

How to Survive Hard Times

**From the "Major Works"
series**

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Coronavirus and COVID-19: The Best Pandemic Yet?.....	2
The Angelic Letters.....	11
God the Spiritual Father.....	32
God the Game Changer.....	63
How to Survive Hard Times.....	76
50 Things You Can Do Even if the Writing Is On The Wall.....	115
The Arena.....	230
More than Royalty.....	237
Death.....	245
The Consolation of Theology.....	253

Preface

It is easy to find material on surviving hard times financially, or taking care of physical needs addressed by survivalists.

Physical needs are only a small part of surviving coronavirus and COVID-19, and lessons we have learned from other disasters still apply.

What is less frequently explored is the spiritual side of surviving disasters. If we enter a disaster, we will continue to have spiritual as well as physical needs, and literature on the spiritual side is not trumpeted as much as storing up food against disaster.

There is something spiritual that has helped people survive disasters; it is having a spiritually disciplined life, praying and giving and doing all else in asceticism. And "spiritual disciplines" does not mean exotic things that only a few can do, but the regular practices of living a life of faith.

These works explore further how we can survive disaster, including dealing with the coronavirus and COVID-19.

Coronavirus and COVID-19: The Best Pandemic Yet?

A friend of mine quoted words written by C.S. Lewis 72 years ago. I follow his suggestion to replace “atomic bomb” with “coronavirus:”

“In one way we think a great deal too much of the coronavirus. “How are we to live in an age of the coronavirus?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of AIDS, an age of terrorism, an age of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.”

In other words, do not let us begin by

exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the coronavirus was anywhere near our radar: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have acknowledged one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by the coronavirus, let that virus when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—there are really a lot of things we can do from our own homes even if we do not wander around outside our homes—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about the coronavirus. They may break our bodies (a mishap with modern inconveniences can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

— “On Living in an Atomic Age” (1948 and updated 2020 by C.S. Hayward) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*

Taking appropriate measures

We have several strokes of good fortune compared to every other pandemic in history. We have Amazon and Facebook, and opportunities to live for more than ourselves. But coping strategies extend beyond merely preventing transmission of the virus, and I would like to comment on standard guidelines. From sampling the CDC:

Clean your hands often

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Avoid close contact

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick
- Put distance between yourself and other people if COVID-19 is spreading in your community. This is especially important

for people who are at higher risk of getting very sick.

The first impression that this makes is that it is based on a *superstitious* and *neanderthal* concept of immunology, though I would here state that desperate times call for desperate measures and I don't see why my immune system should stand up particularly well to something as nasty as COVID-19. People are working on not touching, and normally loving touch stimulates the immune system. Social isolation itself is an excellent way to depress the person and the immune system at one stroke. Furthermore, the prolonged effect of obsessive-compulsive cleanliness is to weaken the immune system. However, again, this is probably a case of *desperate times that call for desperate measures*.

I would pause briefly to comment that it is possible, albeit not obvious, to embrace without touching. "Treasure" tells how I supported a crying little girl without touching above a handshake that ended the interaction. When I went to give a present to my young nephews, I did not touch them, but was vigorous about making a nice big waving motion with my arm. If it is appropriate, these circumstances make it all the more helpful to be able to give an embrace without touching.

The second thing I would say is that this advice is like whiffle balls: it doesn't go very far. It touches a point of need, but there is much more to coping.

For that reason, I offer another shopping list to try to get what you can:

“Really coping” shopping list

- **Lego Mindstorms EV3 31313 Robot Kit**, preferably with *The Lego Mindstorms Discovery Book*. Legos are good, but Lego Mindstorms are better. Lego generated tremendous enthusiasm in the robotics community by dropping the price for serious robotics hobbyists by a factor of four. One feeling you may face going out very little is being cooped up by the walls of your home. If you are exploring what you can do with a super Lego set and more, these walls are likely to be a lot less restricting.
- Buy a “Joy for All” electronic pet: a tabby, a silver cat wit white mitts, a tabby kitten, a tuxedo cat, or a yellow lab puppy. These things consistently rate four and a half stars on Amazon, and they can mitigate some of the harm caused by social isolation and refraining from touching other people.
- Buy *The Best of Jonathan’s Corner*, if you are a C.S. Lewis fan buy *“St. Clive:” An Eastern Orthodox Author Looks Back at C.S. Lewis*, and for more basic reasons. Alternately, read online at cjshayward.com.
- If you are interested in learning a foreign language during this downtime, I personally recommend FluentU. The best free app I know is DuoLingo. Avoid Rosetta Stumblingblock; it doesn't really work with adult brains.
- If you have been thinking about buying the Orthodox Study Bible, the Philokalia, and

perhaps *The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*, there is no better time to buy them than *now*.

