

A Commentary on St. Mark's Gospel

by

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(Chapter 1, verses 1–13)

The Russian word for the Gospels is of Greek origin (*Evangelie*). Translated into Russian, it means “good tidings.”

Good tidings! How can we apprehend this?

A person close to you is languishing somewhere far, far away in a cold inhospitable foreign land, maybe in harsh enemy captivity. You know nothing about him. He has disappeared without a trace. Where is he? What has happened to him? Is he alive? Is he healthy? Maybe he is impoverished, in need of many things... But there are cold, indifferent strangers all around... You know nothing about him. Your heart languishes and grieves. You wish to hear just one word: is he alive or not? No one knows, no one can tell you. Oh, what longing! Lord, send some news!

And then one day you hear knocking at the door. Who is there? The postman has brought a letter! From whom? Good God... Is it really? Yes, yes... On the back of the letter you see the familiar, beloved handwriting: irregular capital letters – his handwriting. It is news from him. What has he written? You rush to open the envelope and read with bated breath. Thank God! Everything is fine: he is alive, healthy, provided for, is going to come home... Your heart is filled with grateful joy. Lord, how merciful you are! You have not forgotten, You have not abandoned me, You have not rejected my miserable prayer! How can I thank you, Creator?

Such is one's impression from good tidings. But in personal life it looks relatively weak.

Why is the Gospel called “good tidings”? Why is it good news?

It is a message from the other world to the sinful earth. Tidings from God to man who is suffering and languishing in sin; tidings of the possibility for rebirth into a new, undefiled life; tidings of bright happiness and joy in the future; tidings that everything has already been done for this, that the Lord has given His Son for us. Man has been waiting for this news for so long, so passionately, so longingly.

Listen and I will tell you a bit about how people lived before the coming of the Savior, how they languished and waited intently for the message which would point to a new, bright path for them, to escape from the dirty swamp of vice and passion in which they floundered, and you will understand why they received this news with such enthusiastic joy, why they called it good, and why there was not and could not be other, more joyful, better tidings than the Gospels for people.

At the time when the Savior was expected to come, the whole world groaned in the iron grip of the Roman state. All the lands around the Mediterranean sea, which comprised the European civilized world of the time, were conquered by the Roman legions. (To speak of the life of humankind of that time is to speak almost solely of Rome.) It was the height of Roman power – the Age of Augustus. Rome was growing and becoming rich. All lands would send their gifts there either as tribute or as merchandise. Countless treasures were collected there. No wonder Augustus liked to say that he turned Rome from a stone city into a marble city. The upper classes – the patricians and equites – were becoming incredibly wealthy, although ordinary people did not benefit from this and there was much grief, poverty, and suffering under the golden tinsel of the Empire's outward splendor. However, oddly enough, the upper rich classes also did not feel happy. Wealth did not save them from despondency, melancholy, and sometimes from the grief of despair. On the contrary, wealth contributed to this, triggering satiety with life. Let us see how the rich people lived at that time.

A luxurious white marble villa... Fine porticoes, statues of emperors and gods from snow white Carrara marble sculpted by the best artisans stand between slender columns. Luxurious mosaic floors on which intricate drawings were laid out of expensive colored stones. A square pool filled with crystal water, with goldfish splashing about, is almost in the middle of a large central room for receptions (the so-called atrium). Its purpose is to spread pleasant coolness when the air is heated by the burning heat of the southern day. Gilding, fresco paintings, intricately interwoven ornamentations of deep colors are on the walls. Valuable furniture and gilded bronze are in the family rooms; all decoration bears the imprint of wealth and elegant taste. A bunch of well-trained slaves always ready to serve their owner are in the outbuildings. And all this gives the sense that luxury, laziness, and pleasure have built a sound nest there.

The amphitryon (owner of the house) is a Roman equite with a fat double chin, hook nose, smoothly shaved. He is preparing for the evening feast. This house has feasts almost every day. The enormous fortune gained from tax farming allows him to spend huge money on this. He is now busy in his home library: he has to choose a poem for entertaining his guests. Slowly and lazily with his puffy hands adorned with heavy gold rings with precious stones, he is going over the cases where valuable scrolls with the latest novelties of Roman poetry copied with golden letters on violet-colored and purple parchment are stored. His lips are squeamishly compressed: he does not like it all. Everything is so plain, uninteresting, so boring!

In the next large room, a whole crowd of slaves of various skin tones are rushing and running about: white-skinned, blue-eyed Suevians, yellow-skinned, swarthy Phrygians and Persians, and dark-skinned Moors and Africans. They are preparing tables and dining couches

for the guests. There will be few of them, only chosen friends, about thirty persons. But even so, everything should be prepared for them and they should be treated the best possible way...

The feast is in full swing. Guests wearing light tunics, with pink and orange wreaths on their heads, are reclining on dining couches covered with fine linen and damask carpets at long tables. The tables are lined with rich foods and vials of precious wine. The thirty-fifth course is already over. A fat carcass of fried boar has just been taken away and little slaves – adorable boys with curled ringlets of hair, wearing sheer pink and blue tunics, are carrying painted jugs with rose water to wash the guests' hands. Mixed chatter is heard from the hall. The guests have already had quite a bit to drink: their eyes are sparkling, their faces are reddened, but tall moors keep bringing enormous amphoras of expensive Phrygian and Falernian wines, offering them to those who wish to refill their emptied goblets.

Despite the hot evening, the room is cool: small fountains gush in the corners and streams of sweet-scented water murmur and fill the air with fragrance. Rose and jasmine petals slowly fall from somewhere above like large snowflakes, covering everything in the room with a fragrant carpet. Quiet sounds of sad music can be heard from somewhere in the distance: a pipe wails; a harp sounds with murmuring cadences, and a lute was languidly cooing.

And the guests are served the thirty-sixth course: fried nightingale tongues with spicy oriental sauce – a dish which cost incredible amounts of money.

It was a cult of the belly, and gluttony. They ate with careful solemnity according to all rules of gastronomy as if performing a sacred ritual; they ate slowly, for an infinitely long time, to prolong the pleasure of satiety. And when the stomach was full and could not contain anything else, they would take an emetic to free it and start again.

The amphitryon's home poet – one of the endless crowd of his sycophants – appears in the banquet hall. To the background of the sounds of a lute, he recites verses of his own composition. He is followed by mimes and dancers. A wild voluptuous bacchanal dance begins.

But the owner is still not joyous. His face shows boredom and satiety. I'm sick and tired of all of this! If only something new was invented! Each time it is all the same!

