Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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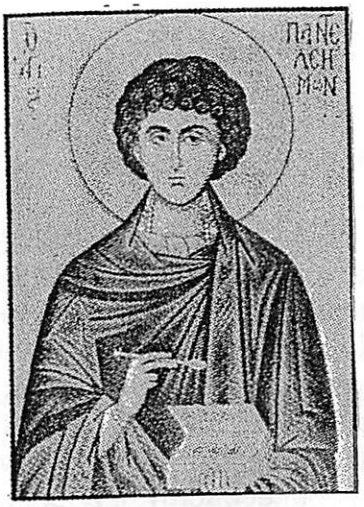
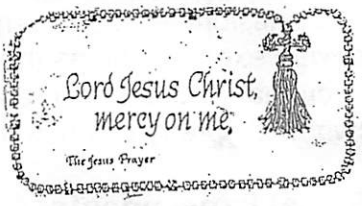
July 24, 2016

Martyr Christina of Tyre (300 AD)
Holy Martyrs and Passion-Bearers, Sts. Boris & Gleb of Russia (1015)





- **It is Diocesan Assembly week in Wilmington, N.C.**

Looking Ahead: Dormition Fast – August 1 thru 14
Baptisms – Saturday, August 6: Jessica Howell, Luke Hobbs, Brion Sokoll
August 6 is also the next major Feastday of the Transfiguration.

The more resolutely , the more constantly, your heart is turned towards God and His Saints, the more it will be enlightened, purified, and vivified. ~ St. John of Kronstadt

It is indispensable for every Christian to acquire the habit of turning quickly to God in prayer about everything. ~ St. John of Kronstadt

Everything you do, all your work, can contribute towards your salvation. It depends on you, on the way you do it. History is replete with monks who became great saints while working in the kitchen or washing sheets. The way of salvation consists in working without passion, in prayer....
May God give you the strength to keep your spirit, your mind, and your heart in the spirit of Christ. Then everything that happens to you can very quickly be radically transformed. What was tiresome and discouraging will disappear, transfigured by your desire to be there where Christ your God is....
Elder Sophrony of Essex (+1991)

Go to Church. Say your prayers. Teach your children. Shop less. Share your stuff. Keep the commandments as we have received them. Pray for the grace to suffer well. Help those around you who are suffering. There is no need to wait for someone else to do it. Those who plant olive trees know that they will not yield a crop for at least 25 years. "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the mercy of God forever and ever." (Psalm 52:8) - Fr. Stephen Freeman

Father Maximos, in *The Mountain of Silence*, says that before speaking to anyone about God, "You must pray for that person so that Grace may proceed ahead of you and prepare the ground. But even so, people whose heart is shut cannot experience the light, no matter what."

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

This and That

"We grew up in a country called America. Wasn't as good as it pretended to be, but it wasn't terrible. Everybody under 25 or so has grown in a country I call PornAmerica, and that country is ...just damaged, possibly beyond repair.

But I have this radical idea that fixing some of the rising economic woes of our country might actually help the morality. If husbands and fathers had good jobs with career growth potential, for instance; if wives had a real choice between working outside the home perpetually or taking time off to do the priceless work of mothering their children without making future employment impossible; if young men and women could be sure that they would not have to sacrifice their human dignity for a paycheck for ten years after college graduation before they can even think about marriage and family; if companies could not demand 60, 70, or 80 hour work-weeks as the price of admission into the global economy; if people had time and money for travel and exploration and community involvement and passionate hobbies–maybe we wouldn't be reduced to a view of human beings that sees their sexual expressions as the greatest source of human identity, pleasure, happiness, and self-worth, such that all such expressions must be elevated to the same level and considered equally moral (when it's pretty obvious that they are not). – Erin Manning

Social Experiments

...For the past half century we have been living through one of the great unstated social experiments of all time. We have tried to construct a world without identity and morality. Instead we left it to two systems to deal with the problems of our collective life: the market economy and the liberal democratic state.

Morality has been outsourced to the market. The market gives us choices, and morality has been reduced to a set of choices in which right or wrong have no meaning beyond the satisfaction or frustration of desire. We find it increasingly hard to understand why there might be things we want to do and can afford to do, that we should not do because they are dishonorable or disloyal or demeaning: in a word, unethical. Too many people in positions of public trust have come to the conclusion that if you can get away with it, you would be a fool not to do it. That is how elites betray the public they were supposed to serve. When that happens, trust collapses and a civilization begins to decay and die.