Past Experience

Dorothy Sayers wrote in “The Other Six Deadly Sins,” “I am reminded of a young man who once said to me with perfect simplicity: ‘I did not know there were seven deadly sins: please tell me the names of the other six.’” Writing in World War II in England about gluttony broadly construed, Sayers wrote,

You will notice that, under a war economy, the contrast [between consumption by rich and poor] is being flattened out; we are being forced to reduce and regulate our personal consumption of commodities, and to revise our whole notion of what constitutes good citizenship in the financial sense. This is the judgment of this world: when we will not amend ourselves by Grace, we are compelled under the yoke of Law. You will notice also that we are learning certain things. There seems, for example, to be no noticeable diminution in our health and spirits due to the fact that we have only the choice of, say, half a dozen dishes in a restaurant instead of forty. In the matter of clothing, we are beginning to regain our respect for stuffs that will wear well; we can no longer be led away by the specious argument that it is smarter and more hygienic to wear underlinen and stockings once and then throw

them away than to buy things that will serve us for years. We are having to learn, painfully, to save food and material and to salvage waste products; and in learning to do these things we have found a curious and stimulating sense of adventure.

And I believe that this coronavirus might not just be a restriction on civil liberties, or practical restrictions when others are being meticulous. The coronavirus and COVID-19 has declared war on humanity; we have declared war on it. By reining ourselves in we can and will reduce human casualties. And in this warfare we may touch something almost transcendent. We may, through difficult measures, save many, many, many human lives.

Digging deeper

There is something I wish to say, and I wish it so much that it is hard to think of how to say it. **I wrote in “God the Spiritual Father” that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that makes *all* the difference.**

Life is here and now, under the circumstances, and life is not about waiting for the rain to stop so you can dance, but dancing in the rain.

One koan has a cook monk, a position of high status, toiling over vegetables in the midday sun. A less mature monk asked him, “Why are you doing that work on the vegetables now?” The cook countered with a question: “When else can I do it?”

Zen and koans have a reputation for being enigmatic, but the point is sometimes a clue-by-four to help someone see the painfully obvious. The only time we can live is now, in the here and now that God has given us. Perhaps some of us are not Zen rigorists and are willing to schedule like the less mature monk expected. None the less, Orthodox hold to salvation being in the here and now, and recognizing that the here and now is under the guiding hand of Providence, as in a poem whose author I don't know:

“Life’s Tapestry”

Behind those golden clouds up there
the Great One sews a priceless embroidery
and since down below we walk
we see, my child, the reverse view.
And consequently it is natural for the mind to
see mistakes
there where one must give thanks and glorify.

Wait as a Christian for that day to come
where your soul a-wing will rip through the air
and you shall see the embroidery of God
from the good side
and then... everything will seem to you to be a
system and order.

And with it, the prayer for acceptance of God's
will from St. Philaret of Moscow:

My Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of
Thee.
Thou and Thou alone knowest my needs.

Thou lovest me more than I am able to love
Thee.

O Father, grant unto me, Thy servant, all which
I cannot ask.

For a cross I dare not ask, nor for consolation;
I dare only to stand in Thy presence.

My heart is open to Thee.

Thou seest my needs of which I myself am
unaware.

Behold and lift me up!

In Thy presence I stand,
awed and silenced by Thy will and Thy
judgments,

into which my mind cannot penetrate.

To Thee I offer myself as a sacrifice.

No other desire is mine but to fulfill Thy will.

Teach me how to pray.

Do Thyself pray within me.

Amen.

We are in God's workshop, and God is working
with us, if we will work with him, to create an
eternal glory. The circumstances of our lives may be
messy; God's Providence is perfect in order, and it
beckons to us.

*Please experience present circumstances as a
joy!*

The Angelic Letters

My dearly beloved son Eukairos;

I am writing to you concerning the inestimable responsibility and priceless charge who has been entrusted to you. You have been appointed guardian angel to one Mark.

Who is Mark, whose patron is St. Mark of Ephesus? A man. What then is man? Microcosm and mediator, the midpoint of Creation, and the fulcrum for its sanctification. Created in the image of God; created to be prophet, priest, and king. It is toxic for man to know too much of his beauty at once, but it is also toxic for man to know too much of his sin at once. For he is mired in sin and passion, and in prayer and deed offer what help you can for the snares all about him. Keep a watchful eye out for his physical situation, urge great persistence in the liturgical and the sacramental life of the Church that he gives such godly participation, and watch for his asceticism with every eye you have. Rightly, when we understand what injures a man, nothing can injure the man who does

not injure himself: but it is treacherously easy for a man to injure himself. Do watch over him and offer what help you can.

