

# From the Teachings of St. Seraphim of Sarov

## About God

God is fire, warming and igniting the heart and inward parts. So, if we feel coldness in our hearts, which is from the devil (for the devil is cold), then let us call the Lord: He, in coming, will warm our heart with perfect love, not only towards Himself, but to our neighbors as well. And the coldness of the despiser of good will run from the face of His warmth.

Where there is God, there is no evil. Everything coming from God is peaceful, healthy and leads a person to the judgment of his own imperfections and humility.

God shows us His love for man not only in those instances when we do good, but also when we affront Him with our sins and anger Him. With what longsuffering he bears our lawlessness! "Do not call God a rightful Judge," says St. Isaac, "for His rightful judgment is not seen in your deeds. True, David called Him a righteous judge and rightly, but the Son of God has shown us that God is good and merciful even more. Where is His righteous judgment? We were sinners, but Christ died for us" (St. Isaac the Syrian, Word 90).

## The Reasons for Christ's Coming

Christ came because of: (1) God's love towards the human race: *"For so God loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son"* (John 3:16); (2) the restoration of the image and likeness of God in fallen man; (3) the salvation of human souls: *"For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved"* (John 3:17).

And so, we, following the goals of our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, must lead our lives according to His Godly teaching, in order to save our souls by it.

## Faith

Faith, according to the teachings of St. Antioch, is the beginning of our union with God: the true believers are the stone of the church of God, prepared for the edifice of God the Father, which is raised up to the heights by the power of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Cross and help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. *"Faith without works is dead"* (James 2:26). The works of faith are love, peace, longsuffering, mercy, humility, bearing one's cross and life by the spirit. True faith cannot remain without works. One who truly believes will also surely perform good works.

## Hope

All those having firm hope in God are raised to Him and enlightened with the radiance of eternal light.

If a person does not have superfluous care for himself, out of his love for God and for virtuous deeds, and knows that God will take care of him, then this hope is true and wise. But if a person places all his hope in his works, and turns to God in prayer only when unforeseen misfortunes befall him, then he, seeing that he lacks the means of averting them in his own abilities, begins to hope for help from God -- but such a hope is trivial and false. True hope seeks the one Kingdom of God and is sure that everything necessary for this mortal life will surely be given. The heart cannot have peace until it acquires this hope. This hope pacifies it fully and brings joy to it. The most holy lips of the Saviour spoke about this very hope: *"Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Mt. 11:28).

## Love for God

He who has acquired perfect love for God goes through this life as if he did not exist. For he considers himself a stranger to all that is visible, and awaits with patience that which is unseen. He is completely transformed into love for God and has abandoned all worldly attachments.

He who truly loves God considers himself a wanderer and newcomer on earth, for in him is a striving towards God in soul and mind, which contemplates Him alone.

As for care of the soul, a person in his body is like a lighted candle. The candle must burn out, and a person must die. But as our soul is immortal, so our cares should be directed more toward the soul than the body: *"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Mt. 16:26) "for which, as is known, nothing in the world can serve as ransom? If the soul alone is worth more than all the world and the worldly kingdom, then the Kingdom of Heaven is incomparably more precious. We consider the soul as most precious for the reason stated by Macarius the Great, that God did not desire to bond and unite His spiritual essence with any visible creation except man, whom He loves more than any of His creations.

### **Love for Neighbors**

One must behave affectionately toward one's neighbors, not showing even a hint of offense. When we turn away from a person or offend him, it is as if a rock settles on our heart. One must try to cheer the spirit of an embarrassed or dejected person with words of love.

When you see a brother sinning, cover him, as counseled by St. Isaac the Syrian: "Stretch out your vestment over the sinner and cover him."

In our relations with our neighbors we must be equally pure towards everyone in word as well as in thought; otherwise we will make our life useless. We must love

others no less than ourselves, in accordance with the law of the Lord: *"Thou shalt love ... thy neighbour as thyself"* (Lk. 10:27). But not so much that our love for others, by extending past the boundaries of moderation, diverts us from fulfilling the first and main law of love towards God, as our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught: *"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me"* (Mt. 10:37).

## **Mercy**

It is necessary to be merciful to those wretched and wandering. The great lightgivers and Fathers of the Church took great care concerning this. In relation to this virtue we must try by all means to fulfill the following law of God: *"Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful,"* and, *"I will have mercy, and not sacrifice"* (Lk. 6:36; Mt. 9:13). The wise heed these saving words, but the foolish do not heed them. For this reason the reward is also different, as is said: *"He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully"* (2 Cor. 9:6).

