

Remember Your First Love

Excerpts from a conversation with Archimandrite Tikhon, Abbot of the Sretensky Monastery, in Moscow.

Question: Fr. Tikhon, where has our faith gone, our need for Church services and prayer, our joy?

Answer: Once, I was talking with Archimandrite Seraphim (Rosenberg). This was not long before his death. He was from a family of German barons; after graduating from Tartu University (Estonia) in the 1930's, he left for the Pskov-Caves Monastery, where he lived for sixty years. During this conversation, Fr. Seraphim spoke about monasticism. He said that the greatest problem of modern monasticism is the lack of resolve. Probably this could be said not only of monks, but also of many of our contemporary Orthodox Christians. Resolve, courage, and the spiritual nobility connected with these qualities are noticeably lacking. But if people understand throughout their lives the most important thing – to go to God regardless of any obstacles and temptations, to be faithful to Him – they will not waver in their faith to the point of losing it.

This crisis of faith that you are speaking about is most obvious in our teenagers. From age eight to nine the children go to church, sing on the cliros, amazing and delighting everyone around them. But by age fourteen to sixteen, many, if not the majority, stop going to church.

Question: Why does this happen?

Answer: The children were not acquainted with God. Of course, they were acquainted with the rites, the Church Slavonic language, rules of behavior in the church, lives of the saints, sacred history simplified for children. But no one acquainted them with God. The meeting never took place. So it turns out that the parents, the Sunday school, and – sad as it is – the priest,

built the house of their children's faith on sand (Mt. 7:26), and not on a rock – Christ. How does it happen that children do not notice God despite the adults' most sincere efforts to instill faith in them? How does it come to be, that the child does not find the strength in himself to see Christ the Savior in his life, in the Gospels? By answering these questions to ourselves, we raise another adult problem which is reflected in our children as in a mirror. **This is when both parents and priests teach one thing, but live another.** This is the most terrible blow to the tender strength of a child's faith, and an unbearable drama for their sensitive awareness.

There are other examples. I could name them, but I especially remember this one: during my first trip to Germany in 1990, I received to my great surprise a good lesson from one priest, a Catholic. I was amazed by his congregation – very pure young people age sixteen to twenty, sincerely striving to live the Christian life. I asked this priest how he was able to guard these teenagers from the aggressive pressure of temptations and pleasures so normal to their peers in the West. He looked at me with complete perplexity. He said something that simply crushed me with its simplicity and clarity (I am very sorry that I did not hear this from an Orthodox priest): “They just love Christ more than all those pleasures!”

Question: And our situation is different?

Answer: No, of course not! There are many shining examples amongst us, glory be to God. In our Sretensky Seminary I see remarkably pure and sincere young men; although of course, temptations happen – that is life.

Question: But they are youths. What about the people who come to church as adults?

Answer: What is the differ-

Festivities for the Feast of the Repose of St. Seraphim

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, Vespers for the feast of St. Seraphim of Sarov will be served at 5 PM, followed by the beautiful Akathist hymn to his memory. On Monday, Jan. 2, at 9:30 AM, we will greet His Grace Bishop Benjamin, and begin the Divine Liturgy. Following the Liturgy we will ask His Grace to bless the new hall, the storage building, and the children's play equipment. All are invited to the festal meal which will follow.

INFORMATION

Protection of the Holy Virgin & St. Seraphim of Sarov Church
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Parish office phone: 584-9491 / fax: 585-9445
website: www.saintseraphim.com

Our Parish Secretary may be reached at the Church office on Tuesday-Saturday, 9 AM to Noon, at 584-9491.

Fr. Lawrence Margitich may be reached at the Parish office phone, or at lmargitich@sbcglobal.net. He is available Tuesday-Saturday, from noon onwards each day.

PARISH CONTACTS

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ence? Something similar happens to adults. We also tempt each other (in this case, the little ones the Savior describes are not necessarily children according to age) by our lukewarmness, our conscious transgressions of the Gospel commandments, by our impure life. **Gradually, people get the impression that a Christian can live however he likes. If this happens, people who have come to the faith as adults gradually lose interest in spiritual life, and everything bores them. There is no real relationship with God, which means there is no life of the spirit.** During the first three years or so of faith, Orthodoxy is interesting; a new life enralls us and brings a mass of new impressions. Then comes everyday life.