With Eternal Light and Love,
Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

My dear son Eukairos;

I would see it fitting to offer a word about medicating experience and medicating existence.

When one of the race of men medicates experience by means of wine, that is called drunkenness. When by means of the pleasures of the palate, that is called gluttony. When by means of other pleasures, it is called lust. When by means of possessions and getting things, it is called avarice. Escapism is an ancient vice and a root of all manner of evils: ancient Christians were warned strongly against attempting to escape this world by medicating experience.

Not that pleasure is the only way; medicating experience by mental gymnastics is called metaphysics in the occult sense, and medicating experience by means of technology is a serious danger.

Not all technologies, and perhaps not any technology, is automatically a problem to use. But when technologies become a drone they are a problem. Turning on a radio for traffic and weather news, and then turning it off, is not a drone. Listening to the radio at a particular time to devote your attention to a concert is not a drone. Turning on a radio in the background while you work is a

drone; even *Zen and the Art of the Motorcycle Maintenance* discusses what is wrong with mechanics having the radio on in the background. And texting to get specific information or coordinate with someone is not a drone, but a stream of text messages that is always on is a drone. Technology has its uses, but when technology is a drone, noise in the background that prevents silence from getting too uncomfortable, then it is a spiritual problem, a tool to medicate experience. And there are some technologies, like video games, that *exist* to medicate experience.

(Of course, technologies are not the only drone; when Mark buckles down to prayer he discovers that his mind is a drone with a stream of thoughts that are a life's work to quiet.)

More could be said about technologies, but my point here is to point out one of the dangers Mark faces. Not the only one, by any means, but he has at his disposal some very powerful tools for doing things that are detrimental. It's not just a steady stream of X-rated spam that puts temptation at his fingertips. He has all the old ways to medicate experience, and quite a few powerful technologies that can help him medicate his experience as well. And for that he needs prayer.

But what is to be done? The *ways* of medicating experience may be in some measure than many saints have contended with; the *answer* is the same. Don't find another way to medicate experience, or escape the conditions God has placed you in, trying to escape to Paradise. Don't ask for an easier load, but tougher muscles. Instead of escaping the silence, engage it. *Prayerfully* engage it. If your dear Mark does this, after

repenting and despairing of finding a way to escape and create Paradise, he will find that escape is not needed, and Paradise, like the absent-minded Professor's lost spectacles, were not in any of the strange places he looked but on his nose the whole time.

A man does not usually wean himself of drones in one fell swoop, but pray and draw your precious charge to cut back, to let go of another way of medicating experience even if it is very small, and to seek not a lighter load but a stronger back. If he weans himself of noise that medicates uncomfortable silence, he might find that silence is not what he fears.

Watch after Mark, and hold him in prayer.

Your Dearly Loving Elder,
Your Fellow-Servant,
But a Wind and a Flame of Fire

My dear, dear Eukairos;

When fingers that are numb from icy cold come into a warm, warm house, it stings.

You say that the precious treasure entrusted to you prayed, in an uncomfortable silence, not for a lighter load but for a stronger back, and that he was fearful and almost despairing in his prayer. And you wonder why he looks down on himself for that. Do not deprive him of his treasure by showing him how much good he is done.

He has awakened a little, and I would have you do all in your power to show him the silence of Heaven, however little he can receive it yet. You

know some theologians speak of a river of fire, where in one image among others, the Light of Heaven and the fire of Hell are the same thing: not because good and evil are one, but because God can only give himself, the uncreated Light, in love to his creatures, and those in Hell are twisted through the rejection of Christ so that the Light of Heaven is to them the fire of Hell. The silence of Heaven is something like this; silence is of Heaven and there is nothing to replace it, but to those not yet able to bear joy, the silence is an uncomfortable silence. It is a bit like the Light of Heaven as it is experienced by those who reject it.

Help Mark in any way you can to taste the silence of Heaven as joy. Help him to hear the silence that is echoed in the Church's chanting: when he seeks a stronger back to bear silence, strengthen his back, and help him to taste the silence not as bitter but sweet. Where noise and drones would anaesthetize his pain, pull him *through* his pain to health, wholeness, and joy.

The Physician is at work!

With Eternal Light and Love,
Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

Dear blessed Eukairos;

Your charge has had a fall. Do your best that this not be the last word: help him get up. Right now he believes the things of God are not for those like him.

The details of the fall I will not treat here, but

suffice it to say that when someone begins to wake up, the devils are furious. They are often given permission to test the awakening man, and often he falls. And you know how the devils are: before a fall, they say that God is easy-going and forgiving, and after a fall, that God is inexorable. Do your best to aid a person being seduced with the lie that God is inexorable.

