

A Warrior of the Spirit

Selected letters of Fr. Seraphim of Platina

Compiled editor Father Herman of Platina

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Fathers Herman and Seraphim of Platina

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

1. FOR THE GENUINE MONASTIC SPIRIT
2. ON JOINING THE COMMUNITY
3. STICK THROUGH THE SEMINARY
4. TWO KINDS OF BISHOPS
5. "ON OUR OWN IN THE WILDERNESS"
6. A WARNING
7. THE BAWLING OUT OF A TYPICON CHEWER
8. A SPIDER WEB OF IDEAS

EDITOR'S PREFACE

FATHER SERAPHIM may have been wrong sometimes, he may have had to learn some things the hard way, but he was no coward. He was a manly, virile "warrior of the spirit" (as one of the essay contest winners has called him); one who fought his way, first through unbelief, nihilism, the counterculture, modern academia, and false and incomplete spiritual paths, and then through worldliness and fakery in his own church. If he saw something wrong in the church, he warred against it even if he knew he might get in trouble for it. He did not fight only against that which it was safe to attack, that is, against that which he had been given a license to criticize by his hierarchs or by his circle of public opinion. About one of his own hierarchs whose actions he saw to be detrimental, he wrote: "We respect his high rank, but we still speak the truth when it is called for." He did not, of course, speak of all church problems to all of his friends, acquaintances and spiritual children. In the sum of his letters which have been preserved, we find these comments directed chiefly to those who could help his Brotherhood face these problems, or to those who were themselves facing them and needed to be warned and encouraged. Above all, he spoke out so that his and his brothers' monastic labors in the wilderness would not be swallowed up by the organizational mentality that paralyzes activity, quenches the spirit, and makes life intolerably boring.

There are some who would like to make Fr. Seraphim into the politically correct party man of one Orthodox jurisdiction. This he was not. In addition to his writings quoted in *Not of This World*, the testimony of his letters quoted below are enough in themselves to show that he was not the property of any party. There are many more such letters.

The letters presented here also show Fr. Seraphim as one who, out of love for the monastic brothers placed under his care, was not afraid to be bold and forceful in offering correction. His aim in bawling them out was to shake them out of the weakness and complacency which had been bred in them by their pampered modern American upbringing, to awaken them out of the calculation and phariseism known as "the stingy-heart syndrome," and to help them understand and appreciate the "oneness of soul" and simple trust that is the basis of all monastic life.

Save for a few short excerpts, the letters presented here did not appear in *Not of This World*, and are appearing now for the first time in print. We have arranged them in chronological order, and have supplied them with titles.

Copies of Fr. Seraphim's original letters and journals (including the those quoted in *Not of This World*, the collection below, and others) are preserved in the archives of the Fr. Seraphim Rose Studies Center (1139 Janero Drive, Santa Rosa, California 95407), and are available for public viewing.

Fr. Herman

1. FIGHTING FOR THE GENUINE MONASTIC SPIRIT

Aug. 10/23, 1971

Dear Brother in Christ L_____,

Congratulations on your namesday! May God grant you to grow with each year in Christian virtues and attain in the end to His eternal Kingdom!

Enclosed is our official epistle to you to help you make up your mind about joining us. What does it say to your heart?

Fr. F_____s being so upset is apparently significant of something; he complained also to Deacon Nicholas. As for giving advice, he asked for it, telling Fr. Herman that he was dissatisfied where he was, that he had a chance to go to Vladika Vitaly, or maybe he would join us, and what did Fr. Herman think? Fr. Herman's reply was by no means unkind or sharp, but it was very definitely based on the idea that we could not possibly ask someone to travel 3,000 miles to our primitive conditions when he was no more than casually (if at all) interested in what we are doing. Fr. Herman suggested that he read several issues of the OW if he wanted to know what makes our community "tick," but that probably he would find himself more at home with Vladika Vitaly's Russian-oriented work. That Fr. F_____ could get so upset at this leads one to suspect that he indeed did have in mind just what he told you: that he, being experienced (?) in monasticism, wanted to come and "run the show."