Probably it is like family life. You have to labor, endure and endure—first of all, yourself. This really is hard. For those who have come to the faith at age, say, twenty-five, there are some fifty years of this work ahead. It has always been this way; no need to be surprised. This dryness is, as a rule, an inevitable stage of spiritual life. St. Theophan the Recluse for example writes much and interestingly about this. This is a segment of the path, a desert that we have to get through. Unfortunately, not all of our brothers and sisters get through this segment. Some even dig themselves into those barren sands with great pleasure forever; and it can be very difficult to work one's way out of them.

Question: Where does this dryness come from? A person does everything he is supposed to do—he goes to confession, recounts all of those things that he knows are called sins, reads the prayer rule, approaches the chalice; and the further he goes, the more this seems to be formalism, a mechanical action of “reading,” “standing through the service,” and “telling something at confession.” What should he do? What is the right thing?

Answer: In Holy Scripture it is stated very expressly how to revive the soul, how to make the soul young and alive again. **Seek God, and your soul shall live** (Ps. 68:32). Seek God, no matter what! Stubbornly and persistently. Then the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ will be fulfilled: Seek, and ye shall find (Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11:9).

But if the search for God, the thirst for God, the desire to attain Him disappears, this is cause for very serious alarm. You have to labor and use any means to restore this desire in your soul. Without it, nothing good can come. Or, you may have to wait, as the parched earth waits for rain, for trials that shake up the soul, sickness, serious wounds, and temptations.

Question: But is this possible for the laity?

Answer: For the laity? It is possible precisely for them! As Fr. John (Krestiankin) said, in our days, strong Christians are saved in the world, while weak ones are saved in monasteries. When you confess parishioners or talk with them, you see what amazing *podvizhniks* (ascetical laborers) there are among the laity, and we who call ourselves monks should learn from them. I remember once during the mid 1980's, I was walking with Fr. John (Krestiankin) in the Pskov-Caves Monastery. Suddenly, an agitated young man ran up, "pale, with a heated gaze," and began complaining loudly, "Batiushka, Moscow is such a disgusting city, a new Babylon! People are

godless and terrifying!" Then Fr. John covered the man's mouth with his hand and said sternly, "What are you saying? In Moscow, forty Divine Liturgies are served every day, in forty churches! There are such amazing podvizhniks living unknown to the world, somewhere on the eighth floor of a twelve-story block building! True saints, such as you cannot even imagine." I was amazed at the time, because I thought that podvizhniks only lived in distant monasteries, somewhere on Solovki or in Egypt. But now – and this is the truth – I myself see remarkable *podvizhniks*, simple laypeople, who teach and save me by humbling me, and showing me how it is possible to live in our time in a truly ascetic way, as Christians.

Question: In what does this Christian life consist?

Answer: In the fulfillment of Christ's commandment of love for God and neighbor. These are ordinary people – women, youths, girls, and grown men. Not to mention the grandmothers, who read such prayer rules that when a monk hears about them – I tell you honestly – he feels uncomfortable. Moreover, they have been fulfilling these rules regularly for decades, with the absolute conviction that they are doing nothing special! A *babushka* reads so many kathismas for her eldest son, so many for the second, and so many for her youngest daughter. Then she says 1,500 Jesus prayers, just to get a feeling, if only a little, of her own sinfulness. Then the particular prayers of her prayer group, and an Akathist – how could she do without an Akathist?! I am telling you about the real prayer rule of a real parishioner. And such ascetics are innumerable! Besides this, they also work, go to the store, wash and iron clothes, and raise their children and grandchildren. But they are not proud or vain, they consider themselves to be nothing, and are ready at any moment to serve their neighbor. Just associating with such people is amazingly helpful for the faithless to find hope and resolve.

Question: But is true Christianity only in the reading of prayers?

Answer: Of course not only in the reading of prayers. It is in the reading of prayers as living communion with God! Only, you have to understand that the form of prayer can widely vary. The holy fathers considered that spiritual life is determined by the quality and purity of prayer. However, it goes without saying that if a person thinks he prays, but he is cruel, and does not love people, then one can only pity him. You know, perhaps I am lucky, but it has been a long time since I have met such people.

– The full interview with Fr. Tikhon can be found here: www.pravoslavie.ru/english/39306.htm

STEWARDSHIP – Caring for what God has given us

• **OUR LIFE:** *Let us commend ourselves, each other, and all our life unto Christ our God* (from the Divine Services of the Church). Each day we make choices – some good and some bad. These choices are a measure of our stewardship of the life we have been given. The question we must ask ourselves is “How do I involve Jesus Christ in the choices I make each day?”