Mark believes himself unfit for the service of the Kingdom. Very well, and in fact he *is*, but it is the special delight of the King to work in and through men who have made themselves unfit for his service. Don't brush away a mite of his humility as one fallen, but show him what he cannot believe, that God wishes to work through him now as much as *ever* And that God wishes for him prayer, liturgy, sacrament..

And open his eyes now, a hint here, a moment of joy there: open them that eternity is now: eternal life is not something that begins after he dies, but that takes root now, and takes root even (or rather, *especially*) in those who repent. He considers himself unworthy of both Heaven and earth, and he *is*; therefore, in God's grace, give him both Heaven and earth. Open up earth as an icon, a window to Heaven, and draw him to share in the uncreated Light and Life.

Open up his repentance; it is a window to Heaven.

In Light and Life and Love,
Your Brother Angel

My dear fellow-ministering angel;

I would make a few remarks on those windows of Heaven called icons.

To Mark, depending on the sense of the word 'window', a 'window' is an opening in a wall with a glass divider, or alternately the 'window' *is* the glass divider separating inside from outside. But this is not the exact understanding when Orthodox say an icon is a window of Heaven; it is more like what he would understand by an open window, where wind blows, and inside and outside meet. (In most of human history, a window fitted with glass was the exception, not the rule.) If an icon is a window of Heaven, it is an opening to Heaven, or an opening between Heaven and earth.

Now Mark does not understand this, and while you may draw him to begin to sense this, that is not the point. In *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a man speaks who was given the sacred Gospels in an old, hard-to-understand book, and was told by the priest, "Never mind if you do not understand what you are reading. The devils will understand it." Perhaps, to Mark, icons are still somewhat odd pictures with strange postures and proportions. You may, if you want, help him see that there *is* perspective in the icons, but instead of the usual perspective of people in their own world, it is reverse perspective whose vanishing point lies behind him because Mark is in the picture. But instead of focusing on correcting his understanding, and certainly correcting his understanding all at once, draw him to venerate and look at these openings of Heaven. Never mind if he does not fully grasp the icons he venerates. *The devils will understand.*

And that is true of a great many things in life; draw Mark to participate in faith and obedience. He expects to understand first and participate second, but he needs to come to a point of participating first and understanding second. Many things need to start on the outside and work inwards.

Serving Christ,
Whose Incarnation Unfurls in Holy Icons,
Your Fellow

Dear cherished, luminous son;

Your charge is reading a good many books. Most of them are good, but I urge you to spur him to higher things.

It is a seemingly natural expression of love to try to know as much about possible about Orthodoxy. But mature Orthodox usually spend less time trying to understand Orthodoxy through books. And this is *not* because they have learned everything there is to learn. (That would be impossible.) Rather, it is because they've found a deeper place to dig.

God does not want Mark to be educated and have an educated mind. He wants him to have an enlightened mind. The Orthodox man is not supposed to have good thoughts in prayer, but to have no thoughts. The Orthodox settled on the path have a clear mind that is enlightened in hesychastic silence. And it is better to sit in the silence of Heaven than read the Gospel as something to analyze.

Books have a place. Homilies have a place. But

they are one shadow of the silence of Heaven. And there are more important things in the faith, such as fasting and almsgiving, repentance and confession, and prayer, the crowning jewel of all asceticism. Give Mark all of these gems.

With Deep Affection,
Your Brother Angel

*My dearly beloved, cherished fellow angel
Eukairos;*

Your charge Mark has been robbed.

Your priceless charge Mark has been robbed, and I am concerned.

He is also concerned about a great many things: his fear now, which is understandable, and his concerns about where money may come from, and his loss of an expensive smartphone and a beautiful pocketwatch with sentimental as well as financial value to him, and his inconvenience while waiting on new credit cards.

There are more concerns where those came from, but I am concerned because he is concerned about the wrong things. He has well over a week's food in his fridge and he believes that God failed to provide. Mark does not understand that *everything that happens to a man is either a temptation God allowed for his strengthening, or a blessing from God*. I am concerned that after God has allowed this, among other reasons so Mark can get his priorities straight, he is doing everything but seeking in this an opportunity for spiritual growth

to greater maturity.

If you were a human employee, this would be the time for you to be punching in *lots* of overtime. Never mind that he thinks unconsciously that you and God have both deserted him; your strengthening hand has been invisible to him. I do not condemn you for any of this, but this time has been appointed for him to have opportunities for growth and for you to be working with him, and the fact that he does not seek growth in this trial is only reason for you to work all the harder. That he is seeking to get things back the way they were, and suffering anger and fear, is only reason for you to exercise more diligent care. God is working with him now as much as ever, and I would advise you for now to work to the point of him seeking his spiritual good in this situation, however short he falls of right use of adversity for now.