One could pay a lot of money for new entertainments, for the invention of pleasures. But it was difficult to invent something new, which would be strong enough to arouse one's blunt nerves. Inevitable boredom encroached like a swamp fog full of suffocating miasma. The satiated life ceased to be life.

One of the richest people of his time, the Emperor Tiberius, is probably the saddest example of this satiated boredom. He was on the island of Capri in a wonderful marble villa; the azure waves of the Gulf of Naples were splashing all around; the wondrous, vibrant southern

nature was smiling at him and speaking of happiness and joy of life, and yet he wrote to the Senate, "I die every day... and I don't know what I live for."

Thus lived the Roman nobility: idle, satiated, having lost a taste for life, dissatisfied both with their wealth and power.

The people, or rather the urban class, the crowd that filled the streets of Rome, hardly felt completely happy either. It is true that from the outside, life there could also sometimes seem like a holiday. The golden streams of wealth and luxury, which flowed to Rome from all lands also reached the Roman commoners, albeit to a small extent. Significant gifts would sometimes come their way from the Emperor and high-ranking patricians on the days of festive events and family holidays. Free distribution of bread was often practiced. In addition, the Roman citizens could trade in their votes for elections to the Senate or municipal posts.

Spectacular free shows were organized for the crowd in circuses and theaters. All of this created conditions for an easy, idle life and attracted masses of pleasure-seeking people from the provinces. Little by little, huge crowds of people who were unoccupied, restless, lazy, and accustomed to living at public expense, whose only desire and constant cry was, "Bread and shows!" accumulated in Rome and other big cities.

However, while making gifts from their tremendous wealth to the crowd, the Emperor and Roman nobility treated them with undisguised contempt and barbaric cruelty. Sometimes it occurred in circuses, where there prevailed bloody spectacles of gladiator battles and chasing of people by wild animals, that all the victims intended for the animals were torn to pieces, but the thirst for blood both in the animals and spectators was still not satisfied. In this case, the Emperor would order to throw a few dozen spectators from the common people who filled the amphitheater for the free show, into the arena. And this order was executed with loud laughter and applause of the nobility.

Once, on the eve of a horse race in which a magnificent thoroughbred stallion of a noble senator was about to take part, a huge crowd of curious onlookers surrounded the stall of the famous horse to admire him. To disperse the curious crowd which disturbed the peace of the noble animal, the senator ordered his slaves to empty several large baskets full of poisonous snakes onto the onlookers.

These brief illustrations show how insecure and unattractive the lives of the citizens of this class were despite the outer cover of seeming lightness and carelessness.

If we go down the public ladder even lower into the class of slaves, we will find there only continuous suffering and hopeless grief. A slave was not even considered a human being. It was just a tool, a thing, a household utensil. The master was allowed to kill or mutilate his slave:

he did not have to answer to anyone for this, just as he did not have to answer for a broken shovel or pot.

The life of the slaves was terrible. If we could have walked in the evening on the streets of Rome of that age, we would probably hear grievous moans, crying, and dull blows from the basements of rich houses where the slaves were kept – there occurred the usual evening punishment of slaves for their daytime offenses. They were punished cruelly for the slightest mistake: they were beaten with whips or chains until they would lose consciousness. They could be clamped by the neck to a split log and left in this position for days. Their feet could be hammered into stocks. Once during a reception for the Emperor Augustus in the house of a famous rich man of that time, Maecenas, a slave by accident broke an expensive vase. Maecenas ordered to throw him alive into the pool to be eaten by moray eels. At night, slaves were tied in pairs and put on a chain tightly riveted to a ring screwed into the wall. And in the daytime they had endless, stupefying, exhausting work under the scourge of the overseer, almost without rest. If desperate slaves raised a rebellion against their master, they were crucified on crosses – an execution which was considered the most shameful and painful. When a slave grew old or became exhausted and could no longer work, he was taken to a small uninhabited island in the middle of the Tiber River, where he was thrown to the mercy of fate like carrion.

Thus, life was hard, joyless, and dismal in all classes of Roman society: satiety of life, boredom, and disappointment among the higher nobility, and lawlessness, oppression, and suffering in the lower strata. There was nowhere to look for joy, comfort, and consolation. Pagan religion did not give people any relief. It did not have that grace-filled mysterious power which alone could calm, encourage, and strengthen a suffering heart and languishing spirit. In addition, the Roman religion at the time of the coming of Christ the Savior borrowed many things from eastern cults which were filled with lust and debauchery. One could find intoxication and temporary oblivion in the phrenetic, dissolute orgies of the East, but after that the sorrow would become even more acute; the despair would become even deeper.

Pagan philosophy also could not satisfy man, since it taught only earthly happiness and did not free a troubled spirit from the bonds of the world and matter. Two schools – Epicureanism and Stoicism – dominated the philosophy of the time. The Epicureans claimed that the science of being happy consisted of creating pleasant sensations for oneself; any excess would lead to painful sensations; therefore, one had to be moderate in everything, even in pleasures, yet this moderation as well as virtue itself, did not constitute the goal for a person, but served only as the best means for pleasure. The Stoics took the best aspects of man. You are free, they said, which means that you are the only master over yourself. Your will must be wholly yours; happiness consists in mastering oneself. Sorrows, persecutions, and death do not exist for

you: you belong entirely to yourself and no one will take you from yourself, and that's all a wise man needs.

What philosophy lacked was the divine element. That god whom they called nature had no advantages over the gods proclaimed in the pagan religion and mythological legends. The god of philosophers was not the living, personal God, but fate – inexorable and blind, inflicting blows from which a person could fall into despair and die.

In addition, philosophy was completely incomprehensible to popular understanding and was the lot of only a small number of elected sages. Therefore, the masses could not seek comfort in it.

One might expect that indications of a new way and means of rebirth in life might be found among the Jewish people – the only people who preserved the true religion and exalted notions of God and life. But Judaism also was undergoing a severe crisis. It is unlikely that there were darker pages of religious and moral decline in the history of the Jewish people than in the period preceding the appearance of Christ the Savior. A hard and gloomy picture emerges when one reads the prophetic books and harsh speeches of the prophets rebuking the Jewish life.

Here are a number of excerpts from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, depicting the bleak moral and religious condition of the Israelites of that time¹, their ingratitude and betrayal of God, their disbelief, dissipation, cruelty and flagrant injustice.

*Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken; I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward (Is 1:2-4). How is the faithful city become a harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers....Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. (Is 1:21, 23).*²

And the people shall be oppressed, every one by another, and every one by his neighbour...their tongue and their doings are against the LORD, to provoke the eyes of his glory...O my people, they which lead thee cause thee to err, and destroy the way of thy paths (Is 3:5, 8, 12).

¹ Here Bishop Basil refers to the period before the captivity in Babylon (approx. 700 BC). God's chosen people kept falling into sin again and again, thus showing that having the Law was not enough for attaining closeness to God.

² Unless otherwise indicated, the King James Version of the Bible is used for all Biblical quotations.

The heart of this people has become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. (Is 6:10).³

...the Lord shall have no joy in their young men, neither shall have mercy on their fatherless and widows: for every one is a hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh folly (Is 9:17)...the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean (Is 28:7-8).

...This is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord (Is 30:9). Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness. None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity....their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths; whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace. Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness....For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them; in transgressing and lying against the Lord, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood....and equity cannot enter. Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey (Is 59: 2-4, 6-9, 12-15).

Thus, it was the same picture of moral darkness and decay among the chosen people of God.

Evil was thickening everywhere. It was becoming difficult to breathe in this atmosphere of lawlessness and violence, deception and hypocrisy, disbelief and superstition, dissipation and pursuit of pleasures. The world which was enslaved by Roman politics, humiliated and despairing from false religions, questioning philosophy about the mystery of life and virtue to no avail, this world was standing on the brink of the grave.

Judaism itself which betrayed its purpose was at its last gasp. There had never been a more critical moment in the history of mankind. It was felt that mankind had reached a dead end and without the outside help of Someone Great and Strong, it could not get out. And expectation of the appearance of a Great Prophet who would show people new ways and save the world from death and decay was becoming more and more persistent and strained among the best people of that time.

³ Here the Septuagint translation is used, as it is closer to the original.

In Judaism, this expectation had existed for a long time and was fed by the Prophets' prophecies, yet even outside of Judaism, a tremulous feeling and longing for the coming of the Savior and Redeemer of the world can be perceived in the best people of pagan society. The whole world was in a tense state, and at this great and solemn moment, the Lord Jesus Christ was born and preached His Gospel to people – this Revelation of new ways of rebirth and true life.

This revelation was the message from Heaven which led people out of the dead end of sin and despair, and which humanity waited for so passionately and futilely. That is why it was called *good tidings*, or *Evangelie*.

But even now, when so many centuries have passed since the appearance of the Gospels, they have not lost their significance and are still good news for us, telling us about the high, pure, and holy life; as before, like a lighthouse on a stormy dark night, they show us the only true path to eternal happiness and to God.

Where is this path? Paganism and almost the entire ancient world sought it in serving their self-love in self-indulgence, in self-pleasure. The personal egoism of paganism, the national egoism of Jewry – these are the cornerstones on which the people of antiquity wanted to construct the building of their happiness. They did not build anything, and their experience has proved only that the path that they chose was false and led not to the chambers of happiness, but to the quagmire of despair.

The Gospel has charted a new path: self-renunciation.

Already the first major figure appearing in the Gospel narrative according to Mark, the figure of John the Baptist, was infused with this new spirit.

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins....And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey (Mk. 1:4, 6).

In all his appearance, he seemed to say to those who were listening to him, "One should look for the paths to God and happiness not in wealth, not in luxury, not in human glory, not in earthly power. All of this is a lie, deceit, a phantom! The desert is better than royal chambers, for its eternal silence and monotony do not distract the mind and make it possible to completely immerse it in the contemplation of the works of God and God's greatness. Haircloth is better than fine fabrics and expensive clothes, because it does not make the body tender, but wearing the body out, haircloth makes it a submissive slave to the spirit. Scarce desert food is better than exquisite dishes, because it does not arouse sensuality and lust in a person. A harsh life among nature is better than the idle, lazy existence of the rich, because it tempers the will in order to make endeavors. Renunciation of the world is better than attachment to the world, for the person who is not bound to anything and free in spirit can serve God with his whole being."

And there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem (Mk. 1:5), expecting to find in John the long-desired prophet, the Savior of the world. But he was only His forerunner.

One who was mightier than him was to come after him.

Chapter 1, verses 14–34

On representations, the Evangelist Mark is almost always accompanied by a lion. This is his emblem – an emblem of power, strength, and royal greatness. The Evangelist wanted to depict the Lord Jesus Christ in the radiance of this power and greatness. This is why he has been given this emblem. Indeed, in the narrative of St. Mark, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ especially often and vividly appears with these features of divine greatness and spiritual power.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, these traits are emphasized several times. The powerful and truthful word of the Lord Jesus Christ, devoid of ingratiation and servility: *And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.* The scribes sought only success and glory and in order to earn the applause of the crowd often flattered its passions and justified its prejudices, while the Lord was alien to this weakness.

Such is His calm, confident power over evil spirits: *And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him.*

Such is the extraordinary impression that His power made on the onlookers: *And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.*

Such is His tremendous power of healing, acting instantly and healing radically: *But Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever; and anon they tell him of her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them.*

Such is the versatility of this healing power which cured various diseases: *And at even, when the sun did set, they brought unto him all that were diseased, and them that were possessed with devils....And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils.*

Thus, already in the few verses cited above, the Lord Jesus Christ appears before the people as an extraordinary prophet *mighty in deed and word* (Lk. 24:19).

His power is truly extraordinary. It is manifested in everything: in His words, His actions, and most of all in His influence on other people. It is enough for Him only to tell Simon and Andrew, the fishermen: *Come ye after me!* And straightway they left their nets and followed him (v. 18). It was enough for Him to call the Zebedee brothers, James and John, who were busy repairing their nets, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the workers and followed Him (v. 20). The attraction of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, that spiritual power which irresistibly attracts the hearts of pure and honest people to Him, is enormous.

We do not pose the question here of what the secret of this power is. Another remark of the Savior from the Gospel of John is valuable for us, where he promises His followers that each of them can gain this spiritual power. *He that believeth on me, He says, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do* (Jn. 14:12).

What a great promise!

To have the power that Christ had! The power which demons cannot stand, and fear! To fight with them and conquer, cleansing your life and your soul from their poisonous corruptive influence, constantly darkening the path to perfection! Moreover, to attract other people to the Lord Jesus Christ, to make others participants in eternal bliss! Is this not great joy and happiness?

But how can one acquire this power?