But of course he is correct when he says that what we are doing is "irregular"—from the point of view of the prevailing Russian Church practice. There are, however, plentiful precedents from the lives of Saints—St. Sergius, for example—for going to the wilderness to save your soul. "Establishing a monastery" is another matter, but we did not come here with the intention of "establishing a monastery," and in fact we've had nothing but trouble since Vladika Anthony "established a monastery" for us; but if this is what God wills and the Church desires that we have, then we will fight to have a real one, and not a fake one that is just a bishop's whim, and we will fight for the genuine, independent monastic spirit and not be tempted by any barren fig trees that come around boasting of their "experience," ukases, organizational ability, or whatever. In the prevailing Russian understanding today a "monastery" is a place with an incidental collection of people, with a definite function in the Church: to serve as a bishop's summer residence, picnic center, manpower pool for church needs, etc. And "monks" are those people who become slaves, crushed by the authorities for the sake of "obedience," who can be used by the church organization: the more hopeful ones as bishops, the less hopeful ones as hieromonks in parishes that can't afford anything better, and the complete fools to remain in the monastery and tend the cows. Against such a perverted idea, both of monasteries and of "obedience" and the monastic virtues, we emphatically protest, and if God grants us to have a real monastery here, it will fit into this "accepted" picture only over our dead bodies. This is what Vladika Anthony has in mind (and Vladika Vitaly also, who recently forbade an Athonite hieromonk to reestablish the skete at Grad Kitezh or anywhere else), and this is apparently what Fr. F_____ thinks also. In this concept "monasticism" has become some kind of spiritual gymnastics (pokloni, obediences, etc.) which can be acquired by living for a while in a "monastery," and once you have it you can become an incidental member of any other "monastery" and offer others the fruit of your gymnastic experience—in the meantime rising in the hierarchy of church ranks until, if you're lucky, you become a bishop and you can run your own show. No! Monasticism is a disposition and effort of the soul striving for salvation, and its coenobitic form is forged by living in community with others of the same mind and soul and coming to be one in aspiration with them, each one spurring the others on to salvation. This, from all signs, is what Fr. Panteleimon has, and the Greeks in general seem still very aware of monasticism in itself and not just as a function in the Church at the mercy of bishops. Fr. Neketas was shocked when we spoke to him of Fr. Panteleimon as a candidate for bishop; an abbot isn't supposed to be "promoted" to bishop, but remain where he is for life; and if Fr. Panteleimon did become a bishop, except in an extreme emergency, he would lose all respect in Greece.

This concept, however, seems to be dying out among Russians, certainly among bishops.

Concerning your quitting your job: it would doubtless be best for your peace of mind ("economic security") if you took a "leave of absence," preserving the right to return to your job; this would be normal and we would not regard it as a lack of faith in us or anything of the sort. However, in this way you would not get your retirement money and so would not be able to take your trip?? or maybe a shorter trip?? Decide what is wisest, by normal human standards.

This will be background for the accompanying epistle. We hope to see you on Uspeniye ...

2. ON JOINING THE COMMUNITY

August 10/23, 1971

Dear Brother in Christ, L_____,

You have told us of your willingness to drop everything and come to join us here as a full-fledged brother; and you have expressed your doubts. Now it is for us to tell you what you can expect and what we expect of you when and if you join us, no longer as an honored guest and brother from far away, but as a full member of our community.

1. First of all, we welcome you as a full and organic member of our monastic-missionary body, fully sharing our common joys, sorrows, difficulties, and everyday life, and giving your maximum to the common work and responding to the common need without second thought. We will sacrifice ourselves to the utmost to make room for you in our common body, and we will expect the same of you. Under no circumstances will we allow you to live as a "bachelor" and adjust ourselves to your whims and eccentricities, nor as any kind of "guest," paying or free, who gets room and board in exchange for work or money. You are a full member of us, or there is no point in your coming.

2. Our spiritual orientation is: devotion to St. Herman and discipleship to Vladika John and faithfulness to his testament and tradition to us, which includes in some degree being a "reflection of Valaam." We have neither startsi nor great spiritual gifts to offer you; we can only invite you to be our fellow-orphan of St. Herman and Vladika John, asking together their help to make up our numerous deficiencies. Many from outside, as you already see, will judge us, will say we are in "prelest," etc., and you will fall under the general condemnation. We cannot defend ourselves by pointing to any "spiritual" qualities which we do not have, but only by the fruits which God may bring forth from our common labors. We have sufficient testimony from outside to tell us that these fruits so far, even if small, are nonetheless real.