Your name, "Eukairos," comes from "eu", meaning "good", and "kairos", an almost inexhaustible word which means, among other things, "appointed time" and "decisive moment." You and Mark are alike called to dance the great dance, and though Mark may not see it now, you are God's agent and son supporting him in a great and ordered dance where everything is arranged in God's providence. Right now Mark sees none of this, but as his guardian angel you are charged to work with him in the dance, a dance where God incorporates his being robbed and will incorporate his spiritual struggles and, yes, provide when Mark fails to see that the righteous will never be forsaken.

A good goal would be for Mark to pray for those that robbed him, and through those prayers honestly desire their good, or come to that point.

But a more immediate goal is his understanding of the struggle he faces. Right now he sees his struggle in terms of money, inconveniences, and the like. Raise his eyes higher so he can see that it is a spiritual struggle, that God's providence is not overruled by this tribulation, and that if he seeks first the Kingdom of God, God himself knows Mark's material needs and will show deepest care for him.

Your Fellow-Servant in Prayer,
But an Angel Who Cannot Struggle Mark's
Struggle on his Behalf

My dear, esteemed son and fellow-angel Eukairos;

That was a deft move on your part, and I thank you for what you have helped foster in Mark's thoughts.

Mark began to console himself with the deep pit of porn, that poison that is so easily found in his time and place. And he began to pray, on his priest's advice, "Holy Father John, pray to God for me," and "Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for me," Saint John the Much-Suffering and Saint Mary of Egypt being saints to remember when fighting that poison. And you helped him for a moment to see how he was turned in on himself and away from others, and he prayed for help caring about others.

At 10:30 PM that night on the dot, one of his friends was walking in the dark, in torrential rains, and fell in the street, and a car ran over his legs.

This friend was someone with tremendous love for others, the kind of person you cannot help but appreciate, and now that he had two broken legs, the flow of love reversed. And Mark unwittingly found himself in an excellent situation to care about something other than himself. He quite forgot about his money worries; and he barely noticed a windfall from an unexpected source. He kept company and ran errands for his friend.

What was once only a smouldering ember is now a fire burning brightly. Work as you can to billow it into a blaze.

With an Eternal Love,
Your Respectful Brother Angel

My dear, scintillating son Eukairos;

I would recall to you the chief end of mankind. "To glorify God and enjoy him forever" is not a bad answer; the chief end of mankind is to contemplate God. No matter what you do, Mark will never reach the strictest sense of contemplation such as monastic saints enjoy in their prayer, but that is neither here nor there. He can have a life ordered to contemplation even if he will never reach the spiritual quiet from which strict contemplation is rightly approached. He may never reach beyond the struggle of asceticism, but his purpose, on earth as well as in Heaven, is to contemplate God, and to be deified. The point of human life is to become by grace what Christ is by nature.

Mark is right in one way and wrong in another to realize that he has only seen the beginning of

deification. He *has* started, and only started, the chief end of human life, and he is right to pray, go to confession, and see himself as a beginner. But what he is *wrong* about is imagining that the proof of his fledgling status is that his wishes are not fulfilled in the circumstances of his life: his unconscious and unstated assumption is that if he had real faith like saints who worked miracles, his wishes would be fulfilled and his life would be easier. Those saints had *less* wishes fulfilled, not more, and much harder lives than him.

(And this is beside the point that Mark is not called to perform miracles; he is called to something greater, the most excellent way: **love**.)

Mark imagines you, as his guardian angel, to be sent by God to see that at least some of his wishes happen, but the truth is closer to saying that you are sent by God to see that some of his wishes *do not* happen so that in the cutting off of self-will he may grow in ways that would be impossible if he always had his wishes. There is a French saying, «*On trouve souvent sa destiné par les chemins que l'on prend pour l'éviter.*»: "One often finds his destiny on the paths one takes to avoid it." Destiny is not an especially Christian idea, but there is a grain of truth here: *Men often find God's providence in the situations they hoped his providence would keep them out of.*

This cutting off of self-will is part of the self-transcendence that makes deification; it is foundational to monks and the office of spiritual father, but it is not a "monks-only" treasure. Not by half. God answers "No" to prayers to say "Yes" to something greater. But the "Yes" only comes *through* the "No."

As Mark has heard, "We pray because we want God to change our circumstances. God wants to use our circumstances to change us."

Mark has had losses, and he will have more to come, but what he does not understand is that the path of God's sanctification is precisely through the loss of what Mark thinks he needs. God is at work allowing Mark to be robbed. God is at work allowing Mark to use "his" "free" time to serve his friend. And God is at work in the latest challenge you wrote to me about.