Strictly speaking, the whole teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ is the answer to this question. In successive narrations, the Gospels reveal to us the long and difficult path which the believer must follow in order to fulfill the covenant of Christ: *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect* (Mt. 5:48). The great spiritual power which the Lord promises His faithful disciples is acquired only at the end of that path, at the highest levels of perfection. But the first level, the first step which a person must take for this is most definitively described by the words of this passage: *repent ye, and believe the gospel* (Mk. 1:15).

Thus begins the preaching of the Savior. This was also preached by His great Forerunner. Anyone who has entrusted himself to the leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ should begin with this.

Two efforts of willpower are needed as a first step and prerequisite for the possibility of improvement: 1) *repent!* and 2) *believe the gospel!*

We know that repentance in the deep sense of the word is not simply grieving over one's sins or loathing one's sinful past; it means even less a formal confession: the meaning of the word is much deeper. This is a decisive turning of life onto new tracks, complete rearrangement of all values in the soul and heart, where under regular circumstances worldly concerns and goals

of the temporary, mainly material life come first, while everything exalted and holy, everything related to faith in God and serving Him is pushed into the background. The person does not completely abandon these exalted ideals, but recalls them and serves them furtively, fearfully, in rare moments of spiritual enlightenment. Repentance involves a radical rearrangement: God always, everywhere and in every thing is in the foreground; the world and its demands, if they can't be completely thrown out of one's heart, are behind, after everything. In other words, repentance requires the creation of a new, single center in man, and God must be this center, where all threads of life come together.

When a person succeeds in uniting all his thoughts, feelings, and decisions together with this single center, then from this is created a wholeness, a solidity of the soul which gives enormous spiritual power. In addition, the person with such a disposition seeks to fulfill only the will of God and can ultimately achieve complete submission or merging of his weak human will with the omnipotent will of the Creator. Then his power grows to reach the divine power of wonderworking, because it is not him who is acting, but God acting in him.

This is in general terms the process of development of spiritual power in a person.

How were the Apostles able to receive this power of wonderworking and the charisma of their personality and preaching, which made them powerful and skilled *fishers of men* (Mk. 1:17)? Precisely because God was that single, all-encompassing center for them and they fulfilled His will as the highest law of life. It is interesting to ponder the history of their calling. One word of the Lord, one call: *Come ye after me!* – and everything was forgotten and abandoned: the boat, the nets, all their scanty fishing equipment, even their father... It is clear that God was the most valuable thing in life for these people, and when His will sounded as a calling, nothing could stop them. He who knows how to respond to God's calling with such willingness will go far; and he who can surrender to the will of God so completely, so wholly, without doubt and hesitation, will undoubtedly receive great gifts and great spiritual power from the Lord.

It should be admitted that presently such whole people full of deep faith and spiritual power are extremely few. When you look back at your life and the life of modern society, you will see with sadness that it is not faith that moves us and it is not God Who is our center. We have replaced this great life-giving center with other centers.

The German philosopher Nietzsche depicts a madman who is running around the city with a wild, wandering gaze and is shouting, while gasping for breath: "We killed God"

Of course, this is not true. Neither faith in God, nor a general religious idea in humankind can be killed. But it can be largely replaced. It is impossible to erase religious feeling

from the soul entirely, but it can be given a false one-sided direction. Man often tries to replace God with something else.

This was already done in the first fall. The tempted man put his will in the place of God's will, placed himself higher and wanted to become god...through knowledge. Do you remember what the devil tempted Eve with?

And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat (Gen. 3:1–6).

Had Eve been directed only by faith, and devotion and love for God, she would have told the snake: “Well... Maybe you are right. Maybe we will get knowledge! But at what cost?! To break the Commandment of God, to go against God's will, to betray God, to push Him away with our disobedience! No, the Lord is most valuable to us... More valuable than your knowledge, and we do not need knowledge at such a price – at the price of breaking away from God... God cannot be replaced with knowledge for us!”

Eve did not say that. The knowledge promised by the devil seemed more attractive than a trustful and unquestioning fulfillment of the will of God, and maybe for a short moment overshadowed God. The temptation prevailed. Sin was committed.

Since then, people have been constantly replacing God. Most often they replace Him by the idols of their passions. They serve lust, greed, pride, self-love, vainglory, greed for profit, etc., etc. It is impossible to list all the idols which people worship instead of serving the one true God.

And as if anticipating this, the Sinai legislation given by God to Moses, in its second commandment, reads: *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them (Ex. 20:4–5).*

This commandment is straightly directed against idolatry with which the Israelites often became contaminated from the neighboring pagans, and prohibits the worship of pagan idols. But since it was not belief in its truth which attracted the Jews to idolatry, but most strongly and most often their sensuality and passion, which found satisfaction in some cults, especially the

eastern ones – of Baal, Moloch, and others, the Second Commandment prohibits any passion which may become an idol and overshadow God. In other words, it prohibits any other center invented by man other than God.

But why is there such a ban? Why should the Lord and nothing else be the only center for man?

The human centers which people worship and serve, bring about division in humanity. Many of them, especially the centers of low order, such as wealth, profit-seeking, vainglory or pleasure-seeking, lead to open and inevitable hostility. Other passions perhaps do not cause obvious hostility, but still do not unite and cannot unite people. Ultimately, they are all too small and petty to satisfy, capture, and unite all people. Each person has his own tastes, his own passions, his own goals. There are as many goals as there are minds. One loves science; another prefers poetry; a third chooses painting. It is clear that with the diversity of these goals, people will go in different ways and it is very difficult to achieve unity between them. Meanwhile, this unity is necessary for human happiness, for peace and harmony in life, for the common struggle against evil and victory over it.

In addition, all these idols invented by man do not give him full satisfaction. They may attract a person, they may be worshiped, they may be sought for, but no one can live by them. There is no true life in them.

Let us discuss this in more detail.

All human idols which may be the centers of life for man can be divided into three categories.

The first group consists of the coarsest, most base passions: gluttony, lust, laziness, drunkenness, etc. Yet people often make idols for themselves of even these passions, and give to them their whole life and all their strength.

There is a story about one Frenchman for whom eating and drinking was the only purpose in life. For satisfying this passion, he spared neither energy nor money. He enthusiastically studied the history of culinary art (cookery) and achieved amazing knowledge in that area. He knew all rare dishes which were ever served at the table of kings in the whole world and among all historically famous rich gastronomers. He knew how to cook each of these dishes, and his daily menu could delight the most capricious and spoiled man of pleasure. He would order rare and expensive foods for his table from the most distant countries of the whole world. He spent all his enormous fortune which he received as an inheritance on this, and when he had only one franc left in his pocket and it became clear to him that it was impossible to continue such a life,

he went to the market, bought a fat capon on the last franc, roasted it according to all rules of culinary art, ate it and... shot himself. Life had lost all value to him. There are many people who surrender themselves entirely to lust and debauchery. Without this, life is not life for them. There are experts on seducing women, the so-called "lions" of high society.

