

Chapter 5, verses 1–20

The narration in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark about the healing of the man possessed by demons decisively refutes the speculations of those rationalists who do not believe in the existence of unclean spirits and try to explain the facts of being possessed as being the diseased state of a person – epilepsy, the falling sickness, a nervous disorder, or something of that kind. The narration of St. Mark and the details which he describes, including the transfer of demons into the swine, death of the herd of swine, and healing of the possessed afterwards, are all not in any way reconcilable with such explanations. Only one thing is possible here: either to reject the Gospel story recognizing it as implausible, or to allow for the existence of evil powers.

Of course, only the latter option is possible for us who believe in the Gospels.

Yet, given our undoubted belief in the existence of demons, which is confirmed by the Word of God and the spiritual experience of all holy ascetics, we are further confronted with an extremely interesting and important question concerning manifestations of their activities and ways to fight them.

We need to know the enemy with whom a Christian has a constant, unreconcilable struggle, to know his tricks, his cunning, his devices; we need to be able to distinguish his intrigues where he attempts to hide and act stealthily. Fighting gropingly with our eyes blindfolded, we will inevitably fall into numerous mistakes and will be exposed to dangerous temptations and sensitive blows from the side which we least expect.

Manifestations of the activity of the evil spirit in the unfortunate, possessed man, according to the description of St. Mark, were terrible: *he had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and beating himself against the rocks* (verses 3-5).¹

This is the most severe form of possession, when a person loses all power over himself and is completely subordinate to the demons. His actions manifest not only the loss of reason, but also of the most basic instincts, even the instinct of self-preservation. In this state, he might kill himself, mutilate himself; inexplicable yearning and torment torture his heart; night and day he screams and beats himself against the rocks.

At the same time, he has an enormous, unnaturally strong strength, so he pulls apart the chains, breaks the fetters, and no one can subjugate him. The evil spirit does not let go of its victim

¹ The KJV reads: “cutting himself with stones.” The words here are adjusted to correspond to the Russian translation of the Bible quoted in the text.

for a single moment, and by the intensity of the attacks one can really see that not a single demon, but a whole legion is hiding in the unfortunate, possessed man.

Nowadays, this form of possession can be seen relatively rarely. Yet whoever has visited holy places, especially whenever the relics of the saints are opened, might probably have observed such cases.

During the opening of the relics of St. Seraphim of Sarov, a possessed man from Siberia was brought to the reliquary of the saint, who was bound with chains since there was no way to control him any other way. But in the forest near the monastery, already almost at the end of the journey, the unfortunate man suddenly became overwhelmed by extreme anxiety which soon turned into a fit of incredible rage, during which he broke his fetters with inhuman strength and ran away.

Cases of periodic possession, whose attacks are usually associated with certain moments of the divine service or with specific church hymns, are much more frequent.

Probably everyone knows the so-called “*klikushi*” or raving women who start barking like dogs, meowing and screaming in a wild, heart-rending voice during the Cherubic Hymn, “We hymn Thee,” and worship of the Holy Gifts. These cries turn into a terrible scream and bestial howl if people try to bring them to the Holy Gifts by force. The reason for this is that “the demons are met by the blessed power, which is hateful to them and stronger than them, which burns, oppresses, strikes them righteously, and drives them out of their beloved dwellings” (Father John of Kronstadt).²

I remember one young girl, quite normal in everyday life, who could not withstand two prayers during the divine service: the reading of the Gospels and singing of the Kontakion of the Mother of God “We Have No Other Help.” As soon as she felt that the time of reading of the Gospels was approaching, she would start trembling with all her members, and then she would suddenly turn and run out of the church. If she was stopped and held by force, she would fall to the floor and freeze entirely, almost unconscious. But after the reading of the Gospels ended, the attack would end too; she would stand calmly and pray fervently.

I ended up spending the winter of 1924 in one of the northern, provincial towns of the Zyryan region,³ and there one exiled bishop told me about an extraordinary incident which happened in the family of the owner of the house where he lived.

This family consisted of four persons: the master of the house Vassily Timofeyevich or, according to the Zyryan method of pronunciation, “Timovas,” his wife, his daughter Lisa – a

² Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 424.

³ Now known as the Komi Republic.

young girl of sixteen or seventeen years, and a boy, his son. Signs of possession to a stronger or weaker degree could be seen in all the family members with the exception of the family head, but they took the most terrible form in the daughter.

Once she became sick and during her illness she suffered a severe nervous attack. Lisa thrashed around and tossed back and forth, so that they were forced to take her from the bunk on top of the Russian stove and put her on the floor so she would not fall and get injured in convulsions. Little by little, she began to calm down and seemed to become quiet... And suddenly, in pure Russian language, addressing her mother, she said, "I don't need you...! Send for Vassily Timofeyich!" It should be mentioned that she never called her father in that manner and did not know the Russian language at all, always speaking only in Zyryan.⁴

They sent for the father whom they soon found at their neighbors. When Timovas entered the peasant house, a conversation began between him and his daughter, which lasted over three hours. It was Lisa who spoke the most and she did it using grammatically correct Russian language.