• **OUR TIME:** *Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming* (Matthew 25:13). How much time we spend on things shows what we think is important. Good stewards offer the first and best part of their time to remember God and do His work. Some people might

think “Most of my time each day is spent at school (or work). Does that make me a bad steward?” A good steward will transform even the most routine daily activities into small offerings to God.

• **OUR BODIES & THE CREATION:** *Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit Who is in you, Whom you have from God, and you are not your own* (1 Corinthians 6:19). When we consider that our bodies and all of creation are a gift from God, living an unhealthy life and misusing His property is bad stewardship! By caring for our bodies and the creation around us responsibly, we give glory to God and can more effectively care for others.

• **OUR TALENTS AND ABILITIES:** *And though I*

have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and though I give my body to be burned but have not love it profits me nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). God gives each of us talents and abilities. Regardless of how talented we are or how proficient we are at something, if these abilities are not used to fulfill Christ's commandments to love God and our neighbor, they are worthless.

• **RESOURCES:** *Assuredly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance but she out of her poverty put in all that she had* (Mark 12:41-44). God also gives us resources such as money to serve Him and to help others. Are we mindful of the Biblical standard of proportional giving, the tithe which is 10% of our income)? Each day we make choices—some good and some bad. These choices are a measure of our stewardship of the life we have been given. The question we must ask ourselves is “How do I involve Jesus Christ in the choices I make each day?”

• **STEWARDSHIP AND PROPORTIONAL GIVING** are not once a year events; nor are they about money, or dues, or fund-raising or even meeting our annual parish budget. Stewardship is about making choices, as individuals and as a community and about being grateful for the blessings we have been given by God. If we practice good Christian stewardship of money we will escape the trap of anxiety (and often selfishness). Poor stewardship of money will find us anxious and distracted when it comes to our faith.

• **TWO MORE POINTS TO CONSIDER:** *Proportional Giving* does not leave out anyone at all. All may participate, and all will benefit from the blessings of returning a small percentage (the tithe) back to God from what He has given you. This is true whether one is rich, or poor, or just getting by. So, give. Not when you feel you have some financial buffer, but from what you have. Success in a parish is judged **not** by how much money is brought in, but by how much we trust God and are grateful to Him. The “Widow’s Mite” of the Gospel of Matthew speaks eloquently: Jesus “looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.’”

Finally, we must remember that giving to the Church is not a form of charity. By no means; for God does not need our money, nor our time nor our talents. He has all things, and providentially uses them for the good of His People. More rightly, the Church is God’s charity toward us. **Christians who practice proportional giving know that they work in synergy with God in helping to empower the Church’s charitable work—and that it matters not whether they have little or great resources, because God can multiply that offering.**

—Fr. Lawrence

The Orthodox Family ~ by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, CA.

Excerpts from an article that appeared in Orthodox Tradition, Vol. IV, No. 2, pp. 34-36.

IN CONTEMPORARY America the social family, the family created without spiritual goals, is turning ugly. On Christmas and holidays, for example, we gather in our homes, ignore the poor, resent the "intrusion" of friends and acquaintances into our food- and drink-filled festivities, and pay homage to Christ or the theme of the holiday in perfunctory services or commemorations designed around the family activities—if any homage is paid at all. We

have abandoned, to a great extent, the custom of visiting the infirm and needy on holidays. Rather, we have turned to a social selfishness that extends out from these holidays to the whole year, poisoning and killing society itself, making people cold, alien, and insensitive to others. And even the family itself suffers. Family members embrace, relate to one another in empty and inane exchanges of words, and often hide their need for real love and affection—for the true love and affection known only to the spiritual family, to that family which reaches beyond itself.

Thus the model American family which so shocks us Christians, but which predominates in the society around us: a family beset by drug abuse, alcohol, the killing comforts of wealth and material gain, divorce, and even suicide!

So far has the American family strayed from the spiritual image that, if a young man or woman is to go away today and enter the monastic life, dedicating himself to prayer for the family and others, this is an occasion for shame and embarrassment. The family unit may even explode in hatred, decrying the personal separation that such a life might entail. Deep love, that love which survives separation (and even death), is disappearing from our families. We delight in those who succeed in the emptiness of material life and remove even the privileges of the family from those who seek the spiritual life. How far we have come from the traditional Christian family, based as it was in the past – especially in our Orthodox societies – on spiritual values, in which a monastic or Priestly vocation was the cause of merriment and rejoicing. To such families, a monastic or Priestly vocation represents a total fulfillment of family goals, a realization of the Christian life, and a reification of Christian ideals. If we reflect on the contrast between the true family and the social unit qua family created in modern materialistic society, we can precisely glimpse what the true Orthodox family is.