It seems that there is no such base passion which a person could not idolize and for the service of which he could not give himself entirely.

In no way can passions of this kind satisfy man. They can give him momentary pleasure, lead to exhilaration, but in the end they act destructively not only on the spiritual nature of man, but also on his body. And one has to pay for this with severe illnesses and painful diseases for the years spent in dirty pleasures. Moreover, even during the period of the highest summit of passion, physical pleasures which one obtains are infinitely weaker than the desires excited by passion.

Passion is insatiable. As it progresses, it demands ever newer, stronger, more refined pleasures. In the meantime, the body wears out, becomes less receptive, and is no longer able to give sensations of the required strength. A cruel discord between the scorching desires of passion and impossibility of satisfying them begins. Then passion only burns and torments a person, but no longer gives him pleasure.

Idols of the second group are common passions of our time: greed for profit, love of glory, ambition, love of power, etc. Their main evil is that they divide people, inevitably leading them to hostility and hatred. The so-called blessings of life, which these passions strive for possessing: wealth, power, etc., cannot be divided equally among all people. A fierce struggle of all against all for their possession begins, and the hatred born of that struggle poisons even the successes of the winners. A person cannot calmly enjoy the results of victories achieved, since he feels that the envy and anger of the defeated opponents are on the watch for him everywhere, that they are only suppressed and hidden, but not killed. In addition, the ordinary law of passion also can be applied here: the more it grows, the less it finds ways and means of satisfaction, which depends here on external conditions beyond our control. Imagine a rich man obsessed with gaining profit. His passion grows like the thirst of drunkards and demands more and more gain. The small amounts which pleased him before, no longer satisfy him now. Yesterday he was happy with a penny that he gained, but a few years later he already contemptuously looks at a pound. Now only hundreds of pounds give some pleasure to him. But how to get them? After all, this does not depend solely on the will of man. Profits do not arrive as fast as we would like them to. And here again dissatisfaction, painful discord, and languishing of the spirit.

The third group consists of the idols of the highest level: art, science, charity, social activism, etc. The person's service to these idols seems altruistic, although in fact it is often mixed with the love of glory and vanity. Moreover, they do not lead to hostility, at least directly, because the field of activity here is unlimited. There is enough space and work for everyone, and competition begins here only when passions of the second category are mixed with pure service to these idols: desire for profit, ambition, etc. In modern society, the level of moral ideals has decreased so much that life devoted to the idols of this group is considered almost the height of perfection and virtue. Enthusiasts of science and luminaries of art are certainly appreciated among us much more than modest ascetics of Christianity. And yet, even with the most sincere and selfless service to these idols, they do not give and cannot give a person complete satisfaction and happiness.

First of all, they represent only a partial satisfaction of human needs: the mind finds satisfaction in science; feelings find satisfaction in art, etc. The remaining aspects of the soul are left without satisfaction. In religion, the person is captured much more fully, for religion satisfies all his needs.

Usually religious need manifests itself in the soul of a believer as a desire for a personal, living God, embodying all supreme ideals of man – truth, goodness, and beauty. In the Person of God, all this merges into a marvelous, inexplicable, wholesome harmony, and while serving God and becoming united with Him, the whole person is imbued with these ideals. His whole life, actions, and being are permeated by their radiant rays. Man finds great happiness already in this alone, not to mention the greatest happiness of personal union with the Living God.

The same elements of religious need – pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty – are in the basis of serving the idols of the third category, and this is why these idols seem so exalted. But, **firstly**, these elements are broken apart here. For science is human expression of truth, art is human expression of beauty, and charity and social activism are human expressions of goodness. They all do not merge here into a single marvelous symphony captivating the whole soul of the person as is the case with religion. **Secondly**, the personal, living God Who is the bearer and the highest embodiment of the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty in religion, is replaced here by purely abstract, soulless concepts, a kind of surrogate, and these surrogates of course cannot cause such pure and intense uplifting of feelings as mutual communication with the living, personal, and holy Being. One can never love science or art so wholeheartedly, so deeply as one can love God.

Ultimately, worship of science and art is a special kind of idolatry, a kind of anthropomorphism; the person worships his own creation here – if not the creation of his own

hands, then the creation of his mind and heart. This is why a supreme sense of reverence cannot be found there. One may love one's own creation; one may even be proud of it, but it is hardly possible to have awe for it. It is rather the contrary: some kind of patronizing, fatherly feeling is manifested here, and, indeed, reading the scientific works of many luminaries of science, one has an impression that they are either flirting with science or condescendingly pat it on the shoulder. Therefore, there cannot be unshakable confidence in the unconditional right of this beloved child to be worshiped. There is always a worm of skepticism in the depths of consciousness of the most fanatical lover of science, which eats away his heart with constant doubt: what if this is not true? Could this plaque of profound conclusions and high-sounding scholarly words be nothing but elegant tatters which cover either an empty place or a lie? Both error and deception are quite possible! For ultimately, it was created only by man! And *errare humanum est* – it is human to err!

Only in one case service to science and art is fruitful and fully captures a person – when it is associated with a religious idea: when in pursuing science, the person looks at it as a means to find out and understand the mysteries of God's universe and discover its eternal laws; when he uses art as a means to awaken the feelings of a higher order in the human soul – love for God or for His earthly manifestations in truth, goodness, and beauty; in other words, when the pursuit of science and art is actually a service to the single true God, and constitute only a specific form of religious life. Yet, if a person loses touch with God, does not strive for Him, and seeks support and inspiration not in Him, by necessity he is forced to search them in his petty brains and squeeze out all elements of scientific labor from himself. And this leads to the bankruptcy of science since it inevitably leads to doubt and denial of scientific axioms, and thus shakes the foundations of science. This is why those people who advanced science were usually deeply religious.

In the same way, art flourishes and gives satisfaction to a person only if it is either connected directly with religion and serves its purposes, or with one of the forms of expression of a religious need – serving truth, goodness, and beauty. The circumstance that art has always evolved and flourished when it revealed a religious idea, as we see especially clearly in Italian painting, is not an accidental fact. And vice versa, the modern Futurism, Rayonism, Cubism, etc., are undoubted decadence and decline of art, since people here have lost God and are looking for a new center in their impoverished psyche. This no longer results in art, but in baboonery, in a clown's grimace.