Vladika John divided his day into four parts of six hours each: rest, spiritual reading and reflection, work, and prayer. That is also the formula of our common life, only with the hours adapted to our weakness and needs. The active part of our day is devoted to work and prayer; no idleness. You will be given a chotki and a brief rule of cell prayer; besides this, you will carry the chotki with you everywhere and use it as your chief weapon against idleness and vain imaginings, fighting the devil with the Jesus Prayer.

3. As you know, we are experiencing difficulty with the local "authority," whose ideas concerning our status and the idea that inspires us are totally opposed to our own. Therefore, you must know that we do not accept him as Head of our community, nor do we accept his Ukase concerning our monastery, concerning which we have reported in writing to the Secretary of the Synod. Sooner or later there will doubtless be an open battle with the "authority," and you will be expected to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in this, fighting for the common idea that inspires us (without which we will not be faithful to Vladika John), and being counselled by responsible persons in the Church who know us and our work. We may well have to endure disgrace. But know that one bishop (Nektary) has openly encouraged us to "disobedience," if that be necessary, telling us to "treasure the blessing of Vladika John above everything", and another (Laurus) has said: "the feet that sorrows come to you testifies to the fact that you are doing a work of God... I think that you should be patient, undertake no dramatic moves, but by your conduct and your 'line' show that this (the behavior and ukase of Vladika Anthony) goes against your soul and is not suitable to you." In the meantime we consider that our monastery does not yet have an official status and is in a state of "persecution" until such day as we shall be free to exercise our monastic right to present our own Rule to the Synod and elect our own Head. Until that time we take protection under the name of "Brotherhood" which Vladika John blessed.

4. Our rule being coenobitic, everything is held in common, and no one has anything of his "own"—except, for practical purposes, the personal effects, books, icons, etc., in his own cell. All needs are paid for out of the common treasury; you must come to us poor. We will ask you to put whatever money you have left from the world in a safe place outside and not touch it until you either leave (in which case the money becomes your adjustment money back to the world) or make your final decision to remain with us (in which case you distribute the money to whomever you please, or to the monastery). If you come with your car, you will put the keys in the common treasury and it will be used by the community as needed and with blessing and will not become "yours" again until you make your final decision on staying or leaving, when you will decide how to dispose of it. In other words, you will be entirely dependent on the community, which means also: you on us, and we on you. The worry that we cannot feed another mouth is real only if you do not intend to work; the additional income to be expected from the wholehearted addition of two hands to the work force will more than feed one extra mouth.

5. Authority, when necessary, is exercised by the eldest in our community, Fr. Herman, and after him by Fr. Seraphim. The obediences to be given form a part of the whole work and circumstances of the community, and their importance will generally be evident. If in particular cases you do not always see this, you will just have to

trust us. So that the activity of community will proceed by common consent, and not according to the whim of individuals, nothing is undertaken without a blessing, no matter what one may “feel” or “think,” and all obediences are performed according to the rules and spirit of the community. Phrases such as “I insist, I demand, I refuse,” etc., are absolutely forbidden. General questions affecting the whole community will be decided “soborno,” by common consent (such as the question of stoves for winter). We do not acknowledge the right of any ecclesiastical authority outside the community to issue commands regarding our internal life, organization, or any individual member; any such attempt will be judged and acted on by the common consent of all members of the community. Our community is a monastery and not an episcopal dacha.