"Hello, Vassily Timofeyevich...! Why are you standing there, Vassily Timofeyevich? Come over here..."

Lisa lay motionless: her lips did not move and not a single muscle of her face moved either. The voice came from somewhere inside of her.

"Well, hello, Vassily Timofeyevich! We have come to you from far away... There are three of us: a doctor, doctor's assistant, and lackey... We have come to tell you that you live badly, Vassily Timofeyevich...! Your wife is good; Lisa and your son Nikolai are good... But you... you live badly: you smoke... and you have other sins too... If you quit smoking, you will live for a long time... But if you don't quit, you will soon die... Your son Ivan is also bad: he deceives you and smokes... You are too gullible, Vassily Timofeyevich! You very much love your brother Grigory, but he is wretched: he takes advantage of your gullibility and deceives you... Beware also of Maria Vasilievna: she is bad... You would better associate with Marya Egorovna..."

That was the name of Timovas' wife's sister.

"You don't seem to believe me, Vassily Timofeyevich! So listen: Marya Egorovna is now putting shangas (Zyryan round flatbreads – *Bishop Basil*) into the Russian stove... Send your boy to her... Let him bring them to me... I will eat them..."

"Have mercy," Timovas objected timidly, "What stove now! It is six o'clock in the evening...!"

"No, you still should send the boy! They are going to leave tomorrow and have kindled the fire in the stove. Send him!"

⁴ The Komi language.

The boy was sent. He returned forty minutes later and brought a bowl of warm shangas with him. Everything which was said turned out to be true. The husband of Marya Egorovna was planning to leave early in the morning, and they had to kindle the stove to bake him food to eat on the road.

Further, household talk began: about sowing, about field work, about livestock. It was predicted which cows would die, how many would remain, how many calves there would be, etc. Subsequently, all this came true.

Then suddenly the same voice declared:

“You know, I have been given power over your Lisa... As soon as I press her heart, she will die...”

Poor Timovas begged:

“Have pity if you have such power... Have pity on the girl ... She is my only daughter!”

“Well, I’ll think about it...!” was the answer. “We will discuss it...!”

There were some new, unfamiliar voices, as if several people spoke at once. Then they began to gradually subside as if moving away, and finally everything became silent.

Lisa fell asleep.

The next day, she did not remember anything and did not know a single Russian word. The only thing she could tell was what happened to her a minute before the attack: someone in black came and sat on her chest, and squeezed it tightly. Her breathing ceased and she lost consciousness. She did not feel anything after that.

I remember a somewhat similar case from my pastoral practice. Once I was invited to give Communion to a dying girl. When I arrived, the patient, a teenage girl of twelve-thirteen years old, was apparently already in a state of final agony. Mortal shadows were on her face; faint wheezy breathing popularly known as “the bell,” was heard in her throat as happens with dying people in their last minutes. But at the same time something unusual was happening to her: terrible swearing words came out of her half-open lips. She scolded her mother who was in the room, scolded with the most filthy, obscene, abusive words.

It was a terrible sight.

A girl, almost a child, on the verge of death – and this disgusting swearing... The voice was sharp as if someone was tapping on a wooden board; the words flew out with small pauses, but methodically, with some kind of evil perseverance. And at the same time, it was obvious from her eyes that the poor girl hardly understood what was happening to her... It seemed as if someone was pulling a spring from the inside and the words popped up automatically...

It turned out that it was impossible to give Communion to the patient: she no longer had the swallowing reflex.

I could only sprinkle her with holy water and read the prayers of interdiction of St. Basil the Great and the prayer for the dying. Little by little, she began to calm down.

However, possession reveals itself not only in such clearly abnormal manifestations. There are a number of phenomena which we consider to be the most ordinary; they do not raise particular suspicions and do not provoke disquietude in anyone, yet nevertheless, they are undoubtedly connected with the activities of the evil spirit. These are the so-called affects or outbursts of various passions.

The presence of an alien, hostile force is especially noticeable in the attacks of violent, destructive passions: anger, jealousy, etc. Almost all killers who killed their victims in moments of irritation and vehemence (было passion), while talking about this later, would say that they felt at that moment as if “someone seized their heart.” Probably each of us who has ever experienced such bursts of rage and anger, would agree that he felt the same way and that some kind of power had gotten hold of him.

In literary descriptions of affects one can almost always find this moment of a loss of self-control and a feeling of the irresistibility of something strong and powerful.

People who are about to commit suicide feel almost the same influence of an alien, evil force before their fatal step.

One peasant widow, afflicted by terribly heavy grief, said she was afraid to walk past the mill pond.

“It draws me in!” she said. “It draws me in! I’m afraid I will not be able to control myself – I’ll throw myself in... Today I was passing by... As soon as I looked at it – I could hardly resist... My heart was seized... I fell to the ground so as not to look there... I barely could make myself go away...”

But besides these heavy and striking phenomena which capture us only occasionally, we are constantly under the influence of some dark force which people of pure heart and righteous life definitely feel as the power of the devil, but we, who are morally coarsened, sinful people, usually do not notice.