Meanwhile the liberal democratic state abolished national identity in favor of multiculturalism. The effect was to turn society from a home into a hotel. In a hotel you pay the price, get a room, and are free to do what you like so long as you do not disturb the other guests. But a hotel is not a home. It doesn't generate identity, loyalty or a sense of belonging. Multiculturalism was supposed to make Europe more tolerant. Its effect has been precisely the opposite, leading to segregation, not integration.

The market economy and the liberal democratic state are two of the West's greatest achievements, but without a strong sense of identity and morality, they will fail. To turn crisis into opportunity, we must recover the central insight of our great religious and civic traditions, that society is woven out shared ideals. Confident in our identity, we can welcome and integrate new waves of immigration. Strong in our moral sense, we can build businesses that strengthen communities.

~ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, UK Telegraph, 7/1/16

....Whether the Revolution one wants to protect is the French, the Bolshevik, or the Sexual, killing innocents for the sake of the Revolution is no vice. That's how ideologues see it. — Rod Dreher

An Introduction to the Desert Fathers (Benedicta Ward)

The Historical Background

The collections of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the Sayings of the Fathers, come from the very beginnings of Christian monasticism. In the fourth century, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Arabia were the forcing ground for monasticism in its Christian expression; every form of monastic life was tried, every kind of experiment, every kind of extreme. Monasticism is of course older than Christianity, but this was the flowering of it in its Christian expression and in many ways it has never been surpassed. The roots of western monasticism are in the East, and the wisdom of the desert, the understanding of this way of life, has formed a central, though often unidentified, source for Christian living through the centuries. The great center was Egypt. By 400 AD, Egypt was a land of hermits and monks. There were three main types of monasticism there, corresponding very roughly to three geographical locations.

Lower Egypt—the hermit life. The prototype of the hermit life was St. Anthony the Great, a Copt and a layman. He was unlettered, the son of well-to-do peasants. One day in church he heard the saying of Jesus: 'Go, sell all you have and give to the poor and come and follow me', as a commandment addressed to himself. He withdrew from ordinary Christian society about 269, and later he went further and further into the solitude of the desert. Anthony died in 356 at the age of 105 and he is still regarded as the 'father of monks'. He had many disciples and many imitators, and it is from Anthony and this tradition that many of the Sayings of the Fathers come.

Upper Egypt—coenobitic (communal) monasticism. In a less remote part of Egypt, the radical break with society took a different form. At Tabennisi in the Thebaid, St. Pachomius (290—347) became the creator of an organized monasticism. These were not hermits grouped around a spiritual father, but communities of brothers united to each other in work and prayer. There are few Sayings that are preserved from this region, but the Pachomian experiment was of vital importance in the development of monasticism.

Nitria and Scetis—groups of ascetics. At Nitria, west of the Nile delta, and at Scetis, forty miles south of Nitria, there evolved a third form of monastic life in the 'lavra' or 'skete' where several monks lived together, often as disciples of an 'abba' (spiritual father). Nitria was nearer to Alexandria and formed a natural gateway to Scetis. It was a meeting place between the world and the desert where visitors, like St. John Cassian, could first make contact with the traditions of the desert. Here a more learned, Greek-influenced type of monasticism evolved around an educated minority of whom Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) is the most famous. Many Sayings come from here and are associated with the names of the great abbas such as Moses, Pambo, Abraham, Sisoes, John Kolobos, and the two Macarii.

Syria. The Egyptian monks created an ethos of their own; they made a radical break with their environment and formed new groups to which the relentless round of prayer and manual labor was basic. In Syria, however, in the area around Edessa and Antioch, and especially in the mountains of Tur 'Abdin, the ascetic movement took a different form. The Syrian monks were great individualists and they deliberately imposed on themselves what is hardest for human beings to bear: they went about naked and in chains, they lived unsettled lives, eating whatever they found in the woods. They chose to live at the limits of human nature, close to the animals, the angels, and the demons. Their most typical representatives in the fifth century were the 'Stylite' saints, men who lived for very long periods on the top of a pillar. The first to adopt this way of life was Simeon Stylites (from the Greek stylos, pillar) who lived for forty years on a fifty-foot column outside Antioch. Some Sayings of the Fathers come from this forbidding source, from the ascetics like Julian Saba, as well as the Stylites.