6. Worldly actions, conversation, manner, tone, objects, etc., are absolutely prohibited, as being utterly destructive of the monastic spirit. This includes:

- a. Singing worldly songs, whistling, ostentatious spitting, littering.
- b. Radio, newspapers, or magazines besides those received by the community, unless by special blessing for a definite purpose.
- c. Crude or sexually-oriented talk, reference to “urination,” etc.
- d. Arguing, proving one's point, raising one's voice, idle comments, complaints, and in general everything that upsets the general peace and order.
- e. Demanding of special treatment or privileges, such as bed pans, special foods or preparation, or other paraphernalia and habits of old maids and self-pampered bachelors. Sufficient allowance will be given in cases of illness, allergy, etc.
- f. Demands to be placed in a position of authority, on a “Board of Directors,” etc.—these concepts are foreign to the nature of our community's existence.
- g. Nosiness, curiosity, idle questions.
- h. Crossing the legs (fer: Life of St. Arsenius the Great).
- i. Any free and easy, worldly manner with visitors. After visitors have been greeted one or more brothers will be assigned to them, and the others will continue their work.
- j. No food is kept in kellias, and no eating between meals, unless with blessing (water is allowed between meals).

7. Finally, in everything the spirit of mutual love, trust, and respect must prevail. For infractions of the above rules, penances of pokloni may be given; but the severest punishment will be given the brother who allows the sun to set on his anger against another brother. According to the rule of St. John Cassian, such a one will not be allowed to pray with the brethren until he comes to repentance and begs forgiveness. For without mutual love, trust, and respect, nothing written above makes any sense, and there cannot be any community at all.

And so, dear brother in Christ, you have the picture. We expect much of you, and we will try to give you much in return. Only in principle you must agree with all that is written above; and if you fall, accept correction. As slaves of Christ we cannot offer to God and His Church great spirituality, wisdom, organization, or podvigs; but we can offer our absolute determination and strenuous effort to be faithful to the testament of Vladika John to us and to forge a community which in some way preserves his spirit, helping, encouraging and strengthening each other in our weaknesses and falls, and being open and honest with each other. The rules given above are in accordance with the “Decree on Monasteries” of the Russian Church Abroad, which we shall read to you on your next visit.

Aug. 29/Sept. 11, 1971
Beheading of St. John the Baptist

Dear Brother in Christ, D_____,
Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ. I pray this finds you safely returned—although from what we hear not all your fellow-pilgrims left unscathed from Mt. Athos!

Alas, I've done it again! My letter has inspired you to take a decision—a leave of absence from the seminary. But after reading your new letter I very much doubt that that is a wise thing for you to do now. If you give up the seminary (and a leave of absence just about amounts to that), it should be only because it has become a spiritual dead-end and because you have at least a promising alternative to it. But what's your alternative?—Getting a job (if you can) and waiting for God to do something. Not much chance! You have to show an effort, some kind of “podvig,” first. However discouraging you may find the Jordanville atmosphere, it is still a Church-saturated atmosphere and it gives you valuable Church learning. Whereas a job in the world, with no definite spiritual orientation or goal, is all too likely to be precisely a spiritual dead-end for you.

Forgive me again for my frankness, but I sense that you are in great danger. You are floating in a cloud of indefiniteness, no definite goal in mind, waiting for something to happen; and meanwhile feeling somewhat sorry for yourself and piling up some negative experiences and (probably) attitudes. For example: how have you taken your trip fiasco? Are you still thinking: that Nikita did this to me! Or are you thinking as you should: even though by worldly standards I “deserved” this trip, still, God, for my sins and my completely foul, complacent, and self-centered attitude toward serving Him, deprived me of seeing the holy places. Which of these is closest to your attitude?—that should be a key to your spiritual state.

Your letters give this impression: you're a great big spiritual baby who needs, first of all, a good spanking, and second of all some good hard work; and then you might be in a position to start thinking of your spiritual needs. If you are going to take any “advice” from me, I would give this advice: stick through this year of the seminary and do your best to catch up; and only then stop to think about what's next. Pray hard for guidance from God and from the God-pleasers—pray to Vladika John: but pray in the midst of some kind of labor to please God—the seminary is a good such labor—and not in a cloud of indefiniteness unaccompanied by hard labors, without a definite goal. IF YOU HAVE NO OTHER DEFINITE GOAL, THEN AT LEAST KEEP THE GOAL OF FINISHING THE SEMINARY, ONE YEAR AT A TIME, and God will surely send you guidance beyond that.