Following art and science, all forms of social activities come to life and give a person the highest satisfaction only in connection with religion. And if so, then what is the point of

replacing the idea of God with human idols? If these idols are of the highest order, they do not give full and all-encompassing satisfaction; if they are of base order, they only destroy life and harm a person.

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*⁴ This is the first condition for the development of spiritual power.

Chapter 1, verses 35–45

And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.

For fulfilling His lofty ministry, Jesus Christ undoubtedly possessed spiritual power which infinitely exceeded the power of an ordinary person. The above verse of the first chapter tells us by what means He strengthened this power. This was prayer.

In spiritual union with the Almighty Father, he always sought strengthening, encouragement, and consolation in prayer. He drew new strength for His ministry in this only inexhaustible source of all power.

Yet when He sought this oneness with God, He always wanted to be alone, away from people.

We read in the passage of Mark cited above: *rising up a great while before day, he... departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.*

From Matthew: *And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone* (Mt. 14:23).

From Luke: *And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed* (Lk. 5:16).

Prayer is His first work. Before sunrise, while everyone was still sleeping, He would leave the house and town, retire to a secluded place away from the noise and people, looking for solitude and silence, in order to secretly talk with His Father.

The nature in Palestine disposes one to such concentration. The village and town are noisy, but the fields are silent; as soon as a person moves away from the last houses, he plunges into complete silence. There is none of that ambient noise which rises from the sea or is heard from the forest. Only the barking of dogs and distant howl of a jackal occasionally breaks the silence that hovers over the valleys and mountains of Palestine.

At these moments of the highest concentration of spiritual forces, nothing was there to distract the Lord from prayer; no one was there to violate His union with God; no one dared to overhear the mysterious conversation of the Son with the Father. A human voice or immodest

⁴ See Ex 20:4

gaze could interfere with the integrity and fullness of this merging with God, and Jesus Christ would leave people for deserted places.

Yet, He protected from people not only these moments of the highest manifestations of the spiritual life, but also His actions, good deeds, and miracles, in which His spiritual strength and love were manifested – He also wanted to make sure that no one knew about them.

When He healed the leper, we read: *And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away; And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man* (verses 43–44).

On the one hand, Jesus wanted to escape human glory which was the greatest hindrance to His Messianic ministry. He did not want to be known as a wizard, and He thought to attract the hearts of people not by miracles. But on the other hand, this modesty of doing good things, this desire for keeping the secret of spiritual life, has other reasons. This secret contains one of the conditions for preserving and developing spiritual power.

The Lord bequeaths the same to His followers.

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them...But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:1, 3–4).

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:6).

But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly (Mt. 6:17, 18).

Thus, the doing of good in Christianity should be modest, and the spiritual inner life should be enveloped in mystery, impenetrable to people and open only to God. Only then does the Lord bless the inner work with success and give the fruit of the spiritual life. Spiritual powers, ripened and expanded in the hidden places of the soul, then become so powerful that on their own they are manifested outwardly and it becomes impossible to hide them from others. *Thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*

Why so? Why does a spiritual life which is openly visible to others become inevitably impoverished and brings neither fruit nor reward?

First of all, because God, Who alone must be the center of spiritual life, in this case can easily be replaced and indeed almost always is replaced by some kind of idol, most frequently by the idol of vanity and love of glory, and this weakens the spiritual power of a person as we have seen in the previous discussion. When a man does his deeds for show, in order to be glorified by people, strictly speaking he ceases to think about God and serve Him alone. In this case, he

serves himself, his pride, his self-love. But while serving himself, he does not have the right to demand a reward from God, since he already receives what he needs – glory and praise – as a reward from people.

Even if the person is completely honest in his intentions when starting to serve God and does not care at all about his own glory and praise from people, but sincerely seeks only the glory of God, in this case the incense of worldly glory still fogs his head; applause of the crowd excites a taste for glory and praise and vainglorious love of them, and almost without noticing it, the person begins to desire and seek them, constantly trying to assure himself that he has been serving only God. It takes great moral courage and stability of will so as to not give in to temptation and to repel the glory of this world, which intrusively pursues those who flee from it.

This should be especially remembered by young and inexperienced people, who are ardent and enthusiastic, upon embarking on the path of serving God. In the beginning, the devil does not tempt them with anything else but intoxication of glory. Their young age, the unusual nature of the phenomenon – especially in our time when faith in God has almost faded out among young people, their zeal for endeavors still not moderated by experience, their first successes on the basis of enthusiasm – all of these involuntarily excite and attract the attention of the crowd. Attention is followed by approval, respect, admiration, and sometimes reverence, and under the hypnosis of such an attitude, the young servant of God – the most sincere and humble servant – begins to involuntarily feel like some extraordinary hero who stands above the crowd. Pride is born, which delights in the esteem that has been achieved and already starts to seek and demand esteem as the appropriate tribute of respect toward its high qualities which in fact are not yet there. It is temptingly easy to believe human rumors and imagine yourself as worthy of praise, forgetting that the crowd is usually the worst appraiser of moral qualities and attained height of the soul. Then comes the point when the awakened thirst for glory and esteem from people is no longer satisfied with the results achieved. It begins to seem that the respect of the crowd is weakening; glory is diminishing, and universal attention is no longer aroused. Then the person starts running after the glory on his own, trying to stop it from fading, and in this pursuit he forgets the pure service of God. He no longer sets the commandments and the will of God as the law of his life, but conforms to the tastes of the crowd in order to elicit at least a momentary burst of applause and intoxicating pleasure, which have already become a habit, and plunges into trickery and sometimes sheer charlatanism. How many great moral forces, how many ardent, sincere impulses have died in this way! How many deceivers and charlatans have emerged instead of ascetics of pure Christianity! Oh, the devil well knows the power of this temptation, and probably there is not a single honest servant of God whom the evil one would not have led through the fire of this trial.

I remember one pilgrim – tall and dry, but still a strong and sinewy old man. He wore a terribly heavy double chain tightly riveted on his chest and back on his naked body under his shirt. His cap was a heavy leaden cup lined with shabby fur and weighing about fifteen pounds. His long hollowed stick was also filled with lead. He always carried not less than two poods⁵ of weight upon himself. His heavy measured gait with the accompaniment of clinking chains was heard from afar. His shoulders were eaten to the bones by the heavy chains, and wearing them was undoubtedly a real torment. He enjoyed enormous respect among the people. Yet, one feature would cast doubt on his feat: when he stopped in the huts of peasants, he loved for his admirers to feel his chains, weigh his hat and staff in their hands, and if no one realized he was expected to do so, the old man would invite them to: “Come on, look at the chains I have!” The respect and surprise of people gave him undoubted pleasure.