Asia Minor. In Cappadocia (central Turkey), where a more learned and liturgical monasticism developed in the heart of the city and of the Church, the key figure was St. Basil the Great (c. 330—379). He and his followers were known as theologians and writers rather than as simple monks of the Egyptian type.

Palestine. The great monastic center in the fifth century was Palestine. In the Judean wilderness, and especially around the desert of Gaza, there were great spiritual fathers in the Egyptian tradition; Sts. Barsanuphius and John, Dorotheos, Euthymius, and Sabbas. Many of the Sayings come from this source.

The Sayings of the Fathers

These experiments of fourth and fifth century monasticism, especially those in Egypt, produced a remarkable new literary genre in the records of the Sayings of the Fathers. Close to parable and folk wisdom, their themes and anecdotes passed into the world of the Middle Ages and on into pre-revolutionary Russia. The Vitae Patrum, the Lives of various Desert Fathers, also exercised a great influence, especially the greatest of them, the Life of St. Anthony by St. Athanasius, but they were more sophisticated works. It is in the Sayings that we are closer to the wisdom of the desert as it was understood among the fathers of monasticism. One of the chief exponents of this tradition in the West was St. John Cassian. Cassian (c. 360—435), according to one tradition, was a native of early Romania. As a young man he joined a monastery in Bethlehem, but soon left it and went to study monasticism in Egypt, where he was greatly influenced by Evagrius Ponticus. He was later a deacon of the Church in Constantinople. From there he was sent by St. John Chrysostom on a mission to Innocent I at Rome. He seems to have remained in the West, and about 415 he founded two monasteries near Marseilles. There he wrote two books, the Institutes and the Conferences, in which he presented what he had learned from the great Elders of the desert in a series of sermons which he attributed to several of the famous Fathers. Though they crystallize much that he heard in the desert, he presents it in his own style, and with a consistency which is his rather than theirs. These works became classics in the West; quotations from them abound in the Rule of St. Benedict, and the Conferences were part of the reading before Compline each night in Benedictine monasteries.

The tradition of early desert monasticism reached the West chiefly through the writings of Cassian, though it was also known through the works of Sts. Jerome, Rufinus, and Palladius. These men knew the desert, and they knew, often at first-hand, the oral tradition of the Apophthegmata (Sayings). They systematized it, interpreted it, and presented it as they understood it. Though their works, especially Cassian's, are of great merit and importance, it is not in them that the plain teaching of the desert is best seen.

For that, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the Sayings of the Fathers, are invaluable. These are short sayings originally delivered to individuals on specific occasions and written down later. Groups of monks would preserve the sayings of their founder or of some monks especially remembered by them, and this nucleus would be enlarged and rearranged as time passed. There is an Alphabetical Collection of sayings in Greek. There is another Greek collection of Anonymous sayings, known as the Anonymous Collection. The collection best known in the West is the Systematic Collection in which the sayings have been grouped according to subject. The original form of the Sayings was presumably Coptic or Greek; the records of the sayings are in the Coptic, Syriac, Greek, Armenian and, later, Latin and the Slavonic languages.

These sayings preserve the unstructured wisdom of the desert in simple language. These are records of practical advice given out of a long life of experience in monastic and ascetic discipline. For this reason they are not always consistent with one another and they always need to be read within the context in which they were given. They are not abstract ideas to be applied indiscriminately, but instances of what was said in particular situations.

{to be continued}

Love People, Not Pleasure

Arthur C. Brooks, July 18, 2014, NY Times (excerpt)

ABD AL-RAHMAN III was an emir and caliph of Córdoba in 10th-century Spain. He was an absolute ruler who lived in complete luxury. Here's how he assessed his life:

"I have now reigned above 50 years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity."
Fame, riches and pleasure beyond imagination. Sound great? He went on to write: "I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot: They amount to 14."

Abd al-Rahman's problem wasn't happiness, as he believed — it was unhappiness. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, you probably have the same problem as the great emir. But with a little knowledge, you can avoid the misery that befell him.

What is unhappiness? Your intuition might be that it is simply the opposite of happiness, just as darkness is the absence of light. That is not correct. Happiness and unhappiness are certainly related, but they are not actually opposites. Images of the brain show that parts of the left cerebral cortex are more active than the right when we are experiencing happiness, while the right side becomes more active when we are unhappy.

So when people say, "I am an unhappy person," they are really doing sums, whether they realize it or not. They are saying, "My unhappiness is x, my happiness is y, and $x > y$." The real questions are why, and what you can do to make $y > x$.