This power is manifested mainly in persistent thoughts and seductive images, which in the ascetic language are called “devil’s suggestions.” It is unknown where these thoughts and images come from, which powerfully capture our consciousness and often direct our activities.

People who are spiritually uncultivated, usually take them for their own thoughts and desires, and not only do not consider it necessary to fight them, but if they are colored in a sensually pleasant color, call them again when they disappear, take pleasure in them, keeping them in their consciousness, and strain their imagination to decorate them in an even more attractive way with new details. These are not memories of the past, not constructions of conscious thought,

not products of the subconscious activities of the imagination, as they are sometimes called (a definition, by the way, which does not explain anything at all) – these are undoubted suggestions of alien spiritual power. This can be most clearly felt during prayer, when persistent thoughts begin to particularly insistently crowd the consciousness as if trying to obscure God from the spiritual eye of the praying person. Only by a great effort of will is it possible to focus on the holy words of prayer. Many people, especially those who are not used to spiritual struggle and tension, cannot succeed in this at all.

“When we pray,” writes Father John of Kronstadt, “then the holiest, highest subjects are strangely intermingled in our thoughts with earthly, worldly, trifling subjects. For instance, God and some object we love, such as money, dress, a hat, or some dainty dish, some sweet drink, or else some outward distinction, such as a cross, an order, a ribbon, etc.”⁵

But as soon as prayer ends, all of these variegated, incoherent thoughts immediately disappear like clouds scattered by the wind. Often you do not even remember what you were thinking about during prayer and what it was at that time that seemed incredibly important and necessary, requiring a serious discussion.

This circumstance is the best proof of the presence in persistent thoughts of an alien force hostile to prayer.

Finally, the influence of the evil power, according to Father John, affects many other phenomena of spiritual life. “There is no doubt,” he says, “that in the hearts of many people the presence of the Devil manifests itself by a kind of spiritual languor, prostration, and slothfulness for every good and useful work, especially for works of faith and piety requiring attention and soberness of heart, and for spiritual work in general. Thus he strikes the heart with languor and the intellect with dullness during prayer, with coldness and indolence when it is necessary for us to do good – for instance, to have compassion upon those who suffer, to help those who are in need, to comfort those who are in sorrow, to teach the ignorant, to guide the erring and vicious into the way of truth....The Devil also manifests his presence in our hearts by unusually violent irritation. We sometimes become so sick with our own self-love that we cannot even endure the slightest contradiction, any spiritual or material obstacles; cannot bear a single rough, harsh word.”⁶

Thus, the activity of the evil spirit in mankind manifests itself in extremely varied ways, starting with the manifest expression of being possessed or true demonic frenzy, when a person is completely subjugated to the evil will up to the loss of the instinct of self-preservation, and ending with almost elusive currents of evil thought and feeling, where only the keen eye of an experienced

⁵ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 411.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 384-5

ascetic can discern the presence of demonic temptation. But all these are facts of the same order, differing only in the degree of the power of evil influence.

If the activity of the evil force is so constant and insatiable, we have to seriously think of how to fight its influence, even if we do not feel it. Otherwise, our spiritual work on ourselves on the path to Christian perfection will be seriously hampered and may come to naught.

First of all, where can we find support for this fight? The Gospel's passage that we read answers this question definitively: in Christ. The unfortunate possessed man from the Gospels found healing in the Lord, and the legion of demons was expelled by the power of His divine word. The conqueror of hell and death, the Lord, before Whom the unclean spirit trembles and Whom he obeys, is our fast and powerful protector also today.

This is the testimony of the same Father John from his experience: "My Master, Lord Jesus Christ! my swift, most speedy Intercessor, Who never lettest me be ashamed! I thank Thee from my whole heart for having mercifully heard me when I called unto Thee in my darkness, straitness, and when I was in the flames of the enemy; for having delivered me most speedily, mightily, and graciously from my enemies, and for having given unto my heart graciousness, ease, light! O, my Lord, in what distress I was from the snares of the enemy! how opportunely hast Thou shown me Thy help, and how manifestly and almightily hast Thou succoured me! I glorify Thy mercy, Master, speedy to hear us; Hope of the despairing, I glorify Thee, that Thou hast not let my face be ashamed, but hast mercifully delivered me from the darkness and ignominy of hell. How after this can I ever at any time despair of Thy hearing me and having mercy upon me a sinner?"⁷

"None of the saints," writes St. John Cassian, "could have withstood the anger of the demons or could have resisted their slander and fierce rage, if during our struggle, the most merciful intercessor and originator of feats, Christ, was not always by our side, did not balance the forces of those fighting, did not repel and did not restrain the disorderly raids of the enemies" (St. John Cassian, *Fight with Evil Thoughts and Spirits*).

Thus, the entire struggle with the evil spirit in all its manifestations hinges on a living connection with God and Lord Jesus Christ. From the very first steps, it must be firmly remembered that no one can endure this struggle using his own personal forces and will inevitably be defeated if he does not turn to God for help. Self-conceit and self-confidence here fatally lead to peril and are doomed to shameful defeat in advance.