Just as an army trains soldiers to battle the enemy for the sake of the homeland, so the true family, the Orthodox family, endows its children with the spiritual armor by which they can overcome temptation, battle sin, live exemplary and moral lives, gain union here on earth with God, fulfill the divine potential within man, and pass into the next life with the spiritual power to pray for family members left behind. A true Orthodox family teaches love to its members—that intuitive, spontaneous love natural to blood relations—and encourages them to go out into the world sharing this love with others and perfecting it to whatever degree possible.

A true family moves out beyond itself. If family members should gain wealth or fame, these are secondary things. These accomplishments are measured only by the primary contribution that they make to the Church, to society in general, and to the fulfillment of Christian ideals. And if a family member should embrace monasticism, it is for this individual that the Church reserves the greatest praise: for one who can, without the reinforcement of family ties and the comfort of marital affection, show and give love unselfishly; for one who can, living in poverty, produce richness in his soul and heart; for one who can, in the face of the world's ridicule and scorn, maintain inner dignity; for one who can, though separated from his family, show more real love, in his prayers and example, than those present to it.

SAYINGS

Do not wish for many things, whether they are within or out of reach. Instead, take care to sanctify the little you have. ...Let God intervene between you and your purpose, instead of letting your purpose intervene between you and God. ...We must not “surrender” to His Will. This is what soldiers do. We, who are His Children, must offer Him our own will along with all our being – in whatever pitiful state we may be – and tell him: “Lord, take all my faults and imperfections and set them right.” – *sayings, of Mother Gavrila, from the book **The Ascetic of Love***

Our spiritual health and growth, like our physical health and growth, depend on daily exercise. The church often refers to this exercise as *ascesis*. Ascesis involves commitment, practice, and the remembrance of what is important. True ascesis becomes a way of daily life. Without exercise we become weak and our spirit atrophies. How can we strengthen our life in the church? The direction of a spiritual father, continual contact with him. Frequent resort to the sacraments, careful preparation before receiving them, participation in Church services, prayer at home, the daily reading of the Gospels and religious books, the observance of the Church calendar, friendship and contact with people who believe and belong to the Church. – *Father Alexander Elchaninov, **The Diary of a Russian Priest***

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **THE GREAT FEAST OF THEOPHANY** (Baptism of the Lord and revelation of the Holy Trinity) will be celebrated this week: The service of the Royal Hours will be served on Wednesday, Jan. 4 at 6 PM. On Thursday, Jan. 5 at 11:30 AM we will serve the Vespers Divine Liturgy with Old Testament readings, followed by blessing of Holy Water. This is a Divine Liturgy, so, we fast strictly before so we may receive Holy Communion. In the evening, Matins will be served at 6 PM. On Friday, Jan. 6, the Divine Liturgy of the Feast and the Blessing of Water will be served. One can discern by the number of Services and their solemnity how great a feast Theophany truly is.
- **HOUSE BLESSINGS:** Please schedule your house blessing with our priests directly. Due to the weddings on Sunday, Jan 8 and 15, we will not be able to have a house blessing “caravan” on either of those days.
- **THERE WILL BE A SISTERHOOD** meeting on Sunday, January 8, starting about 1 PM.
- **WOMEN’S BOOK STUDY GROUP:** The January meeting will take place on January 18, at 7 PM at the home of Barbara Owens.
- **A REMINDER FOR OUR CATECHUMENS:** On Saturday, January 14 we have a Catechumen Class at 3:30 PM, on the topic of Holy Baptism. The next class, which will be the first of a series of nine talks, will be held on Saturday, February 4. The Class Schedule can be found on the parish website.
- **YOU ARE WARMLY INVITED** to share in the joy and thanksgiving of their families as Brendan Ryan Schettig and Irini Amaxopoulou celebrate their betrothal and marriage Sunday, January 8, here at the Parish. All are invited for wine and cakes in the Hall after the ceremony.
- **FATHER LAWRENCE INVITES** all parents of our high school age children to a meeting. Date: Sunday, January 22, at 1 PM. Topic: Creating Orthodox soul-strengthening, faith-building and friendship bonding activities, retreats, camp-outs, and retreats for our parish teens. We won’t be discussing theology, theory, challenges or problems that confront our youth (that’s for the retreats, etc.). We will simply attempt to make plans for the above-named activities for the year ahead, using our resources, those that the Diocese makes available to us, and those of our sister parishes.
- **OUR PARISH REJOICES** in the offering made by the Church school children on Christmas: \$100 was given toward helping Sarah Riccio, an eleven year old girl from our former Prophet Elijah Mission in Middletown. Sarah had open heart surgery last month to treat hypoplastic left heart syndrome, which left her with only half a functioning heart and one working lung. The Riccio family, who were founders and supporters of the Mission, have limited financial resources, so a fund was established to assist them, and it was to this that our children raised the \$100. Please see www.everribbon.com/r/sarahsfund for more info.
- **THE ANNUAL MEETING FOR 2012** will convene on Sunday, February 5, following the Liturgy. According to our Parish By-Laws, the Annual Meeting is to take place on the first Sunday of February. All parish members are asked to attend the meeting. What constitutes Parish Membership? What are the requirements for eligibility to vote at this meeting? Very simply, four things: A formal member of the parish is one who 1) is a baptized Orthodox Christian, 2) is at least 18 years of age, 3) regularly confesses and communes in this parish, 4) financially supports the parish (you are encouraged to give a proportional amount from what God has blessed you, in accordance with the Biblical standard). If you have questions about any of these requirements, please see any Parish Council Member, or speak with Father Lawrence.