The example of Peter the Breadgiver, who, for a piece of bread given to a beggar, received forgiveness for all his sins (as was revealed to him in a vision) may prompt us to be merciful to our neighbors — for even a small alms may contribute to the obtaining of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Giving alms must be done with a spiritually kind disposition, in agreement with the teachings of St. Isaac the Syrian: "If you give anything to him who asks, may the joy of your face precede your alms, and comfort his sorrow with kind words."

## **Non-Judgment and the Forgiveness of Offenses**

It is not right to judge anyone, even if you have seen someone sinning and wallowing in the violations of God's laws with your own eyes, as is said in the word of God: *"Judge not, that ye be not judged"* (Mt. 7:1). *"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he*

*shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand"* (Rom. 14:4). It is much better always to bring to memory the words of the apostle: *"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"* (1 Cor. 10:12).

One must not harbor anger or hatred towards a person that is hostile toward us. On the contrary, one must love him and do as much good as possible towards him, following the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ: *"Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you"* (Mt. 5:44). If then we will try to fulfill all this to the extent of our power, we can hope that God's light will begin to shine in our hearts, lighting our path to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Why do we judge our neighbors? Because we are not trying to get to know ourselves. Someone busy trying to understand himself has no time to notice the shortcomings of others. Judge yourself — and you will stop judging others. Judge a poor deed, but do not judge the doer. It is necessary to consider yourself the most sinful of all, and to forgive your neighbor every poor deed. One must hate only the devil, who tempted him. It can happen that someone might appear to be doing something bad to us, but in reality, because of the doer's good intentions, it is a good deed. Besides, the door of penitence is always open, and it is not known who will enter it sooner — you, "the judge," or the one judged by you.

## **Penitence**

One desiring salvation must always have a heart inclined towards penitence and contrition: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise"* (Ps. 51:19). With such a contrite spirit a person can avoid without trouble all the artful tricks of the devil, whose efforts are all directed towards disturbing the spirit of a person. By this disturbance he sows tares (i.e., weeds), according to the words of the Gospel: *"Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, 'An enemy hath done this'"* (Mt. 13:27-28). But when a person struggles to have a meek heart and to keep peace in his thoughts, then are all the wiles of the enemy

powerless; for, where there is peace of thought, God Himself resides: *"In Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion"* (Ps. 76:2).

We offend the greatness of God with our sinning throughout our entire lives, and so must always humbly ask the Lord forgiveness for our sins.

## **Fast**

The leader of feasts and our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, before setting out on the feat of redeeming the human race, fortified Himself with a lengthy fast. And all ascetics, proceeding to work for the Lord, armed themselves by fasting and did not set out on the path of the Cross without the feat of fasting. They measured the very success of their ascetism by their success in fasting.

Despite their fasting, and to the surprise of others, the holy fathers did not know weakness but always remained hearty, strong and ready for the task at hand. Illnesses were rare among them and their lives were extraordinarily prolonged.

During the time that the body of one fasting becomes thin and light, the spiritual life attains to perfection and reveals itself through miraculous manifestations. The spirit then performs its actions as if in a bodiless body. External feelings are as shut out, and the mind, renouncing the worldly, ascends to the heavenly and becomes completely immersed in the contemplation of the spiritual world. Yet not everyone can take upon himself strict rules of abstinence from everything, nor deprive himself completely of all that serves to relieve infirmities: *"He that is able to receive it, let him receive it"* (Mt. 19:12).

One should take enough food everyday to strengthen the body, so that it can be a friend and helper to the soul in accomplishing virtues: otherwise it can happen that through the exhaustion of the body the spirit can weaken. On Wednesdays and Fridays, particularly during the four Lenten periods, follow the example of the Fathers and take food once a day — and the Angel of the Lord will affix himself to you.

## Patience and Humility

It is necessary always to be patient and to accept everything that happens, no matter what, with gratitude for God's sake. Our life — is a minute compared to eternity. And for this reason *"the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us"* (Rom. 8:18).

Bear the insults of your enemy in silence, and open your heart only to the Lord. Try in any way possible to forgive those who humiliate you or take away your honor, by the words of the Gospel: *"Of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again"* (Lk. 6:30).

When people curse us, we must consider ourselves unworthy of praise, imagining that if we were worthy, everyone would be bowing down to us. We must always, and before everyone, humble ourselves, according to the teachings of St. Isaac the Syrian: "Humble yourself and you will see the glory of God within yourself."