He died a mournful death without repentance. Of course, he could have had other merits before God. No one dares and is allowed to judge another person’s soul except for the omniscient Lord to Whom all secrets of the heart are revealed.⁶ But the feat in itself thus advertised and flaunted, has already lost all moral greatness despite all its difficulty and torment. It has no more dignity than the tricks of a wandering comedian who eats rubber galoshes and crushed glass for the amusement of the crowd.

In both instances, people were trying to arouse the surprise of the crowd and make them talk about themselves using different means.

Verily I say unto you, They have their reward (Mt. 6:2), says the Lord.

Service to the Lord should be impeccably pure. And the motivation for this service should also be pure. Such pure motivation is the love of God and no exterior impurity, especially if it contains the filth of egoism and pride, can be allowed here. Holy ascetics labored for the sake of their own love of God and for gaining His good will towards themselves in response. But when a person while serving God seeks to use this for achieving personal gain or glory, the value of his service either decreases or is reduced to zero depending on the amount of egotistic impurity. Reward for one’s service, which is primarily obtained in the form of new spiritual gifts or growth of spiritual power, can be achieved. Therefore, one needs to watch all the time, strictly and vigilantly, so that nothing in the spiritual life be done for the sake of exterior motivations, and the worm of vainglory, which perfectly knows how to hide behind externally beneficial pretexts and sophisms, would not creep into the soul; otherwise it will easily grow into a snake which will suck out all spiritual powers.

⁵ An old Russian measure of weight equal to 16.38 kg.

⁶ Cf. “For He knoweth the secrets of the heart,” Psalm 43:22 (King James 44:21).

This is why the holy fathers in their lives were so watchful of even an occasional curious exterior gaze and surrounded their endeavors with deep secret.

At one of the strict eastern monasteries in Panero there once came a presbyter named Evagrius⁷ with his retinue to the monk Joseph, a great faster and ascetic. In the old days, the monasteries famous for their life were often visited by pious pilgrims who were looking for lessons and instruction from experienced elder-monks. Evagrius had the same goal, since he himself had already begun to practice asceticism and had some success in this. He wanted to see with his own eyes genuine monastic life which he could take as an example to follow. For this purpose he came to Saint Joseph, whose monastery was famous for its strictness.

The travelers were received very cordially, but how disappointed was Evagrius when he did not notice a shadow of strict asceticism in the appearance of the monastery's life; there was nothing special that would justify the high reputation of the monastery. Church services were short, manual labor and works of obedience seemed easy, and the meal to which Evagrius with his retinue were invited and which Saint Joseph shared with them did not at all speak of strict fasting. The food was simple, but filling and with variety. They were served vegetables and fruits – everything which was available in the monastery, even wine.

One of the companions of Evagrius could not bear it.

“Our presbyter,” he said, “only eats bread and salt...!”

It was as if Saint Joseph did not hear this judgmental remark, and calmly continued the meal.

With a heavy heart Evagrius left the monastery, regretting the lost efforts and time. It seemed to him that he had not gained anything for his soul, and he hurried to other monasteries. But a heavy morning fog caught them on the road. It is generally hard to find the right direction in a sandy desert where everything is so flat and monotonous. In the fog, it turned out to be impossible. The travelers got lost and had to return to the monastery of Saint Joseph.

When they approached the monastery walls, they heard singing. Apparently, the divine service was being performed. This surprised them: earlier, at this hour, there were no church services in the monastery.

Evagrius and his companions decided to wait at the gate so as not to disturb the prayers of the monks by their visit. They had to wait a very long time – several hours.

“Why are they singing so much?” Evagrius thought. “There was never anything like this...”

⁷ Bishop Basil seems to be referring here to the *Paterikon* story about Eulogius, the disciple of Patriarch John the Merciful who visited the monastery in Panephos.

Losing patience, he knocked. They were let in and immediately led into the general refectory where the monastic brethren soon came after finishing the service.

Saint Joseph also came, blessed the meal, and invited the weary travelers to share the brotherly dinner. But what a dinner it was! A small piece of bread and a handful of dried dates! There was no wine at all, but instead there was salty water apparently taken from some seaside puddle. Evagrius could not hide his surprise.

Saint Joseph looked at him with a kind, calm smile.

“Are you surprised, brother?” he asked. “But this is our ordinary life, and what you saw before was a deed of love: this is how we receive guests. We usually do not reveal our real life...”

And Evagrius thanked God that He did not leave him in his initial deception and allowed him to see the genuine monastic life and humility.

In this way the holy monks knew how to hide their ascetic life, fearing human glory.

Yet, it was not only this holy fear which caused the modesty and secrecy of their life. There were other internal, deeper reasons which required the same, above all their great love for God.

Love for God requires inner loneliness, inner alienation from people, from the world. “I want to be only with God! And I don’t need anyone else!”--this is the desire of love which is growing and advancing. At certain steps, it becomes jealous and exceptional. People would go to the deserts, forest thickets, uninhabited islands, would hide in inaccessible mountain gorges and abysses with only one purpose – to be with God, to enjoy complete unity with Him, undistracted by human noise and vanity. Sincere love keeps itself aloof and does not allow outsiders into its intimate circle. Great appeal of love is in the thought, “this secret unites me and God,” and every extra person, every indiscreet gaze penetrating this secret dispels this appeal and is felt by a loving soul almost as an insult. Gradually, as love develops, union with God, merging with Him, or as Saint Isaac the Syrian put it, “rest in God” becomes more and more complete and exclusive, and in this “rest” the soul finds its reward and its bliss. Nothing else is needed. Rattles of human glory, cheap tinsel of worldly luxury, admiration of the servile crowd – everything recedes into the distance and seems so insignificant, petty, and unnecessary in this stream of Divine love, which captivates, dazzlingly glows and burns with delight.

