, of lesser worth, then know that you are not doing something good, but something bad! Reckon that you owe five but give only one. Well, then your debt remains!”

“And just what is it that I am not giving? What is the great good deed that I am not doing?”

“There are innumerable prayers one can say with words, but above them all, Tsar Ivan, is the prayer of deeds. The Lord said: 'Do not say to Me "Lord, O Lord," but put My commandments into practice.' But as for you, now, instead of deeds, you are setting off to utter mere words. That is what is bad about what you are doing.”

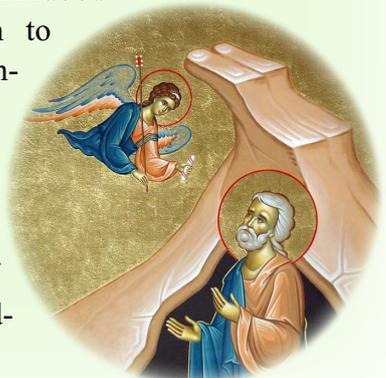
Ivan remained silent. He was not thinking. He only felt a terrible anger within him at the Saint's words.

“So what are you telling me to do?” he asked after a pause.

“Last year, you won Kazan from the infidels and many valiant Christian soldiers fell in battle. They left behind widows, orphaned children, and mothers, broken-hearted and unprotected. Well then, you should think about

them now. Return to Moscow and consider how you can lighten their pain.”

Putting his hand on his heart, he added, with a look of inexpressible pleading on his face:



“Do as I tell you, and I will pray for you day and night, until my death. Show the suffering your compassion. There is no better prayer! And be sure, my Tsar, that the Lord will hearken to such a prayer and glorify your name unto all eternity!”

“Elder,” Ivan replied, “both what you are telling me to do and that which I have in mind to do can be done. The one does not impede the other!”

“But it *does* impede it!” shouted the Saint with emotion. “It impedes it a great deal, Tsar. I beseech you, listen to me: It is not simply that you will bring relief to the widows, the poor, and the others who are in pain. What is even more important is the example you would be setting! What I am telling you now is not of my own feeble inspiration. Listen to me carefully. Lead the way; teach the people by your own example, Tsar, to set aside empty words and to place importance on deeds. That is what our Lord wants. And this is the moment, Tsar Ivan! Now that your Empire has become stronger and invincible, the time has come, here in your Empire, for Christianity to become a religion of deeds.”

“And what if I continue on my journey, Elder, as I began it?”

“If you continue it, you will be doing a great evil! And the pain you will experience will be just as great. You, also, will suffer a great misfortune, and indeed very soon...”

“What misfortune are you talking about?” asked the Tsar in anger.

“There where you are going, you will lose the Tsarevich,” replied the Saint, having been enlightened by God.

Ivan grew deathly pale. He feared the prophecy, but overpowering his fear was his wrath.

“What? Are you threatening me?” he shouted. “How dare you, a mere mortal, tell me things that only God decides? Retract what you said about the Tsarevich.”

In his eyes, the Saint saw the Tsar's terror at the fulfillment of the prophecy, and therein lay his only glimmer of hope.

“Lord, come to our aid!” and he made the sign of the Cross. He approached Ivan, looked him penetratingly in the eyes, and said:

“Tsar Ivan, if you do not hearken to my words, you will lose your son!”

Enraged, Ivan bellowed like an animal, stamped his foot with all his might, and made for the door.

The pilgrimage took place as planned. The Tsar scorned the Saint's call to philanthropy, which would have been an occasion for a general change in the mindset of many merely externally religious people. In accordance with the prophecy, however, the Tsarevich Dmitry, Ivan the Terrible's firstborn son, could not endure the hardships of the journey and died on the road.

(*) *Spiritual Gifts and Those Endowed with Spiritual Gifts* [in Greek] (Piræus: Holy Monastery of the Paraclete, 2013), Vol. III, pp. 74-78.



A Grateful Attitude of “Emptying” Ourselves

“so as to be filled by Him!”

I have everything I need!

*

I do not *demand* anything!

*

I am not *entitled* to anything!

*

I am satisfied with everything!

*

For everything that I have or do not have or is given to me, I thank and glorify God!

*

I love everyone and am content with everyone!

*

Glory to God for all things!

*

Everyone loves me, even when they criticize me, since in so doing they benefit me!

*

I give thanks to Christ when I have no desires or demands, because then I am free; then it is that I can humble myself, love others, and be filled with Him!



Our Guardian Angel is our helper at the time of our departure from this world

The Handwriting of Our Sins*

By the time Elder Gabriel the Confessor [in the sense of a Priest who hears confessions—Trans.] returned from the world to Nea Skete [on Mt. Athos], Monk Kyrillos (Koumiotes), from the Kalyva of the Life-giving Spring, had fallen gravely ill and was at the point of death, and thus had called for his spiritual Father in order to confess. This was in the year 1965.