If you ask an unhappy person why he is unhappy, he'll almost always blame circumstance. In many cases, of course, this is justified. Some people are oppressed or poor or have physical ailments that make life a chore...Another common source of unhappiness is loneliness, from which about 20 percent of Americans suffer enough to make it a major source of unhappiness in their lives.

THERE are also smaller circumstantial sources of unhappiness. The Princeton psychologist Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues measured the "negative affect" (bad moods) that ordinary daily activities and interactions kick up. They found that the No. 1 unhappiness-provoking event in a typical day is spending time with one's boss (which, as a boss, made me unhappy to learn). Circumstances are certainly important.

Have you ever known an alcoholic? They generally drink to relieve craving or anxiety — in other words, to attenuate a source of unhappiness. Yet it is the drink that ultimately prolongs their suffering. The same principle was at work for Abd al-Rahman in his pursuit of fame, wealth and pleasure.

Consider fame. In 2009, researchers from the University of Rochester conducted a study tracking the success of 147 recent graduates in reaching their stated goals after graduation. Some had "intrinsic" goals, such as deep, enduring relationships. Others had "extrinsic" goals, such as achieving reputation or fame. The scholars found that intrinsic goals were associated with happier lives. But the people who pursued extrinsic goals experienced more negative emotions, such as shame and fear. They even suffered more physical maladies.

This is one of the cruelest ironies in life. I work in Washington, right in the middle of intensely public political battles. Bar none, the unhappiest people I have ever met are those most dedicated to their own self-aggrandizement — the pundits, the TV loudmouths, the media know-it-alls. They build themselves up and promote their images, but feel awful most of the time.

That's the paradox of fame. Just like drugs and alcohol, once you become addicted, you can't live without it. But you can't live with it, either. Celebrities have described fame like being "an animal in a cage; a toy in a shop window; a Barbie doll; a public facade; a clay figure; or, that guy on TV," according to research by the psychologist Donna Rockwell. Yet they can't give it up. That impulse to fame by everyday people has generated some astonishing innovations. One is the advent of reality television, in which ordinary people become actors in their day-to-day lives for others to watch. Why? "To be noticed, to be wanted, to be loved, to walk into a place and have others care about what you're doing, even what you had for lunch that day: that's what people want, in my opinion," said one 26-year-old participant in an early hit reality show called "Big Brother."

And then there's social media. Today, each of us can build a personal little fan base, thanks to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the like. We can broadcast the details of our lives to friends and strangers in an astonishingly efficient way. That's good for staying in touch with friends, but it also puts a minor form of fame-seeking within each person's reach. And several studies show that it can make us unhappy.

It makes sense. What do you post to Facebook? Pictures of yourself yelling at your kids, or having a hard time at work? No, you post smiling photos of a hiking trip with friends. You build a fake life — or at least an incomplete one — and share it. Furthermore, you consume almost exclusively the fake lives of your social media "friends." Unless you are extraordinarily self-aware, how could it not make you feel worse to spend part of your time pretending to be happier than you are, and the other part of your time seeing how much happier others seem to be than you?

Some look for relief from unhappiness in money and material things. This scenario is a little more complicated than fame. The evidence does suggest that money relieves suffering in cases of true material need. But when money becomes an end in itself, it can bring misery, too.

For decades, psychologists have been compiling a vast literature on the relationships between different aspirations and well-being. Whether they examine young adults or people of all ages, the bulk of the studies point toward the same important conclusion: People who rate materialistic goals like wealth as top personal priorities are significantly likelier to be more anxious, more depressed and more frequent drug users, and even to have more physical ailments than those who set their sights on more intrinsic values. No one sums up the moral snares of materialism more famously than St. Paul in his First Letter to Timothy: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." Or as the Dalai Lama pithily suggests, it is better to want what you have than to have what you want.

SO fame and money are out. How about pleasures of the flesh? Take the canonical hedonistic pleasure: lust. From Hollywood to college campuses, many assume that sex is always great, and sexual variety is even better.

... In 2004, two economists looked into whether more sexual variety led to greater well-being. They looked at data from about 16,000 adult Americans who were asked confidentially how many sex partners they had had in the preceding year, and about their happiness. Across men and women alike, the data show that the optimal number of partners is one.

This might seem totally counterintuitive. After all, we are unambiguously driven to accumulate material goods, to seek fame, to look for pleasure. How can it be that these very things can give us unhappiness instead of happiness? There are two explanations, one biological and the other philosophical.