Mark has lost his car. A drunk and uninsured driver slammed into it when it was parked; the driver was saved by his airbag, but Mark's car was destroyed, and Mark has no resources to get another car, not even a beater for now. And Mark imagines this as something that pushes him outside of the Lord's providence, not understanding that it is by God's good will that he is now being transported by friendship and generosity, that he is less independent now.

Right now Mark is not ready either to thank God for his circumstances or to forgive the driver. But do open his eyes to the good of friendship and generosity that now transports him. Even if he sees the loss of his car as an example of God failing to provide for him, help him to see the good of his being transported by the love and generosity of his friends. Help him to see God's providence in circumstances he would not choose.

Your Fellow-Servant in the Service of Man,
A Brother Angel

My dear son Eukairos;

Your precious charge, in perfectly good faith, believes strongly in bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. His devotion in trying to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is really quite impressive, but he is fundamentally confused about what that means, and he is not the only one.

Mark would never say that you can reason your way into Heaven, but he is trying to straighten out his worldview, and he thinks that straightening out one's ideas is what this verse is talking about. And he holds an assumption that if you're reasoning things out, or trying to reason things out, you're probably on the right path.

Trying to reason things out does not really help as much as one might think. Arius, the father of all heretics, was one of many to try to reason things out; people who devise heresies often try harder to reason things out than the Orthodox. And Mark has inherited a greatly overstated emphasis on how important or helpful logical reasoning is.

Mark would be surprised to hear this; his natural question might be, "If bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is not what you do when you straighten out your worldview, then what on earth is?"

A little bit more of the text discusses unseen warfare and inner purity: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of

Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Men's thoughts are not just abstract reasoning; they are all sorts of things, some entangled with sinful desire, that are around all the time to a mind that has not learned hesychastic silence. Thoughts that need to be taken captive include thoughts of money entangled with greed, thoughts of imagined success entangled with pride, thoughts of wrongs suffered entangled with anger, thoughts of food compounded with gluttony, thoughts of desired persons compounded with lust, thoughts of imagined future difficulties entangled with worry and doubt about the Lord's good providence. Such thoughts as these need to be addressed, and not by tinkering with one's worldview: these thoughts remain a battleground in spiritual warfare even if one's worldview condemns greed, pride, anger, gluttony, lust, worry, and doubt.

Work with Mark. Guide him and strengthen him in the unseen warfare that includes learning to cut off such thoughts as soon as possible: a fire that is spreading through a house is hard to put out, and what Mark needs to learn is to notice the smoke that goes before fire and extinguish the smouldering that is beginning and not waiting for leaping flames to make doomed efforts to fight it. Help him to see that his thoughts are not only abstract ideas, and help him to be watchful, aware of his inner state. Unseen warfare in thoughts is of inestimable importance, and do what you can to help him see a smouldering smoke when it has not become a raging fire, and to be watchful.

Do what you can to draw him to repeat the Jesus Prayer, to let it grow to a rhythm in him. If the question is, "What should I start thinking when

I catch myself?", the answer is, "The Jesus prayer."

Keep working with Mark, and offer what support you can. And keep him in your prayers.

With Deepest Affection,

Another Member of the Angel Choirs

Dear fellow-warrior, defender, and son Eukairos;

I wish to write to you concerning devils.

Mark has the wrong picture with a scientific worldview in which temptations are more or less random events that occur as a side effect of how the world works. Temptations are intelligently coordinated attacks by devils. They are part of unseen warfare such as Mark faces, part of an evil attack, but none the less on a leash. No man could be saved if the devils could give trials and temptations as much as they wished, but the devils are allowed to bring trials and temptations as much as God allows for the strengthening, and the discipleship, of his servants.

Some street drugs are gateway drugs, and some temptations are temptations to gateway sins. Gluttony, greed, and vanity are among the "gateway sins", although it is the nature of a sin to give way to other sins as well. Gluttony, for instance, opens the door to lust, and it is harder by far to fight lust for a man whose belly is stuffed overfull. (A man who would fare better fighting against lust would do well to eat less and fast more.) In sin, and also in virtue, he who is faithful in little is faithful in much, and he who is unfaithful in little is also unfaithful in

much. You do not need to give Mark what he expects now, help in some great, heroic act of virtue. He needs your help in little, humble, everyday virtues, obedience when obedience doesn't seem worth the bother.

The liturgy speaks of "the feeble audacity of the demons", and Mark needs to know that that is true, and true specifically in his case. What trials God allows are up to God, and the demons are an instrument in the hand of a God who would use even the devils' rebellion to strengthen his sons. The only way Mark can fall into the demons' hands is by yielding to temptation: nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself. The trials Mark faces are intended for his glory, and more basically for God's glory in him—but God chooses glory for himself that glorifies his saints. Doubtless this will conflict with Mark's plans and perceptions of what he needs, but God knows better, and *loves* Mark better than to give Mark everything he thinks he needs.