My brethren, the Apostle Paul admonishes, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:10–12).

⁷ Ibid. p. 368

Our main stronghold in spiritual warfare is therefore faith and hope in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the main means of struggle is heartfelt appeal to Him with sincere faith. At a moment of despondency, at a moment when troubled, at a moment of passion excited in you by a demon, take a deep breath and cry out for help to the Lord in your heart, and the Lord will not leave you and will help you.

The very invocation of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, if done with faith, is already terrible to the devil. *In my name shall they cast out devils* (Mk. 16:17), the Lord promised His followers, and this promise is true.

From the history of the Church and Lives of Saints we know many cases of such casting out. Already in the early days of the Church of Christ, the Apostles used the name of the Lord as a weapon against unclean spirits. When the Apostle Paul and his companions were followed by a maid servant in the city of Philippi, possessed by a spirit of divination, *Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.* Thus it is told in the book of the Acts of the Holy Apostles (Acts 16:18).

There were even special exorcists in the Early Church, whose duty it was to cast out demons in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with prayer. Another weapon against the devil, which is also associated with our faith in the Lord, is the sign of the cross.

“Glory to the never failing power of Thy cross, O Lord!” writes Father John of Kronstadt. “When the enemy oppresses me by sinful thoughts and feelings, and I, having no freedom in my heart, make the sign of the cross several times with faith, then my sin suddenly passes away from me, the straitness vanishes, and I obtain freedom. Glory to Thee, Lord!”⁸

The following event is described in the Life of the Monk Simeon the Stylite. When he had not yet reached the highest perfection of spiritual life, he was once subjected to a severe temptation with which the devil tried to act on his pride. A demon appeared to the ascetic in the form of a bright angel and assured him that for his holy life it was decided to take him alive to heaven like the Prophet Elijah. Succumbing to the temptation, St. Simeon left his cell following his seducer... A sparkling chariot of fire drawn by winged horses was already standing at the cell’s door. But as soon as the holy hermit lifted his foot to climb into the chariot and, according to the usual monastic habit he made the sign of the cross over himself, everything disappeared...

This is the power of the sign of the cross.

But in order for us to be able to use these means in the fight against the devil, one more condition is necessary in our spiritual life, namely wakefulness, or careful observation of our own thoughts and moods.

⁸ Ibid. p. 426

As a keen watchman, our inner man must monitor the approach of the enemy in order to know the moment of impending danger, when it is time to take up the saving weapon.

One needs to clearly realize at all times that the evil and unclean spirit is always near us and is always ready for an attack. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people do not have this perception at all. For many, especially for so-called cultural people of our time, the very idea of the existence of the devil and that they are in unconscious submission to him seems strange and ridiculous. They are quite sure that all thoughts and desires which emerge in their souls belong to their own “self” and that in controlling them, they are completely free and independent. Of course, the devil by all means supports this illusion, for it is much easier to keep blind slaves in subjection. Considering his thoughts, desires, and moods to be his own possession and not realizing that they are largely inspired by alien forces, a person abandons them with difficulty, because his pride and self-love rebel against this under the pretext of supposedly protecting the rights of a free and independent person. Under such conditions none of us seriously think about the need for control and conscious systematic selection of thoughts and desires, especially since a thought, no matter how vile and ugly it is, is not considered a crime. This point of view gradually changes only when a person begins to live a truly Christian life and is forced to fight for moral perfection. Until then, we usually do not monitor our thoughts. That is why they stretch across the field of our consciousness in such incoherent disordered streams, sometimes languid, dull, aimless, and sometimes crafty or conceited, usually vain, and sometimes evil and criminal. However, the most cautious attention of a Christian should be paid to this, for it is in this area of thought and feeling that the unclean spirit comes into contact with the soul, and here are located the levers of his influence on the will of man. Satan cannot force a person to do evil work; he can only seduce him, that is, either deceive him by seeming good appearance of motives, or captivate him with the thought of enjoyment and pleasant consequences of sin.

But how can we discern our thoughts and desires? On what grounds can we distinguish those which are inspired by the devil? How can we feel the breath of the evil spirit and its touch on our soul?

People who are more experienced in the spiritual life feel this directly from some inexplicable tightness, feeling troubled, a heaviness, and anxiety in the soul. As St. Macarius of Egypt says: “As vinegar and wine are the same in appearance, but the larynx distinguishes between the property of one and the other by the sense of taste, so the soul, by its very spiritual sensation and activity can distinguish between the gifts of the spirit and reveries of the devil.”

But this is at the highest levels. It is not possible for our coarse, darkened soul. It is enough if in the beginning we limit ourselves to a thorough analysis of our thoughts, that is, test their moral value, and cut off those which clearly and definitely contradict the commandments of God.