This is primary; other questions, such as frequent communion, will have their meaning and place only after you have sweated through more basic labors and attained a more definite idea of your goal and aims. Nonetheless, to answer briefly your questions: About frequent communion, we discussed this recently with Fr. Neketas Palassis, and we found ourselves quite in mutual agreement on the question. Our present state “without sacraments” (but actually we do partake of the Mysteries about once a month or sometimes two) is temporary and has its place in our whole “plan,” the first and absolutely essential step of which was to get free of the world and its ties, and not to do anything that will drag us back to it; and the context in which the priesthood has been offered to us so far has only promised to drag us back to the world we had escaped, and so we remain in our present state and await a more favorable sign. But that's a complicated story which can't be gone into by letter.

As for the restoration of Russia—we can only wait to see what happens, when it will be and what form it will take, and act accordingly. We feel God's guidance strongly up to this point, and pray He will not deprive us of it in the future. May His holy will be done in us all!

4. TWO KINDS OF BISHOPS

Nov. 1/14, 1971
Sts. Cosmas and Damian

Dear Father N_____,

... Some of the decrees of the recent Sobor of Bishops were encouraging, but some of the “undertones” worry us, if you know what I mean! But doubtless we will hear more of these and have something more solid to talk about in future. From the first “milk” I drank in as an Orthodox Christian in the Synod, I was taught that we have two kinds (or perhaps “traditions”) of bishops: on one side Vladikas John, Averky, Leonty, Nektary, Savva; on the other, those who now seem to have the governing positions. (Metr. Philaret would classify as an “independent,” and as long as he is Metropolitan I see Vladika Ioann's influence as somehow present.) Not to say that anyone is

a heretic or enemy of any kind; but nonetheless the two characteristic dispositions, rather difficult to define, do seem to exist. The one group of bishops has now just about died out, and from them we have inherited some things which, I fear, may make us somewhat “out of fashion” in the Synod in the future, about which we’ve already had some hints. But perhaps this is too cryptic, or in any case is more suitable for oral communication than written. (Next August, perhaps?)...

5. “ON OUR OWN IN THE WILDERNESS”

Mar. 21/Apr. 3, 1972
Passion Monday

Dear Brother in Christ, L____,

Glory be to God for all things! We had no Liturgy yesterday but a joyful feast nonetheless, with 3 pilgrims (Alexey and family). We also received, on Saturday, a very moving letter from Vladika Anthony, which reveals a loving heart. After it something of the empty pit in the bottom of the stomach seems to have been removed. Nonetheless we thank God that in His Providence the events of the past year and a half have cut us off, as it were, from the ecclesiastical world and left us to make it on our own in the wilderness; this is only for our good and perhaps even the good of others.

Unless we hear something before then to change our plans, we will most likely go to Sacramento early Thursday in order to receive Holy Communion (probably in the smaller church), and return here before dark, creating as small a ripple as possible on the church surface. God willing, we will meet Pascha externally (at least) like the desert-dwellers, even though internally still our old selves.

But if one of our “problems” seems to be looking better, new troubles have not been slow in peeking their heads over the horizon. Fr. George Grabbe writes that one does not dare call anyone “Blessed” before the Church gives us the right to do so, and he cites the case of St. John of Kronstadt. But for all his correctness, Fr. George Grabbe is wrong!—the Church does not call anyone blessed by fiat—that’s Roman Catholic “beatification” (as on back cover of latest Orthodox Life!). St. John of Kronstadt still is not called blessed, because he doesn’t fit into that category. Fools for Christ are called blessed even during their lifetimes: Blessed Xenia, Blessed Theophilus, etc. etc. Of course, there are those who wouldn’t like to call Vladika John a fool for Christ, and in fact (that’s the key!) would rather forget him entirely. But we stand and fall with his “foolishness,” which surely one day will be seen to be wiser than the wisdom of many. But we are being watched...

Pray for us.

P.S. Whenever you come, don’t forget another box of lead.

6. A WARNING

May 29/June 11, 1973
St. John, Fool for Christ of Ustiug

Dear Brother in Christ, A_____.