Do your best to strengthen Mark, especially as regards forgiveness to those who have wronged him and in the whole science of unseen warfare. Where he cannot see himself that events are led by an invisible hand, help him to at least have faith, a faith that may someday be able to discern.

And do help him to see that he is in the hands of God, that the words in the Sermon on the Mount about providence are not for the inhabitants of another, perfect world, but intended for him personally as well as others. He has rough things he will have to deal with; help him to trust that he receives providence at the hands of a merciful God who is ever working all things to good for his children.

With Love as Your Fellow-Warrior and Mark's,
Your Fellow-Warrior in the War Unseen

My dear, watchful son Eukairos;

Mark has lost his job, and though he has food before him and a roof over his head, he thinks God's providence has run short.

Yet in all of this, he is showing a sign of growth: even though he does not believe God has provided, there is a deep peace, interrupted at times by worry, and his practice of the virtues allows such peace to enter even though he assumes that God can only provide through paychecks.

Work on him in this peace. Work on him in the joy of friendship. Even if he does not realize that he has food for today and clothing for today, and that this is the providence he is set to ask for, help him to enjoy what he has, and give thanks to God for everything he has been given.

And hold him in your prayers.

As One Who Possesses Nothing,
One Who Receives All He Needs From God

My prayerful, prayerful Eukairos;

Prayer is what Mark needs now more than ever. Prayer is the silent life of angels, and it is a feast men are bidden to join. At the beginning it is

words; in the middle it is desire; at the end it is silence and love. For men it is the outflow of sacrament, and its full depths are in the sacraments. There are said to be seven sacraments, but what men of Mark's day do not grasp is that seven is the number of perfection, and it would do as well to say that there are ten thousand sacraments, all bearing God's grace.

Help Mark to pray. Pray to forgive others, pray for the well-being of others, pray by being in silence before God. Help him to pray when he is attacked by passion; help him to pray when he is tempted and when he confesses in his heart that he has sinned: *O Lord, forgive me for doing this and help me to do better next time, for the glory of thy holy name and for the salvation of my soul.*

Work with Mark so that his life is a prayer, not only with the act-prayer of receiving a sacrament, but so that looking at his neighbor with chaste eyes he may pray out of the Lord's love. Work with Mark so that ordinary activity and work are not an interruption to a life of prayer, but simply a part of it. And where there is noise, help him to be straightened out in silence through his prayer.

And if this is a journey of a thousand miles that Mark will never reach on earth, bid him to take a step, and then a step more. For a man to take one step into this journey is still something: the Thief crucified with Christ could only take one step, and he took that one step, and now stands before God in Paradise.

Ever draw Mark into deeper prayer.

With You Before God's Heart that Hears Prayers,

A Praying Angel

My dearly beloved, cherished, esteemed son; My holy angel who sees the face of Christ God; My dear chorister who sings before the eternal throne of God; My angel divine; My fellow-minister;

Your charge has passed through his apprenticeship successfully.

He went to church, and several gunmen entered. One of them pointed a gun at a visitor, and Mark stepped in front of her. He was ordered to move, and he stood firm. He wasn't thinking of being heroic; he wasn't even thinking of showing due respect to a woman. He only thought vaguely of appropriate treatment of a visitor and fear never deterred him from this vague sense of appropriate care for a visitor.

And so death claimed him to its defeat. O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Death claimed saintly Mark to its defeat.

Mark is no longer your charge.

It is my solemn, profound, and grave pleasure to now introduce you to Mark, no longer as the charge under your care, but as a fellow-chorister with angels who will eternally stand with you before the throne of God in Heaven.

Go in peace.

Your Fellow-Minister,

מיכאל • MIXAHA • MICHAEL •

Who Is Like God?

God the Spiritual Father

I believe in one God, the Father,
Almighty...

The Nicene Creed

All of us do the will of God. The question is not whether we do God's will or not, but whether we do God's will as *instruments*, as Satan and Judas did, or as *sons*, as Peter and John did. In the end Satan may be nothing more than a hammer in the hand of God.

C.S. Lewis, paraphrased

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs

My precious, precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you see one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

Footprints, paraphrased

Look to every situation as if you were going to bargain at the market, always looking to make a spiritual profit.

The Philokalia, paraphrased

For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make Christ the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Hebrews

There are a lot of concerns on people's minds. For those of us in the U.S., we've been facing an economic disaster. Is "the decade from Hell" over and done? Or has the economic depression just begun? Has the *real* nightmare just *begun*? People have faced unemployment, and some are worried about hyper-inflation. And the big question on almost everyone's mind is, "Can I survive this? And if so, how?" And these quotes have something to say to the billion dollar question on almost everyone's mind.