## Illnesses

The body is the handmaid of the soul, and the soul — its queen. Therefore it often happens that by the mercy of God our body is debilitated by illnesses. Passions weaken because of illnesses, and the person becomes well. Sometimes bodily illness itself is born of passions. To bear illness with patience and gratitude is regarded as a feat, and even more than one.

One elder, suffering from dropsy, told this to the brethren who came to him, desiring to heal him: "Fathers, pray, that my inner person is not subjected to a similar illness. But concerning the present illness, I ask God that he not suddenly relieve me of it, *"for though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day"* (2 Cor. 4:16).

## The Spiritual World

The spiritual world is gained by sorrows. The scriptures say: *"We went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place"* (Ps. 66:12). For those who desire to serve God the path lies through many sorrows. How can we praise the holy martyrs for the sufferings which they bore for God, when we cannot even bear a fever?

Nothing so aids the acquiring of internal peace as silence, and as much as is possible, continual discussion with oneself and rarely with others.

A sign of spiritual life is the immersion of a person within himself and the hidden workings within his heart.

This peace, as some priceless treasure, did our Lord Jesus Christ leave his followers before His death, saying, *"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you"* (John 14:27). The apostle also spoke this about it: *"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 4:7); *"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord"* (Heb. 12:14).

In this way, we must direct all our thoughts, desires and actions toward obtaining God's peace, and always cry out with the Church: *"Lord, thou wilt ordain peace for us"* (Is. 26:12).

It is necessary by all means to try to keep one's spiritual peace, and not to become provoked by insults from others. To do this, it is necessary always to restrain oneself from anger, and by careful watch to guard the mind and heart from unclean waverings.

Insults from others must be borne without disturbance; one must train oneself to be of such a nature, that one can react to insults as if they did not refer to

oneself. Such an exercise can bring serenity to our heart and make it a dwelling of God Himself.

We see an example of such a lack of malice in the life of St. Gregory the Miracle-Worker. A certain immoral woman demanded payment from him, purportedly for a sin committed with her. He, not in the least angry with her, humbly said to one of his friends: pay her the price which she demands, quickly. The woman became possessed as soon as she accepted the unrighteous payment. The bishop then prayed and exorcised the evil spirit from her.

If it is impossible not to become indignant, then at least restrain your tongue according to the words of the Psalmist: *"I am so troubled that I cannot speak"* (Ps. 77:4).

In this instance we can take as examples for ourselves St. Spyridon of Tremifunt and St. Ephraim the Syrian. The first bore an insult when he entered the palace by the demand of the Greek emperor: one of the servants present in the emperor's chamber, taking him for a beggar, laughed at him, did not allow him to enter the chamber and even struck him on the cheek. St. Spyridon, being without malice, turned the other cheek to him, according the word of the Lord (see Mt. 5:39). The Blessed Ephraim, living in the desert, was once deprived of food in the following fashion. His pupil, carrying the food, accidentally broke the vessel on the way. Blessed Ephraim, seeing the pupil downcast, said to him: "Do not grieve, brother. If the food did not want to come to us, then we will go to it." And so the monk went, sat next to the broken vessel, and, gathering the food together, ate it. He was thus without malice!

In order to keep spiritual peace, it is necessary to chase dejection away from oneself, and to try to have a joyful spirit, according to the words of the most wise Sirach: *"Sorrow has killed many, but there is no good in it"* (Sir. 30:25).

In order to keep spiritual peace it is also necessary to avoid judging others in any way. Condescension towards your neighbor and silence protect spiritual peace. When a person is in such an state, then he receives Godly revelations.

In order not to lapse into judgment of others, it is necessary to be mindful of oneself, to refuse to receive any bad information from anyone and to be as if dead to others.

For the protection of spiritual peace it is necessary to enter into oneself more often and ask: Where am I? In addition, it is necessary to watch that the physical senses, especially sight, serve the inner person, not diverting the soul with mortal items, because the gifts of grace are received only by those who have inner workings and keep watch over their souls.

## Feats

Blessed Seraphim told those followers who strove to take excessive feats upon themselves that not complaining and humbly bearing insults are our "*verigi*" and our hair shirt. (The word *verigi* in Russian means iron chains and various weights. A hair shirt is clothing made of thick, very coarse wool; some ascetics wore these things to burden their body.)