As for the outbursts of crude passions, their presence is unmistakably felt by everyone, and then one must be especially careful. “When you feel that there is no peace in your heart, through an undue partiality towards anything earthly and worldly, and that, besides this, the heart breathes irritability and malice, be immediately on your guard, and do not let your heart be filled with the devilish fire. Pray fervently, and strengthen by the power of God your passionate, impatient heart. Be firmly assured that the evil is kindled in your heart by the enemy” (Father John of Kronstadt).⁹

Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation (Matt. 26:41) – thus the Lord Jesus Christ gave commandment.

Chapter 5, verses 21–43

The Holy Evangelist Mark again describes the Lord Jesus Christ for us in all the greatness of His strength and power. Again His Divine power is manifested in two events, not only in power over human ailments, but also over death, and as always, the miraculous manifestations of this power are filled with the spirit of active love for man imprinted in the entire life of the Savior.

In one respect these two miracles, according to the description of the Evangelist, are distinctly different from each other, and this feature of how they are different deserves discussion.

When the daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, was raised from the dead, the Lord, following His custom as it was manifested in most of His miraculous deeds, sought to keep it secret.

Firstly, He took only Peter, James, and John – His closest and most beloved disciples – from out of the whole huge, pressing and surging crowd which accompanied Him, and did not allow anyone else to follow Him.

Coming to the house of Jairus, where relatives and friends of the deceased had already gathered, *when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying* (verse 40).

After raising the dead, he charged them strictly *that no man should know it* (verse 43).

Thus, the Evangelist mentions here three times the desire of the Lord to perform the miracle secretly without causing clamor and rumors among the people.

When the Lord healed the woman with the issue of blood, He on the contrary made the woman who was healed and who was hiding in the crowd publicly testify before all the people of the miracle which was performed on her.

The poor sick woman who had spent all her wealth on doctors, wanted to be healed imperceptibly, touching the clothes of Jesus Christ in the crowd, but the Lord did not allow her to hide and, *knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and*

⁹ Ibid. p. 109

said, *Who touched my clothes?* (verse 30). The disciples objected to him that it was a strange thing to ask this in the midst of the densely-packed crowd squeezing them on all sides. But Jesus still looked around for the one who did it.

Then the woman, realizing that she could not hide, *fearing and trembling... came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth* (verse 33).

The Lord, as the One Who knows what is in the heart, of course, knew and could immediately point to the one who touched Him in the crowd, but He wanted the healed woman to acknowledge and confess the miracle which was performed on her to the people.

Why? Undoubtedly, in this case, open confession of the miracle was needed for those who accompanied the Lord. He did not need any human glory and always avoided it, but it was necessary to strengthen the faith of the crowd surrounding him. Jairus was the one who needed this most, especially in view of the upcoming miracle of raising his daughter from the dead. The weak faith of the ruler of the synagogue faced a great test: the death of his beloved daughter whom he left seriously ill, but still alive when he departed from his home. The news of this death would have plunged him into despair, and in order at this moment for him to still have a ray of faith in the power of the Lord and hope in His help for his daughter even in such apparently hopeless circumstances, for this it was necessary to make him witness the extraordinary, miraculous power of the Lord.

That is why the Lord demanded that the woman with the issue of blood should openly acknowledge the miracle that was performed on her.

Maybe Jairus' faith passed the test precisely because of this, and when the Lord said, *Be not afraid, only believe* to the poor father crushed by the sad news of his daughter's death, he found reinforcement for his faith in remembering the unusual event with the woman with the issue of blood, and the miracle of resurrection could thus be accomplished.

This path of confession and open testimony of manifestations of the power of God in the life of people strengthens the faith of people in God and in His providential activities, and together with this, the circle of people who make up the Church of Christ grows and expands. *How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?...So then faith cometh by hearing* (Rom. 10:14, 17), says the Apostle Paul.

Consequently, open confession of faith in God in many cases is the duty of a Christian, and refusing to make such a confession is often tantamount to the betrayal of Christ.

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven (Mt. 10:32–33). Confession of faith is important and needed particularly

in the years of universal decline of faith or persecution of religion. The example of one courageous man who openly, despite ridicule and persecution, professes faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ – such an example supports faith in weak, wavering hearts and strengthens timid souls for the feat of protecting religion and suffering for the name of Christ. In such a difficult and critical time, betraying Christ and renouncing Him becomes especially shameful.

What a terrible sin seems to be the denial of Christ by the Apostle Peter in the moment of danger, when the Lord was arrested and was in the hands of His persecutors who struck Him and insulted Him, and when in the midst of these sufferings there was not a single soul sympathizing with Him except for two disciples lost in the crowd. Such a situation imposed special obligations upon the disciples to courageously and firmly express their sympathies for the Divine Sufferer, for in the midst of universal hatred and contempt this would have been comfort and consolation for Him. No wonder that the robber who did this on the cross earned forgiveness and mercy from the Lord. But to hear renunciation of Himself: *I know not this Man* (Mk. 14:71) at such a moment from the mouth of His beloved disciple – did this not mean for the Lord to find an extra drop of bitterness in His overflowing cup of suffering? And when *the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter* (Lk. 22:61), how telling was this sad look! Peter could not forget this look all his life, and every time a rooster crowed, he would weep bitterly recalling his denial. His eyes were always red with tears.