When his confessor, Father Ephraim, tried to help the sufferer confess, the latter said that there was a piece of paper with something written on it stuck to his left shoulder, but that he could not read what it said.

Another confessor, Father Haralambos, then arrived, but he was also unable to help the dying Monk Kyrillos.

Then his brother in the flesh, Father Neophytos (who was also a confessor), called for Elder Gabriel the Confessor, who, filled with brotherly love, approached the sufferer. When the Elder heard about the piece of paper, as an experienced confessor he asked Monk Kyrillos to tell him exactly what he saw.

The sufferer said that on his right side he saw two Angels in white, whereas on his left side there were many demons ready to snatch his soul. One of these demons, in fact, was using his tail to play with the prayer rope of an hesychastic monk, Elder Joseph, who was also present.

Elder Gabriel asked all of the other Fathers to leave the room, and told Monk Kyrillos a second time to reveal to him the secrets of his heart.

When he had told him everything, the Elder asked him if the paper was

still attached to his shoulder, which it was.

The confessor then instructed him to ask his Guardian Angel to tell him what was written on the paper.

Monk Kyrillos then turned to the Angels and spoke to them in a language of which the confessor understood not a word. His Guardian Angel responded in the same language.

Then Elder Gabriel placed his *Epitrachelion* (Priestly stole) over the dying monk and asked him what the Angel had told him was written on the paper. Then Monk Kyrillos told him two sins that he had forgotten to confess.

Upon hearing this, the confessor read the prayer of absolution.

When he took away his *Epitrachelion*, the monk told him that the paper had attached itself to it and that all of the sins written on it had been erased. And with these words, he gave up his spirit and departed for eternal blessedness.

The confessor's experience and discretion helped Monk Kyrillos to confess and to be cleansed of his human failings, with the Guardian Angel of his soul as his interpreter and helper.

(*) Athonite Monk Andreas, *The Gerondikon of the Holy Mountain* [in Greek], (Ekdoseis: Athos), pp. 408-409.



The Holy Angels protect, strengthen, and illumine us

Are We Shy of Our Guardian Angel?*

A certain man confessed to me, with great simplicity:



“I am shy of my Guardian Angel, and tell him:

“My good Angel, turn around so that you do not see me.”

“So then, when I get dressed, wash myself, or take a shower, I do so with modesty, saying the Jesus Prayer, so that my Guardian Angel does not leave—so that he hears the prayer and remains near me. It does not matter if he has his back turned; it is enough for me that I feel him next to me.”

Indeed, when we pray continually, our Angel remains close to us, and especially when our prayer is fervent. I have only heard such a story once, not from anyone else. Most of us, when we are alone, are not shy of anything. We think: “Nobody can see me.” Nothing we do, however, escapes God's attention.

* * *

A certain pious Priest had the blessed habit of getting up at 3 a.m. and praying alone for four hours, until seven in the morning. He would then go to his Church where he would serve Orthros.

His sole spiritual concern was to battle against pride, cultivating elevating humility, which he taught first and foremost by his own example, and then by his words and counsels.

One night he “saw”—with his bodily or noetic eyes, he does not know—a throng of Holy Angels accompanying him in his prayers, and simultaneously protecting him with fiery swords from the demons

that not only wanted to disturb him, but even, if possible, to tear him to pieces. The presence of the Holy Angels filled him with faith and a sense of assurance and security, since they are the holy guardians “of our souls and bodies.”

Instinctively, saying the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” he interrupted his prayers and went to the bedrooms of his nine children, his Presbytera, and his elderly father. At the side of each and every one of them, at the head of the bed, he saw a Guardian Angel! And in the back of the room, he saw demons, who were bound and unable to harm his family.

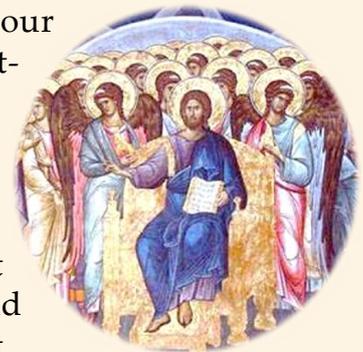
The good Priest then understood that all Ministers of the Most High, and also simple and pious parents, who place all of their hope in God are protected by Him from every danger and evil by means of His Holy Angels.

One rainy winter afternoon, when the Priest was lying sick in bed, his eldest son—today a clergyman himself—saw an Angel next to his sleeping father, not only watching over him, but even wiping away the sweat from off his forehead!