It is not necessary to undertake feats beyond one's strength. Instead, one must try to keep our friend — our body — right and capable of performing virtues. One must follow the middle route, turning neither to the right hand nor the left (Prov. 4:27), giving the spirit the spiritual, and the body the physical things necessary for maintaining temporal life. One should also not refuse that which society legally demands, according to the words of the Gospel: "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's*" (Mt. 22:21).

One should condescend to one's soul in its infirmities and imperfections, endure one's deficiencies as we bear the failings of others, not become lazy, and continually urge oneself to be better.

If you have eaten too much food or done anything else related to human weakness, do not be upset. Do not add injury to injury, but, urging yourself to correction, courageously try to keep spiritual peace according to the words of the Apostle: *"Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth"* (Rom. 14:22). This same meaning is contained in the words of the Saviour: *"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"* (Mt. 18:3).

Any success in any area we must assign to the Lord and say with the prophet: *"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory"* (Ps. 115:1).

### **Purity of Heart**

We must continually protect our heart from unclean thoughts and impressions, according to the words of the author of the book of Proverbs: *"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life"* (Prov. 4:23).

Purity is born within the heart from extended safekeeping of it, to which the vision of the Lord has access, according to the assurance of eternal Truth: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"* (Mt. 5:8).

We should not reveal unnecessarily what is best in the heart, for only then does that which has been accumulated remain in safety from enemies visible and invisible, when it is kept as a treasure in the innermost heart. Do not open the secrets of your heart to everyone.

### **Identifying Movements of the Heart**

When a person accepts anything Godly, then he rejoices in his heart, but when he has accepted anything devilish, then he becomes tormented.

Having accepted anything Godly, the heart of a Christian does not demand outside persuasion that it is from the Lord, but becomes convinced through the act itself that this acceptance is something heavenly, because he feels the spiritual fruits in himself: *"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance"* (Gal. 5:22-23). But if the devil were to transform himself even into an angel of light (see 2 Cor. 11:14), or presented thoughts of the most worthy appearance, the heart still would feel some sort of doubts, trouble in its thoughts and disturbance of feelings.

The devil is like a lion, hiding in ambush (Ps. 9:29). He secretly sets out nets of unclean and unholy thoughts. So, it is necessary to break them off as soon as we notice them, by means of pious reflection and prayer.

During the singing of psalms, feasts and great vigilance are demanded for our mind to be in conformity with our heart and lips; for otherwise stench is added to the incense in our prayers. For the Lord disdains a heart with unclean thoughts.

Let us continually, day and night, fall before the face of the goodness of God with tears, that He purify our hearts of any evil thought, so that we might worthily bring Him the gifts of our service. When we do not accept the evil thoughts put in us by the devil, we perform a good deed.

The unclean spirit has a strong influence only on the passionate; but those purified of passions he touches only indirectly and externally. A person in his youth cannot avoid being disturbed by physical thoughts. But he must pray to the Lord God, that the spark of depraved passions dies out at the very beginning. Then the flame within him will not become more intense.

### **Excessive Care about Worldly Matters**

Excessive care about worldly matters is characteristic of an unbelieving and fainthearted person, and woe to us, if, in taking care of ourselves, we do not use as our foundation our faith in God, who cares for us! If we do not attribute visible

blessings to Him, which we use in this life, then how can we expect those blessings from Him which are promised in the future? We will not be of such little faith. By the words of our Saviour, it is better first to seek the Kingdom of God, for the rest shall be added unto us (see Mt. 6:33).

## **Sorrow**

When the evil spirit of sorrow seizes the soul, then, by filling it with bitterness and unpleasantness, it does not allow it to pray with necessary diligence; it disrupts the attention necessary for reading spiritual writings, deprives it of humility and good nature in the treatment of others and breeds aversion to any discussion. For the sorrowful soul, by becoming as if insane and frenzied, can neither accept kind advice calmly, nor answer posed questions meekly. It runs from people as if from the perpetrators of its embarrassment, not understanding that the reason for its illness — is within it. Sorrow is the worm of the heart, gnawing at the mother that bore it.

He who has conquered passions has also defeated sorrow. But one overcome by passions will not avoid the shackles of sorrow. As an ill person can be identified by the color of his face, so is one overcome by passions distinguished by sorrow.

It is impossible for one who loves the world not to feel sorrow. But he who despises the world is always cheerful. As fire purifies gold, so sorrow in God -- penitence -- purifies the sinful heart.

## **The Active and the Contemplative Life**

A person consists of a soul and body, and therefore his life's path should consist of both physical and spiritual activities — of deeds and contemplation.