In the same way, when the Church of Christ suffers in persecution – our gentle, loving mother who has raised us with her divine worship and statutes, has nurtured us with her teaching, nursed us with the sacraments from the source of grace of the Holy Spirit, it is especially shameful and is befitting of low souls who are of little faith to leave her at these moments of sorrow and persecution, to renounce her instead of defend her.

On the contrary, what a wonderful picture of nobility, loyalty, and honesty is the confession of Christian martyrs of the first centuries in the years of persecution!

Here is a scene usual for that time. A southern city... A platform is built on the main city square, and Christians are being interrogated in front of the Hegemon. The passionate southern crowd, impressionable, unstable, changeable like the sea, full of mixed feelings, is milling around. Some look upon the Christians with contempt as at fools and fanatics harmful to the state; others – with undisguised surprise, since they cannot understand in any way what power makes them go to torture and death; the third are full of inner delight and admiration for the courage and unshakable firmness of these people... And there are many of these strange, amazing individuals... There are very old men gray with age, bent from years, and exhausted by a harsh life; there are mature men in the full bloom of strength and abilities; young men standing on the threshold of life and infused with young hopes; girls, timid and tender like lilies, even children... And they all repeat one word

that irrevocably condemns them to execution: “I am a Christian!” And they are all equally firm in this confession: both longtime Christians and neophytes who have just converted to Christianity.

Everyone has one impulse, one feeling, one great love for Christ... One thought full of delight: “To know Thee, Oh Lord, to suddenly feel that there is no one higher in life, to worship Thy suffering, to endure torture for short hours here in order to rejoice with Thee in eternity, to share Thy sufferings with Thee who art beloved – there is no happiness beyond this!”

They are offered glory, wealth, and incredible prosperity in return for renunciation, as if adding to the stakes, as if wishing to test the extent which the craziness of Christians could come to — but nothing appeals to them. There is no price for which they could betray Christ and sell their faith.

And on the other side the instruments of torture are laid; fires are made; tin to torture with a jet of hot metal is being smelted... The martyrs faced all this horror of anger and cruelty, which exhausted the imagination in inventing the most incredible, refined tortures and torments.

And it takes so little: pour a vial of wine or throw a pinch of incense on a pagan altar. That’s all...! And they don’t want to...! They keep repeating one thing: “I am a Christian!” They know nothing higher and more honorable than this title. And they die for it. Die amid terrible torments. Die calmly, with prayer, with a bright smile on their lips.

It was this confession which spread the faith; the Church of Christ grew and flourished on the blood of martyrs. The centuries of open persecutions and torments for the faith of Christ passed. But the development and further strengthening of the Church of Christ still required the confession of courageous and strong-willed people, for the struggle of evil power against the Church did not stop, but only took on other forms: cunningness and deception joined violence. The Age of the heresies was approaching.

And at this time we again could see a whole number of staunch champions of the true faith, who defended the Church with a bold, strong, direct word, ignoring the dangers threatening them.

Take Athanasius the Great. He was put forward in the struggle against Arianism, the first malicious attempt by the evil mind to refute the Orthodox doctrine of the Divine Humanity of Christ, declaring Him to be a created being. For almost his entire life, St. Athanasius fought against this heresy, which at times was rampant. There were times when the persecuted Orthodoxy rested almost solely on Athanasius. He spent much of his life in exile, but nothing, no onsets of the tempest, defeated him. He preserved and passed on the teaching of the faith in its indestructible purity to the future ages.

Then there was the Age of Iconoclasm. This was a persecution not only against icons, but also against monasticism, against Church regulations, against anything which restrained the passions. The persecution, supported by several emperors in a row, was carried out with

embittered cruelty, using any means possible. And only a small handful of people faithful to the Church, who boldly raised their voices in defense of the ancient regulations, defended icon veneration.

Two champions – St. Theodore the Studite and St. John of Damascus – are especially noticeable in this selfless struggle for the purity of the faith.

John of Damascus was the chief Minister of the Caliph of Damascus. An extraordinarily gifted man and ardent believer, he devoted all his zeal and all his talent to the struggle against Iconoclasm. He wrote many inspired hymns in defense of icons, which gained extraordinary popularity among the people and were sung throughout the Byzantine Empire, supporting those of little faith and strengthening the weak. The main persecutor of icons, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III the Isaurian, until then could not do anything with John to stop his activity, for the Damascus Caliphate was outside of his power. Finally, the malice in the icon-hater found an insidious method: he ordered that a fraudulent letter be composed, which was allegedly received from John and contained a proposal to betray the Caliph in order to overthrow him from the throne. Leo III sent this letter to the Caliph, as if outraged by the baseness of the suggestion. The goal of the slanderer was achieved: in terrible anger at his chief minister, the ruler of Damascus ordered to cut off his hand which he believed to have written the treacherous letter.

Thus Saint John suffered for his bold confession of faith. Yes, these were real people! And what reproach reaches us at our time from these integral, bright images, with the current unrest that is rising against the Church, against church regulations, against Christ.