* * *

My fellow Christians, fear not! We are never alone, if we struggle well. Alongside us are throngs of Holy Angels sent by God to protect us from thousands of dangers, and to guard us, strengthen us in our faith, and enlighten us.

Let us, then, pray to the Holy Angels with great faith and a spirit of repentance and contrition of heart.



(*) Protopresbyter Stephanos K. Anagnostopoulos, *Knowledge and Experience of the Orthodox Faith* [in Greek] (Piraeus: 2005) pp. 168, 192-193.

Importance and Usage—Symbolism and Life

As Orthodox Christians, in our daily devotional life, we make use of various objects such as candles, incense, oil lamps, Prosphoron, Antidoron, and the Cross, and we take part in sacred Rites, such as the Blessing of Loaves, Memorial Services, and the Mysteries of the Church, etc.

While making use of these things, however, we are often ignorant of their meaning and correct usage.

Vigil lamps*

Historical Background



Before the advent of Christianity, pagans would not infrequently hang a perpetually lit golden lamp before idols and statues.

The Vestal Virgins in Rome kept the fire constantly burning at the Temple of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth and household.

In the Jewish Tabernacle of Witness, the Golden Lampstand consisted of seven lamps of pure gold, lit with pure, virginal olive oil.

The first Christians, who came from among the Jews and idolaters, brought this custom with them to their new centers of worship. Thus, they would light vigil lamps so as never to forget those difficult and pivotal days of persecution.

Various kinds of lamps have been found by archeologists in the crypts and catacombs of Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, and Palestine with the inscriptions “Light from light” and “The Light of Christ illumines all.”

Meaning and Symbolism

From the aforementioned inscriptions, we can conclude that the vigil lamp symbolizes the unwaning Light, which is Christ, Whom we are called to imitate.

• Let us illuminate ourselves with the light of knowledge. • Let us become lights, like the disciples of the Great Light • Let us become luminaries in the world by our pure way of life. • Let us be led to the radiance of Christ, keeping our lamps burning, as did the five wise virgins.

If every Christian becomes a lamp, every congregation a golden lampstand, and every Metropolis a *polyelaios*, then the light of Christ will truly shine upon the earth.

* * *

St. Nikolai (Velimirović), Bishop of Ohrid,

gives us seven reasons why we light vigil lamps.

1. In order to remind us that our faith is light. Christ said: “I am the Light of the world” (St. John 8:12). The light of the vigil lamp reminds us of the light by which Christ illumines our souls.

2. In order to remind us that our lives must be radiant, like those of the Saints, whom the Apostle Paul calls “sons of light.”

3. In order to serve as a reproach to us for our dark deeds and our evil thoughts and desires, and so as to call us to the path of evangelical light, that we might more zealously fulfill the commandments of our Lord: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works” (St. Matthew 5:16).

4. In order to remind us that our prayer should be unceasing. Whenever the vigil lamp is lit, it is a call to prayer.

5. In order to strike terror in the evil powers, which deviously assail us before and during prayer, desiring to lead our thoughts away from God. Demons love darkness and tremble at the light—the light of Christ, which illumines those who love Him.

6. In order that this light might rouse us to selflessness. Just as the wick burns with the oil in the vigil lamp, so let our own wills burn with the flame of love for Christ, always being submissive to God’s will.

7. In order to teach us that, just as the vigil lamp cannot be lit without our hand, so too our heart—our inner vigil lamp—cannot be lit without the hand of God. Our virtues are the necessary com-



The wheat of sin

Sunday as a Day of Rest*

An instructive and wondrous event once happened to the Fathers of a certain monastery, which became known to their neighbors, who told the story as follows:

The monks would go to their *metochia* (monastery dependencies) that were located in the lowlands in order to sow wheat for their year's supply of bread, which they would also offer to visitors and the poor.

At one point, they went to sow wheat at the *Metochion* of St.



Athanasios.

Saturday afternoon came around, and just one small strip of land remained unsowed.

One of the monks, so as to avoid their having to return later for the little bit of remaining work, got carried away and sowed the land on Sunday morning at dawn!

* * *

When the time came to harvest the land, they noticed that on the strip of land that had been sowed on Sunday the wheat was twice as high as the wheat elsewhere.

This struck them as peculiar, and they told the Abbot, a Divinely-illuminated and holy man, what had taken place.

To their astonishment, he ordered them not to harvest that particular plot, but rather, when they had finished harvesting the rest of the land, to burn it!

And so they did.

When they were burning the wheat that had been sown in sin, something exploded with the force of dynamite!

Seized with fright, the monks understood the snare of the Enemy and the nature of the sin.