...We assume that things we are attracted to will relieve our suffering and raise our happiness. My brain says, "Get famous." It also says, "Unhappiness is lousy." I conflate the two, getting, "Get famous and you'll be less unhappy."

...More philosophically, the problem stems from dissatisfaction — the sense that nothing has full flavor, and we want more. We can't quite pin down what it is that we seek. Without a great deal of reflection and spiritual hard work, the likely candidates seem to be material things, physical pleasures or favor among friends and strangers.

We look for these things to fill an inner emptiness. They may bring a brief satisfaction, but it never lasts, and it is never enough. And so we crave more. This paradox has a word in Sanskrit: upadana, which refers to the cycle of craving and grasping. As the Dhammapada (the Buddha's path of wisdom) puts it: "The craving of one given to heedless living grows like a creeper. Like the monkey seeking fruits in the forest, he leaps from life to life... Whoever is overcome by this wretched and sticky craving, his sorrows grow like grass after the rains."

This search for fame, the lust for material things and the objectification of others — that is, the cycle of grasping and craving — follows a formula that is elegant, simple and deadly: **Love things, use people.**

This was Abd al-Rahman's formula as he sleepwalked through life. It is the worldly snake oil peddled by the culture makers from Hollywood to Madison Avenue. But you know in your heart that it is morally disordered and a likely road to misery. **You want to be free of the sticky cravings of unhappiness and find a formula for happiness instead. How? Simply invert the deadly formula and render it virtuous: Love people, use things.**

Easier said than done, I realize. It requires the courage to repudiate pride and the strength to love others — family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, God and even strangers and enemies. Only deny love to things that actually are objects. The practice that achieves this is charity. Few things are as liberating as giving away to others that which we hold dear.

This also requires a condemnation of materialism. This is manifestly not an argument for any specific economic system. Anyone who has spent time in a socialist country must concede that materialism and selfishness are as bad under collectivism, or worse, as when markets are free. No political ideology is immune to materialism.

Finally, it requires a deep skepticism of our own basic desires. Of course you are driven to seek admiration, splendor and physical license. But giving in to these impulses will bring unhappiness. You have a responsibility to yourself to stay in the battle. The day you declare a truce is the day you become unhappier. Declaring war on these destructive impulses is not about asceticism or Puritanism. It is about being a prudent person who seeks to avoid unnecessary suffering.

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On Dealing with Anger - St. John of the Ladder

1. The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated; the middle is silence of the thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of soul; and the end is an imperturbable calm under the breath of unclean winds.

2. Wrath is a reminder of hidden hatred, that is to say, remembrance of wrongs. Wrath is a desire for the injury of the one who has provoked you. Irascibility is the untimely blazing up of the heart. Bitterness is a movement of displeasure seated in the soul. Anger is an easily changeable movement of one's disposition and disfiguration of soul.

3. As with the appearance of light, darkness retreats; so at the fragrance of humility, all anger and bitterness vanishes.

4 Some who are prone to anger are neglectful of the healing and cure of this passion. But these unhappy people do not give a thought to him who said: "The moment of his anger is his fall."[1]

5 There is a quick movement of a millstone which, in one moment, grinds and does away with more spiritual grain and fruit than another crushes in a whole day. And so we must pay attention with understanding. It is possible to have such a blaze of flame, suddenly fanned by a strong wind, as will ruin the field of the heart more than a lingering flame.

6 And we ought not to forget, my friends, that the wicked demons sometimes suddenly leave us, so that we may neglect our strong passions as of little importance, and then become incurably sick.

7. As a hard stone with sharp corners has all its sharpness and hard formation dulled by knocking and rubbing against other stones, and is made round, so in the same way, a sharp and curt soul, by living in community and mixing with hard, hot-tempered men, undergoes one of two things: either it cures its wound by its patience, or by retiring it will certainly discover its weakness, its cowardly flight making this clear to it as in a mirror.

8. An angry person is a willful epileptic, who due to an involuntary tendency keeps convulsing and falling down.

9. Nothing is so inappropriate to those repenting as a spirit agitated by anger, because conversion requires great humility, and anger is a sign of every kind of presumption.

10. If it is a mark of extreme meekness, even in the presence of one's offender, to be peacefully and lovingly disposed towards him in one's heart, then it is certainly a mark of hot temper when a person continues to quarrel and rage against his offender, both by words and gestures, even when by himself.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!"

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[1] Ecclesiasticus 1:22.