And how such confession of faith is needed now! What great importance an open confession of faith or bold speech exposing untruth even from one courageous person sometimes has in the life of the Church!

In 1439, the Roman Catholic Pope drew up a plan for a so-called Union, or unification with the Eastern Orthodox Church, trying to subordinate it to his influence and domination. For this purpose, a Council was convened in Florence, to which the representatives of the Orthodox Church were invited. Many traitors appeared among them who agreed to accept this Union which granted authority over Orthodoxy to Catholicism. But one father of the Eastern Church, Mark of Ephesus, a man respected by all for his sincerity, honesty, and devotion to the faith, refused to sign the Act of Unification of the Churches. And such was the influence and respect he had, that after learning that Mark's signature was not in the Council protocols, the Pope exclaimed: "We have not accomplished anything!" He was right: the Union signed at Florence did not lead to anything.

This is what the staunchness of just one person sometimes means! Examples of staunch faith and open confession are particularly important for young people who often seek and cannot find support in their religious aspirations. Imagine a youth thrown into the midst of unbelievers.

Maybe there are correct foundations of faith in his soul, laid down by his family, but all this, his entire spiritual worldview is just in the state of formation and therefore is unstable. Negative impressions of complete indifference to faith or careless criticism creep from all sides into the still weak brain, and drop by drop the child's faith disappears. It is great happiness for such a youth to find support for a fight against the surrounding religious coldness in the example of a consciously believing person. Some, although unfortunately few, believers understand this and do not hide their religious convictions.

“In front of young people,” once said the famous professor and philosopher Astafiev, “I do not conceal, but consciously emphasize my religious beliefs. If in the evening in cold weather I happen to pass by the Iveron Chapel when no people are around, I sometimes make a small sign of the cross without removing my hat. But if I see a student, no matter what the weather is, I take off my hat and make a noticeable sign of the cross.”

If we turn our attention from these images of great and small confessors to our own life, we will probably find a different picture. Not only do we not consider it necessary to openly profess our faith, but on the contrary, we often carefully hide our Christian beliefs as if embarrassed and ashamed of them. Many of those who are accustomed to make the sign of the cross over themselves while passing by a church are sometimes afraid to take off their hats and make the sign of the cross if people are looking at them or if they notice some unbelieving mocker nearby whom they are acquainted with. Some strange cowardice undoubtedly inspired by the evil spirit sometimes takes possession of them! It is terrible to look ridiculous in the eyes of this under-educated skeptic, flaunting the fashionable liberalism of his views! Think what they might say: “To believe in God in the twentieth century! The century of steam and electricity – and faith in God like in the Middle Ages! How backward! Moreover, in the Orthodox way, like old women! Lutheranism with its rational approach toward religion would still be tolerable! But Orthodoxy! Pah, how ridiculous!” And the Orthodox man, cowering in a lump and looking fearfully at the scoffer, tries to slip past the church as soon as possible without making the sign of the cross, although it gnaws at his heart and his hand pulls toward his hat.

So great is this fear of ridicule and concern of seeming behind the times that sometimes sincerely believing people, especially from the urban intellectual circles, instead of a good icon with a vigil lamp in a prominent place, hang a tiny, barely noticeable icon somewhere in the corner, and even try to match it to the color of the wallpaper, so it would be impossible to notice it right away. Pardon me! Guests, friends, intelligentsia will come and judge me!

Is this not denial? – *I know not this man* (Mk. 14:71)!

It sometimes happens that in a merry company someone tells a so-called funny joke, full of the most outrageous blasphemy, and none of those present stop the speaker or express their

indignation against insulting religious feeling. Who hasn't heard blasphemous parodies like "the Creation of the World" or "the Flood Story"? And it should be mentioned that these parodies are not even the worst. Recently, stories and jokes have appeared, whose blasphemy is terrible and frightening. Farces and comedies of this kind are compiled, which are told openly, on stage... And Orthodox people listen to all of this silently, and sometimes even chuckle and applaud...

We do not respect our own religion!

Especially in the present evil time, when such a fierce campaign is being held against Orthodoxy, it is becoming increasingly clear how little we value the faith of our ancestors. Apostasy spreads in a wide wave, capturing not only young people, but sometimes also old people. They extremely easily betray Orthodoxy and the Church for the most insignificant reasons. The desire for a career, the fear of oppression, an official position, impudent ridicule, lightweight, quasi-scientific lectures – all of these are recognized as an excusable reason for apostasy, at least external apostasy. If we compare the power of faith which the first Christians had in the age of persecutions with this mood, the comparison will not be in our favor. How people valued Christianity then! What wholesome, strong, direct, and honest character this deep devotion to religion developed, and how flabby and powerless modern society is, bearing a Christian label! What little glitter is in it, not even speaking of the glitter of the Gospels, but just that of spiritual values!

People often justify themselves that they betray the Church and Lord Jesus Christ only externally, under the pressure of circumstances, but in their souls they are still faithful.

But the Lord says: *But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven* (Mt. 10:33). The Apostle Paul testifies: *It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us* (2 Tim. 2:11–12).