The path of an active life consists of fasting, abstinence, vigilance, kneeling, prayer and other physical feats, composing the strait and sorrowful path which, by the word of God, leads to eternal life (Mt. 7:14).

The contemplative life consists in the mind aspiring to the Lord God, in awareness of the heart, focused prayer and in the contemplation of spiritual matters through such exercises.

Anyone desiring to lead a spiritual way of life must begin with the active life, and only later set about the contemplative, for without an active life it is impossible to lead a contemplative one.

An active life serves to purify us of sinful passions and raises us to the level of functioning perfection; at the same time it clears the way to a contemplative life. For only those cleansed of passions and the perfect can set out on that other life, as can be seen from the words of the Holy Scriptures: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"* (Mt. 5:8), and from the words of Gregory the Theologian: "Only those who are perfect by their experience can without danger proceed to contemplation."

If it is impossible to find a mentor who is able to direct us on the path to a contemplative life, then in that instance we must be guided by the Holy Scriptures, for the Lord Himself commands us to learn from it, saying: *"Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life"* (John 5:39). One should not abandon the active life even when a person has so excelled in it that he has reached the contemplative, for the active life assists the contemplative and uplifts it.

### **The Light of Christ**

In order to accept and perceive the light of Christ in one's heart, it is necessary to divert oneself from the external as much as possible. First, by cleansing the soul with penitence and good deeds with true faith in the Crucified; then, by closing the physical eyes, it is necessary to immerse the mind in the heart and appeal to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ continually. Then, by measure of our zealously and fervor of spirit for the Beloved (Lk. 3:22), a person with the

calling of this name finds delight, which arouses a thirst toward greater enlightenment.

When a person internally contemplates the eternal light, his mind becomes clean and free of any sensory notions. Then, by being completely immersed in the contemplation of uncreated beauty, he forgets everything sensory, does not want to see even himself, but desires to hide in the heart of the earth, if only not to be deprived of this true good — God.

### **Acquiring the Holy Spirit**

#### **(from the Saint's Conversation with Motovilov)**

The true goal of our Christian life consists of acquiring God's Holy Spirit. Fasting and vigil, prayer, mercy, and every other good deed performed for Christ — are means for acquiring the Holy Spirit of God. Only deeds performed for Christ give us the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Some say that the foolish virgins lacking enough oil in their lamps is meant to be understood as a lack of good deeds (see Mt. 25:1-12). Such an understanding is not completely correct. How could there have been a lack of good deeds when they, though foolish, are still called virgins? For virginity is the highest virtue, as a state equal to the angels, and could by itself serve in place of all other virtues. I, the wretched, think that they did not have enough of the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God. These virgins, because of their spiritual injudiciousness, supposed in performing good deeds that it is only necessary to do good works to be a Christian: "We performed a good deed and thus did God's will." Whether or not they had received the grace of the Holy Spirit, whether they had attained it, they did not even bother to find out ... But, this acquiring of the Holy Spirit is in fact that oil which the foolish virgins lacked. They are called foolish because they forgot about the essential fruit of virtue — the grace of the Holy Spirit — without which there is no salvation for anyone and cannot be. For "through the Holy Spirit every soul is quickened, and through its purification, it is exalted and illumined by

the Triune Unity in a Holy mystery." The Holy Spirit Himself settles in our souls, and this occupation of our souls by Him, the All-Ruling, and this coexistence of our spirit with His One Trinity, is granted only through the diligent acquiring, on our part, of the Holy Spirit, which prepares, in our soul and body, the throne for the coexistence of God the All-Creator with our spirit, by the immutable word of God: *"And I will walk among you and will be your God, and ye shall be my people"* (Lev. 26:12).

This is the very oil in the lamps of the wise virgins, which burned brightly and steadily; the virgins with these burning lamps could await the Groom coming at midnight, and enter the chamber of joy with him. The foolish ones, seeing their lamps going out, though they went to the market to buy oil, did not manage to return in time, for the doors were already locked. The market is our life; the doors of the bridal chamber — locked and not permitting entrance to the Groom — human death, the virgins wise and foolish, Christian souls; the oil, not deeds, but the grace of the All Holy Spirit of God received through them, transforming from decay to incorruption, from emotional death into spiritual life, from darkness to light, from the manger of our existence, where our passions are tied like beasts and animals, into a church of God, into the all-lighted chamber of eternal joy in Jesus Christ.