... In connection with our earlier discussion on "bishops," we wonder if the last sentence in the quote on the last page of the May-June issue isn't placing some unnecessary emphasis on a point you've already made well enough? We are already in the age of "impious bishops" which St. Seraphim prophesied, and already in many places (most notably Russia) a degree of "hiding" from or even outright "disobedience" to bishops has already become a spiritual necessity, and one which it is by no means easy to justify always on dogmatic or canonical grounds. This by no means changes the "rule" which you cite, but alas, there are people (also in our Russian Church Abroad!) who are only too anxious to take advantage of such "rules," not for the good of the Church or the bishops, but for their own private purposes. And after all, everything depends on the "interpretation" of such rules: whether broadly and with the heart, or narrowly and coldly and calculatingly. Let's not give any ammunition to certain pharisees! Enough said?

7. THE BAWLING OUT OF A TYPICON CHEWER

Oct. 25/Nov. 7, 1973
Martyrs Marcian and Martyrius

Dear Brother in Christ, D_____.

Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ. We are glad to hear you are safe.

Your letter states again your "position," which is exactly as we understood it to be when you left. My words now, on the other hand, are intended once again, quite deliberately, to "avoid the question" and "to talk about something else." Why? Because you wish to talk logically, to discuss a "problem," whereas we can only speak from the heart, where this "problem" does not exist. Dear D_____, because we love you dearly, I am going to bawl you out and tell you once again that the real "problem" is something quite different from what your "wisdom" tells you; I beg you to read what I will say with your heart, and then act with your heart.

In your letter you have lectured us, accused us, judged us, and from your "position" it must indeed seem ridiculous and amazing that we cannot understand the Church's teaching and practice as well as you can. The main point of your accusation is that we have "felt ourselves competent to decide a matter which according to Church practice can be decided only by a bishop," and that therefore we are saying that we "know better than the Church." Child D_____, how stupid do you think we are?! And how proud and unfeeling you must be to accuse us of such stupidity! Do you really think we are acting with the same soulless calculation which set off your fit? Your letter in effect offers us to work out some kind of "compromise" with you and your Church "principles." Father Herman was quite correct in telling you that you are setting yourself against the central idea which we follow — because we will not involve ourselves on that level of soulless calculation, where everything in the Church which inspires and guides us becomes "correct" or "incorrect," "proper" or "improper".

However, to answer your question: did we "canonize a Saint?" We did not! That is the work of bishops. We rather nourished our own piety, which is constantly in danger of being extinguished in present conditions, and we did so in a way which is by no means foreign to the history of the Church and is approved by present-day Fathers whom we trust, such as Vladika Nektary and Father Panteleimon. Must we call a council of bishops to nourish our piety, six forest-dwellers in a remote cabin, whom any sensible worldly person already regards as crazy? How spoiled rotten you must be, by thinking you know so much about Church history and the "rights" of bishops, in order to think like that!

If you wish to understand under what "category" our actions fall and may be understood, I will tell you by giving an example from the act of a bishop whom you have respected up to now. You know the "secret" which we share with Bishop Nektary, precisely because he did here just what you accuse us of doing. He did not do it in his capacity of bishop, because he does not have episcopal jurisdiction over this piece of land. He did it solely out of love for a Saint, and out of grief over the realization that political and other worldly considerations have made cold the hearts of those, including bishops, who should already be glorifying this Saint; and in doing it he likewise followed the apparently "uncanonical" act of Father Panteleimon, which he applauded. (You must realize, by the way, that by your present behavior you have fallen out of oneness of mind not only with us, but also with Fr. Panteleimon and Vladika Nektary, because you know better what the Church teaches than any of us, and you have judged us all.)

And now I must shock your "principles" even more, in order that you will finally understand what is at stake: Vladika Nektary's act (or rather, acts, for he has repeated it) was done with full knowledge that his own ruling bishop would certainly not approve if he knew of it, but on the contrary would give him great trouble if he heard of it. What?! Does Vladika Nektary, whom you have regarded as "holy," know so much less of Church

“principles” than D_____, that he would dare to usurp the “competence” of his own ruling bishop? Or does he place himself “above” Church principles?! O you fool, if you dare to think like this! He acted “secretly”—precisely because those who should be shouting the praises of a newly-revealed Saint are silent due to the political considerations and cold hearts that reign in our midst; and if it were not for such loving hearts which beat with holy Orthodoxy, the fire of true Orthodoxy would be completely absent from our midst today. In future, we trust in God, the loving zealous acts of such men (which of course are not at all “uncanonical” because they have nothing to do with any canons whatever), whether they be hierarchs or priests or monks or simple laymen, will be praised and lauded by the whole Church, because throughout the Church’s history these are the stuff of which Orthodoxy is made in practice.