In repentance, and having made a full confession to the Abbot, the guilty monk begged forgiveness and resolved to keep Sundays free from all work, no matter how pressing.



(* *Panagia Varnakova: Miracles of the Panagia [in Greek] (Varnakova: Hiera Mone Panagias Varnakova, 2005), p. 35.*

bustible material—that is, the wick and oil—but in order for them to be lit and give off light, we are in need of the “fire” of the Holy Spirit.

What kind of materials should we use?

A clean vigil lamp glass, pure olive oil (not vegetable oil), and a wick of twisted cotton string or wax.

We use olive oil to bring to remembrance the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where there was an olive grove. Olive oil is the best and purest oil, which is what we should offer to God. Let us not be miserly like Cain of old.

Lighting the vigil lamp with olive oil is a small sacrifice on our part—a sign and token of the gratitude and love we owe to God for the great sacrifice He made for us. In this way, along with our prayer, we thank Him for our life, health, salvation, and for everything that He bestows upon us in His Divine and infinite love.

How do we dispose of the materials we have used to light the lamp?

We gather it all up separately and either bury it in the garden in a place where people do not tread or burn it (if you are unable to do so yourself, ask if they can do so for you at your parish). We should never simply throw it in the garbage.

When and where do we light a vigil lamp?

A vigil lamp should be kept perpetually lit in front of our house's main Icon corner, in order to remind us that our spiritual struggle for our salvation should be perpetual, vigilant, and luminous.

We also light vigil lamps in front of Icons and on the Holy Table in Churches, and at the graves of our dearly departed.

(* *Presbyter Georgios A. Kalpouzios, Handbook for Orthodox Devotional Life (Self-Evident Matters of Which We Are So Ignorant) [in Greek] (Athens: Photodotes, 2008), pp. 8-10.*

“Please!”: the courtesy
of the Holy Angels

The Unsleeping Guardian Angel of the Church and of the Holy Table*



A Priest once recounted the following to me.

One evening, he went to the Church fairly late, since he had forgotten something there which he absolutely needed.

He unlocked the door and went inside. The Church lay in darkness.

And there, through the Beautiful Gate, which he had forgotten to close (the curtain in this case, since there were no Altar doors), he saw a radiant Angel with a fiery sword in his hand standing next to the Holy Table!

This so frightened him that he turned to flee.

When he had reached the Narthex (it was a large Church), he heard a voice call out: “Stop!”

So he came to a halt, petrified, frozen to the spot!

“Do not be afraid,” the voice gently said to him. “I am the Church’s Guardian Angel. When a Table in a Church is consecrated and becomes a Holy Table, then the Lord Almighty, the ‘King of kings and Lord of lords,’ places an unsleeping Guardian Angel next to it.”

As the Angel spoke these words, the Priest remained motionless in the Narthex, listening in awe, with his back to the Altar.

The Angel continued, in an even gentler voice:

“Please do come back and close the Beautiful Gate, which you left open.”

(Imagine, the Angel said “please” to the Priest! How many of us say “please” to our companion, our child, our brother, or our neighbor?)

The Priest turned around—by this time his fear and trembling had been replaced by an inner sense of complete calmness—but he could no longer see the Angel.

He walked forward tentatively, but now out of reverence, not fear. With diffidence and awe, he took hold of the curtain at the Beautiful Gate and slowly and carefully drew it shut.

But then he began to wonder: “Maybe it was all my imagination? Was I perhaps dreaming? Maybe I was hallucinating?”

In response to these doubts, he heard the voices of myriads of Angels chanting the *Axion Estin* (“It is Truly Meet”—the Church was dedicated to the Most Holy Theotokos).

The sound of this sweet Angelic psalmody was more than he could bear, and he fainted. He just fell to the ground!

When he came to shortly thereafter, he went home and spoke to no one about what had occurred. Only fifteen years later did he tell me, shortly before his repose.



(*) Protopresbyter Stephanos K. Anagnostopoulos, *Experiences During the Divine Liturgy: An interpretation of the Divine Liturgy based on actual events and experiences of Saints, Priests, monastics and lay people* [in Greek] (Piraeus: 2003), p. 36.

• **Mailing address:** Convent of the Holy Angels, 145 65 Hagios Stephanos, P.O. Box 51891, Greece
 • **e-mail:** mhangels@otenet.gr • **Telephone number:** (+30) 22950 22582 • **FAX:** (+30) 22950 22582
 • **Published in eight languages:** Greek, Russian, English, French, Italian, Swedish, Czech and Georgian (see www.hsir.org/Publications_en/OikodomiParamythia.html) • **Distributed free of charge** • **With the blessing and supervision** of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle, of the Church of the True Orthodox Christians of Greece.