Pearl of Great Price

Please join us for a “Book Event” at 7 PM, on Wednesday, January 25. Author Veronica Hughes will be here to speak on her book “Pearl of Great Price” which chronicles her journey from disillusioned baby-boomer Roman Catholic – to practitioner and teacher of hatha yoga, EST, Hinduism, occult, metaphysics, psychic healing, Tibetan Buddhism and Theosophy – to faith in Jesus Christ in the Orthodox Church.

PROTECTION OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY ORTHODOX CHURCH

JANUARY 2012

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1 - Circumcision / St. Basil <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy (<i>Team A</i>) • Noon: Agape Meal • 5 PM, Vespers & Akathist for St. Seraphim 	2 - St. Seraphim <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:30 AM, Greeting of Bishop Benjamin, Divine Liturgy for the Feast of St. Seraphim • Agape Meal to follow 	3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 PM, 2 yr. anniv. Panikida for Eugenia Selence 	4 - No Fasting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 PM, Royal Hours for Theophany 	5 - STRICT FAST <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11:30 AM, Vesperal Liturgy and Blessing of Water • 6 PM, Matins for Theophany 	6 - Theophany <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 AM, Divine Liturgy and Blessing of Water <p><i>No Fasting after Liturgy</i></p>	7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:30 AM, Old Calendar Nativity at Kazan Skete • 5 PM, Vespers
8 - St. George the Khozebite <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy (<i>Team B</i>) • 11:45 AM, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal • 1 PM, Sisterhood Meeting • 3 PM, Wedding 	9 <p><i>Office Closed</i></p>	10	11 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 PM, Vespers 	12 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 PM, Akathist 	13	14 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11:30 AM, Baptism of Luca Mattei • 3:30, Catechism • 5 PM, Vespers
15 - St. Paul of Thebes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy (<i>Team A</i>) • 11:45 AM, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal • 3 PM, Wedding 	16 <p><i>Office Closed</i></p>	17	18 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 PM, Vespers • 7 PM, Women's Book Study Group 	19 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liturgy for Old Calendar Theophany, Kazan Skete, Time <i>TBA</i> • 6 PM, Akathist 	20	21 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3:30, Catechism • 5 PM, VIGIL
22 - Apostle Timothy and the 70 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy (<i>Team B</i>) • 11:45 AM, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal • 1 PM: Meeting for Parents of high school kids 	23 <p><i>Office Closed</i></p>	24	25 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 AM, Divine Liturgy for St. Gregory the Theologian • 6 PM, Vespers • 7 PM, Talk by author Veronica Hughes 	26 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 PM, Akathist • 7 PM, Parish Council Meeting 	27	28 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3:30, Catechism • 5 PM, VIGIL
29 - New Martyrs of Russia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy (<i>Team A</i>) • 11:45 AM, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal 	30 <p><i>Office Closed</i></p>	31	February 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6:15 PM, Vigil for the Meeting of the Lord 	2 - Meeting of the Lord <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 AM, Divine Liturgy 	3	4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3:30, Catechism • 5 PM, Great Vespers