If you wish to know the “principle” on which Vladika Nektary (and others who practice living Orthodoxy) have acted, and that which inspires even us poor ones just to go on under an extremely difficult and unfavorable spiritual climate (which your cold heart does not even see)—it is the principle of catacombness, of nourishing in secret those sprouts of true Orthodoxy which are not being encouraged in official Orthodox circles.

(Even if you do not understand all this, nonetheless I must strictly forbid you to speak to anyone of anything I have said in connection with Vladika Nektary, which is a strict secret among those who think as he; if you speak of it to anyone, you are his and our betrayer.)

Our dear brother: yes, we fervently desire the return to us of you, our lost sheep, because we really do believe that this place was given to you to work out your salvation, and that your salvation in the world, especially with your cold heart and calculating mind, and with no one to humble you in love, is dubious. But you yourself must make the effort to return to the oneness of soul with us which you left with your calculating “principles.” But you must have trust in us, with entire resolution and commitment—not with your mind, as you seem to think, but with your heart. The trust of the mind is merely calculation (“do they really know better than I do, or not?”); but the trust of the heart is self-sacrificing devotion, that path of commitment upon which you entered some months ago, and which you now wish so easily to abandon, without having offered yourself as a sacrifice to God. You say that you wish to “work out your differences” with us. I will give you an example of how that is done—with the heart, and not with the mind. Four years ago Fr. Panteleimon visited us, before the canonization of St. Herman. We asked him to serve a panikhida for him, and he replied that he simply couldn’t serve a panikhida for someone to whom his community prays as a Saint. Behold, a “difference” between us and Fr. Panteleimon—and we rejoiced! And how did we work out our “difference,” even as we were rejoicing over it? Fr. Panteleimon served a panikhida for “Monk Herman”—but he prayed for the newly-reposed Jordanville Monk Herman, while we prayed for Fr. Herman of Alaska—to whom for a long time we had already sung the troparion, magnification, and akathist. (How “inconsistent” of us!) And how “inconsistent” for Vladika John to end his panikhidas for Fr. Herman with the magnification to him! And how “inconsistent” that we both glorify Elder Nazarius and pray for his Repose! What kind of “canonization” is that?!

Come to your senses, child D_____! You have trapped yourself in a satanic net of “principles” which you are too cold and stupid to know how to apply; and yet you think yourself smart and worthy enough to do so. If your heart responds to this that I have said, then return to us with tears and repentance that you fell away from unity with us through your accursed calculating logic, which is not at all based on “principles” but on pride, and which does not at all join you to the mind of the Church, but on the contrary separates you from it. However, we must tell you straight: we can give you no “answer” to the “problem” you imagine you have with us; you will simply have to trust us and wholeheartedly accept our judgment—or else there is no hope that you will ever attain humility, or even desire it. There can be no “compromise” on the petty point you raised, because we simply refuse to think in those terms, and we will continue to follow our heart right up to the time we are persecuted and banished for it; and if we ever did agree to begin thinking in those terms, and “calculating” together with you, we would precisely then lose just what attracted you to us in the first place, about which you are evidently not very much aware.

If you return to us, it must not be by a “gentleman’s agreement” or “concordat” whereby each of us jealously guards his opinions, but rather by a wholehearted commitment to travel the path of humblemindedness and oneness of soul with us. Out of love for Christ we must continue to try to humble you, according to your strength, which so far has been very little. You are very proud, and up to now you have set a limit and condition to your humility: you will accept being humbled only if it can be proved to you that you are “wrong” or have done something “improper.” Now you must strive harder to enter into true humility and not think you “know better” about the conditions of collecting firewood or transporting ladders, or whether you should be bawled out for your transgressions immediately or later: in fact, it is because you would not give up your own will and understanding on such petty points that you were caught in the devil’s nets on the “principle” which caused you to grow cold, judge us, and walk away from us. It is this pride also which allowed the devil to get into your heart when the Kursk Icon came and reduced you to a state of total unfeelingness.