However, this ascent to God and unity with Him does not at all mean complete breakaway from people, much less neglect or hostility towards them, which Christian ascetics are often unjustly accused of. No, here is manifested only internal alienation from their vain, worldly life, from their bad side, from their sinful attachments, passions, and vices. The best side of man, the ineffaceable image of God imprinted even in a sinful soul invariably attracts and

delights the ascetic and never loses his love, which is full of wonder and admiration for the perfection of God reflected in creation. He loves God in people, but avoids them not only because a loving soul which jealously keeps its secret suffers from their pestering and immodesty, but also because great danger of temptation for the ascetic lies in communicating with them, at least until he has ultimately established himself in the love of God and has acquired stability which is hard as a rock. Forgotten images of the past, rejected lures of worldly life, and old attachments can easily rise again with the same force and even if they prove powerless to tear him away from God and return to the former life, they will inevitably excite the soul, deprive it of peace, cloud the thought of God in the mind, disturb the fullness of unity with Him, weaken the desire for Him and at the same time weaken the spiritual power of the ascetic. Memories of the past for a person who has renounced the world are always shackles in his quest for perfection, and the more love and tenderness associated with them, the more heavy they are. This explains the persistence with which hermits and recluses often refused to see the closest people. But when the ascetic has already established himself in the love for God, and when the world has lost all its charm for him as a worthless rag and no longer excites the soul with temptations, he often, obeying the will of God, returns to people, bringing them his spiritual experience, his love, and grace-filled powers cultivated by solitude. Then he sees only the best side in the soul of a person, sees God Whom he infinitely loves, while vices and passions are powerless to cause another response in him, except disgust for them and deep pity for the person infected with them and suffering from them. In communicating with people, there is no longer such a danger of temptation for him as before.

But even in these circumstances, the personal inner life of an ascetic remains hidden from people. It is always hidden.

Only the wisdom of spiritual experience is revealed to people, but not the mysterious experiences of the soul. The door to this cell is always locked tight, as the Lord commands.

From this viewpoint, the feat of foolishness for Christ is especially interesting, when ascetics of the greatest holiness, staying in constant communication with people, hide the purity and holiness of their soul under the guise of eccentricity and wild antics so skillfully that the crowd often mistakes them as being crazy and offers them contempt and ridicule, not knowing how to discern the gold of spiritual height and endeavor in this rudeness and wildness.

A woman once lived in the east in one of the Tabennisi convents, whose name was unknown even to the sisters of the convent. She was always dirty, ragged, with unkempt hair tangled like felt, and was the subject of constant ridicule and insults. She often seemed drunk. She was seen lying in dirty gutters or latrines, snoring in deep sleep. She would stagger and stumble, muttering incoherent words to herself. More than once the sisters wanted to remove her

and only the tender-hearted abbess, pitying the miserable person, tolerated her in the convent. But one night, a curious nun spied on her when she as usual hid in a latrine, and was amazed: instead of a dirty, drunken slut, there was before her a holy woman in the wondrous grandeur of prayerful inspiration. The holy fool was praying on her knees. Her pale, thin face shone with happiness and delight, and unearthly light streamed from her, illuminating everything around. In the morning, the nun told her sisters what she saw that night. They rushed to look for the ascetic to ask her forgiveness for their insults, and could not find her. She disappeared. She could not and would not want to stay where her endeavors had been revealed and where glory and honor awaited her from then on.

Fools for Christ buy the secret of their life at such a terrible price. They know how to disguise their good intentions and thus avoid gratitude even in front of those for whom they want to do good.

Saint Andrew, a Byzantine fool for Christ, usually gave everything he received from his admirers to the poor, but he did it in a very unusual way. When Andrew would meet a poor man in particular need whom he wanted to give money to, he would start quarrelling with him. The quarrel would soon turn into shouting which seemed would end up in a fight. In a fit of anger, Andrew would suddenly snatch a handful of coins – copper, gold, and silver – from his pocket and would throw them aggressively at his rival. Then he would turn, as if enraged to the highest degree, and run away without looking back, not wanting to have anything to do with him. These were his alms.

Keeping the secret of inner life also has pedagogic value. In this way, the religious feeling of a person and his love for God become more focused and warmer. An open stove does not hold heat, or, as the Nun Syncliticia said, “If the doors are often opened in the bathhouse, all the steam will go out.” In the same way the soul, too open to the eyes of strangers, soon loses its focus; a feeling which is available to many becomes easily dispersed; spiritual power is wasted and disappears uselessly. Physicists know this law: steam has strength and elasticity only in a hermetically sealed space.

Speaking of the secret of spiritual life, two remarks should be added on the extent of the necessary secrecy.

Firstly, one should always remember that hiding the inner life has the purpose of the benefit of the soul, its protection from the love of glory and vanity, from exterior impurities in the feeling of love for God, from the dispersion of spiritual power, etc. Therefore, secrecy is not needed where these dangers are absent, and it goes without saying that in relations, for example, with a clergyman or spiritual adviser it is out of the question. Secrecy here is not only unjustified by anything, but is directly harmful. In the beginning an experienced spiritual adviser is crucial,

since without outside guidance and impartial assessment of the phenomena of spiritual life, it is easy to turn aside on the wrong path, and fall into spiritual deception. Thus, the soul of the aspiring ascetic should be by all means open to such a person, especially since the devil as a rule deliberately arouses distrust of the spiritual father or spiritual adviser, and demands closing the hidden places of the heart from him, fearing that the experienced gaze of the spiritual father would easily distinguish those intrigues with which he is going to entangle the beginning monk.

Secondly, the fear of revealing the secret of one's life should not stop a person from doing good deeds. For example, sometimes some people do not want to do alms in front of people and thus leave the poor without help under the pretext that they want to avoid glory and praise from men. Of course, this is wrong. It is important that you do not think about glory and do not seek it, and if it comes to you without your desire, the Lord will not condemn it. Even if there really is the worm of vainglory in your heart and while doing good, you would not be against attracting people's attention and gaining their approval, it is still better not to refuse doing a good deed.

A young monk came to an old hermit.

"Abba," he said, "when I do good, a thought tells me that I am doing a good thing and that troubles me. I am afraid that the spirit of pride will grow."

"My son," the old monk answered, "There were two farmers who had for sowing only poor wheat mixed with various garbage and seeds of weeds. One of them completely refused to sow, not wanting to spend his labor on a poor harvest which inevitably would result from sowing such grain. The other farmer sowed and harvested some wheat, albeit of a poor variety and with weeds. It was a hungry year; yet nevertheless, he had enough food to eat, although with difficulty. But the first farmer found himself in a hopeless situation. Which one did better?"

"I think the one who sowed," said the young monk.

"So should we," the elder concluded. "We should sow the wheat of good deeds, even if the garbage of bad motivations is mixed in with it!"