Is that not frightening?

The Church is persecuted – we must also endure persecution. When Christ longsuffers – we must longsuffer, sharing in His sufferings, for *he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me* (Mt. 10:38), He says.

Thus, confession of faith is currently necessary and inevitable for an Orthodox Christian.

But here follows one important and quite natural question: if a Christian must make open confession of the faith, how can this be reconciled with the secrecy of spiritual life which is also required of a Christian, as we have seen in the previous discussions? After all, the Lord while demanding confession from the woman with the issue of blood, did not require this from Jairus, but on the contrary ordered him and his relatives to remain silent about the miracle of the

resurrection of the girl. This means that confession of faith is not required always, but only in certain specific cases.

This is absolutely true, and the Gospel story which was read gives a clear indication of when exactly the confession of faith is required.

When did the healed woman come forward with her public recognition of the miracle?

When the Lord demanded this from her.

This is the answer to the question and solution to the above issue .

Confession of faith during persecution is necessary for a Christian when the Lord calls for it, that is, when circumstances develop for him in such a way that he needs to reveal his attitude towards God – for Christ or against Christ – to people. All circumstances of our life to the last detail are determined by the will of God, and if the Lord puts a person where he must openly profess his beliefs, this is the call of God.

When Christians of the first centuries were arrested and brought to the Hegemon for interrogation, they courageously confessed their faith in Christ, but did not seek torment on their own.

A self-willed decision to take on the feat of confession is usually associated with a sense of pride and self-conceit, and is guided by it, and therefore is often punished, *for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble* (1 Pet. 5:5). Self-willed confessors left without the grace-filled help of God cannot endure trials on their own and inevitably end up in renunciation.

A sad tale about one Christian apostate has been preserved from ancient times. A certain Narcissus, who during severe persecution decided to confess the faith on his own volition despite the admonitions of his spiritual father, came to the pagan ruler in order to receive a martyr's crown for the name of Christ.

The ruler received him warmly.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“I am a Christian,” Narcissus answered firmly, “and I came to tell you that your gods are idols, and you are madmen who worship wood and stone...”

“But you certainly know that Christians are subject to the death penalty by the edict of the emperor? Why did you come, fool? Go away...”

“We Christians are not afraid of death... It leads us to Christ...”

“Silence... Take back your words or I will order you to be tortured...”

“You may torture me... For us, Christians, sufferings for Christ are sweet... We are all ready to endure anything for Him! And no torment will force me to renounce Him!”

This overconfidence of the uncalled confessor was severely punished.

The Hegemon called for the executioners. Narcissus steadfastly endured several tortures, constantly repeating that he was not afraid of any torment. But his will, not strengthened by the grace of God, finally could not withstand it, and when new, terrible instruments of torture were brought by the order of the ruler, Narcissus lost heart, shamefully renounced Christ, and made a sacrifice to idols.

Therefore, the ancient Church never approved of this zeal without knowledge and always advised to wait with caution and prudence for clear indications of the will of God calling for martyrdom.

Even bishops often hid from persecutors, saving their lives for the benefit of the Church, and Christians who surrendered themselves arbitrarily to torment were not acknowledged as saints.

This attitude of the Church towards confession of the faith has found its expression in the rules of St. Peter, Archbishop of Alexandria, recognized as canonical, that is, mandatory for guidance in the Christian life. In his Ninth Canon, the Orthodox point of view on this issue is clarified.

“Our Lord and Teacher,” it says, “many times tried to avoid those who were plotting against Him, and that He never openly walked abroad on their account, and that when the time for His passion was approaching He did not surrender Himself, but, on the contrary, evaded them until they came upon Him with swords and staves. Then He said to them: *Are ye come out, as against a robber, with swords and staves to take me?* (Mark 14:48). They, in turn, it says, delivered Him to Pilate. To be like Him, at any rate, those who have gone so far as to suffer for Him on purpose, should be reminded of His divine Words, whereby He explicitly cautions them in regard to persecutions by saying: *But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues* (Matt. 10:17). *They will deliver you up*, He said, and not *You shall deliver yourselves up*. He added: *And you shall be brought before governors and kings for my name*, and not, *You shall bring yourselves*; as He wants you to jump from place to place when persecuted, for His name. As again we hear Him saying: *And when they drive you out of this city, flee into another* (Matt. 10:23). For He does not want us to desert to the lieutenants and satellites of the Devil, but, on the contrary, wants to keep us from causing them to perpetrate more murders, as though we were forcing them rather to increase the severity and effectiveness of death-dealing works. On the contrary, He wants us to beware of and evade them, *Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation* (Matt. 26:41).”¹⁰

¹⁰ Agapios the Hiermonk, Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *The Rudder (Pedalion) of the Metaphorical Ship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Orthodox Christians*, ed. R. J. Masterjohn, West Brookfield, MA: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 2005, p. 1407-8.

Thus, a Christian should not seek martyrdom asking for it on his own, so as not to lead the persecutors of Christianity into the double sin of exasperation and new crimes, but when he is forced to confess the faith, he is obliged to accept this feat.