D_____, God gave us to you to help fight your pride; come to us in repentance and let us help you. By yourself you will only spend your whole life trying to preserve your soul, under the pretext of your understanding of Church “principles” and the like; and he who would preserve his soul will lose it. Only if you try to lose your soul for Christ, by really committing yourself, will you finally gain it.

I pray that these words will get through your stupid cold mind and speak to your heart, for despite their seemingly harsh tone, I assure you they are written from the heart. You have fallen into an extremely elementary trap of the devil, which has been repeated a million times in the history of Orthodoxy and monasticism. And the only way you can get out of this trap is humbly to recognize your own stupidity and trust in God and your brothers.

I close with a quote from St. Barsanuphius, in answer to a question of Abba Dorotheus (when he was a novice), which I copied out this morning:

Q: The thoughts which arise in me say: Go to a different place and there you will be saved.

A: Brother! May he be cursed who has sowed in your heart such thoughts of leaving this place because of the

transgression of commandments here. This is the devil. He presents this to you under an appearance of truth, so that, having mocked you, he might make you an object of scandal for many, so that you might bear condemnation for them also.

You are being subjected to this for your negligence and vainglory. You say: "If I go away to a different place, there I will endure dishonor." But why is it that now, just as soon as you hear that your brother has said something against you, your heart is disturbed, and you do not wish that anyone should know of your transgression? To negligence and vainglory the demons also join their nets so as to cause your soul to perish. Be assured in the Lord, that if it were not for the help of God and the prayers of the true slaves of God who are in this place, you could not remain even a year in the monastery. But just as a blind man sees nothing, so also you do not see the benefactions which God has shown you and continues to show by the prayers and the Saints. Beware! Pay careful heed to yourself; labor against thoughts so as not to fall into negligence and vainglory, not to do anything according to your own will, and not to accept the thoughts and self-justification which arise in you: otherwise you will be subjected to a powerful fall. Know for sure, that wherever you might go, though you might go over the whole earth from end to end, nowhere will you receive such benefit as in this place. What an anchor is for a boat, such will be for you the prayers of the Fathers here. Acquire firmness, and it will remove from you familiarity in your relation with your near ones, which is the cause of all evils in a man. Leave off all outward care, and then you will freely serve God.

With love in Christ our Saviour,
Seraphim, monk

P.S. This reply has been delayed by a week of rain, and a litde snow.

8. A SPIDER WEB OF IDEAS

Jan. 18/31, 1976
Sts. Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria

Dear A_____,
Rejoice in our Lord Jesus Christ!

I hope you aren't still upset over H_____'s fit. You can accept it as "experience"—and really, such behavior is so outrageous, so out of the context of normal life, as it were, that one can't really believe it until one sees it with one's own eyes. But how widespread is this kind of behavior among mankind!...

The state of H ... is the state of prelest called by the Holy Fathers "fancy" or "opinion"—when a web of ideas is spun which has no real contact with reality, which is why when it comes out it seems so very "far out." A person then acts according to his passions, but thinks he is being logical according to the web of ideas he has spun. Usually the devil uses one little idea to "catch" us, knowing that it will catch us in something we may be emotional about; and that "catch" is sufficient to get us to weave the whole spider web which trips us up. I suspect that your "smoking" was the trap that caught H_____: he knows it's so obviously "wrong," and from his Old Believer contacts he has a "thing" about being "right"; and looking at the rest of what he has seen and heard of you in a new light, he sees many "wrong" things there also which he wouldn't have paid much attention to if he hadn't been "caught" by the smoking. Most likely his letters to you of late have come after long stewing and conversations with himself—and what the letters do is not to express any reality, but only different stages of his conversation with himself in his own spider web. We've seen several examples of this here, and it seems to account for many of the difficult "convert" phenomena. The answer seems only one thing: conscious spiritual life according to the Patristic teaching; there, are to be found the right way of thinking which disperses all our "opinions." We've asked Vladika Averky to write an article on this subject...

With love in Christ,
Seraphim, monk