Let's turn the clock back a bit, to 1755. There was a catastrophic earthquake in Lisbon in Portugal, and its untold misery shook people's faith in the goodness of the world we live in. In the questioning that came afterwards, Voltaire wrote *Candide* in which the rather ludicrous teacher Pangloss is always explaining that we live in "the best of all possible worlds:" no matter what misfortune or disaster befell them, the unshakable

Pangloss would always find a way to explain that we still lived in the best of all possible worlds. And Voltaire's point is to rip that preposterous idea apart, giving a dose of reality and showing what the misery in Lisbonne made painfully clear: we do *not* live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But there is another shoe to drop.

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods, and it is a more profound truth, a more vibrant truth, a truth that goes much deeper into the heart of root of all things to say that we may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but *we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods*.

Once we have truly grasped that God the Spiritual Father is the best of all possible Gods, it becomes a mistake to focus on how, in fact, we simply do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Perhaps we all need to repent and recognize that we ourselves are far from being the best of all possible *people*. But we need to raise our eyes higher: raise our eyes and see that our lives and our world are under the love of the best of all possible Gods: God the Spiritual Father.

The Orthodox Church has understood this since ancient times. Let's read some longer quotes:

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each

individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul.
- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain

the virtues and thus become
dispassionate and fit to save other souls.

- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

The Philokalia

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul

that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence,

participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The Philokalia

All These Things Were From Me

(The new St. Seraphim, of Viritsa was born in 1866. He married and had three children. In 1920, at the age of 54, he and his wife quietly separated and each entered monastic life. Eventually he became the spiritual father of the St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, where, as a clairvoyant staretz, he also confessed thousands of laity. He said, "I am the storage room where people's afflictions gather." In imitation of his patron saint, he prayed for a thousand nights on a rock before an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov. He reposed in the Lord in 1949 and the Church of Russia glorified him in August of 2000.)

The following is (slightly abridged) from a letter sent by St. Seraphim to a spiritual child of his, a hierarch who was at that time in a Soviet prison. It is in the form of consolation given by God to a troubled man's soul.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

Have you ever thought that everything that concerns you, concerns Me, also? You are precious in my eyes and I love you; for his reason, it is a special joy for Me to train you. When temptations and the opponent [the Evil One] come upon you like a river, I want you to know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that your weakness has need of My strength, and your safety lies in allowing Me to protect you. I want you to know

that when you are in difficult conditions, among people who do not understand you, and cast you away, This was from Me.

I am your God, the circumstances of your life are in My hands; you did not end up in your position by chance; this is precisely the position I have appointed for you. Weren't you asking Me to teach you humility? And there - I placed you precisely in the "school" where they teach this lesson. Your environment, and those who are around you, are performing My will. Do you have financial difficulties and can just barely survive? Know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that I dispose of your money, so take refuge in Me and depend upon Me. I want you to know that My storehouses are inexhaustible, and I am faithful in My promises. Let it never happen that they tell you in your need, "Do not believe in your Lord and God." Have you ever spent the night in suffering? Are you separated from your relatives, from those you love? I allowed this that you would turn to Me, and in Me find consolation and comfort. Did your friend or someone to whom you opened your heart, deceive you? This was from Me.

I allowed this frustration to touch you so that you would learn that your best friend is the Lord. I want you to bring everything to Me and tell Me everything. Did someone slander you? Leave it to Me; be attached to Me so that you can hide from the "contradiction of the nations." I will make your righteousness shine like light and your life like midday noon. Your plans were destroyed? Your soul yielded and you are exhausted? This was from Me.

You made plans and have your own goals; you brought them to Me to bless them. But I want you to leave it all to Me, to direct and guide the circumstances of your life by My hand, because you are the orphan, not the protagonist. Unexpected failures found you and despair overcame your heart, but know That this was from Me.

With tiredness and anxiety I am testing how strong your faith is in My promises and your boldness in prayer for your relatives. Why is it not you who entrusted their cares to My providential love? You must leave them to the protection of My All Pure Mother. Serious illness found you, which may be healed or may be incurable, and has nailed you to your bed. This was from Me.

Because I want you to know Me more deeply, through physical ailment, do not murmur against this trial I have sent you. And do not try to understand My plans for the salvation of people's souls, but uncomplainingly and humbly bow your head before My goodness. You were dreaming about doing something special for Me and, instead of doing it, you fell into a bed of pain. This was from Me.

Because then you were sunk in your own works and plans and I wouldn't have been able to draw your thoughts to Me. But I want to teach you the most deep thoughts and My lessons, so that you may serve Me. I want to teach you that you are nothing without Me. Some of my best children are those who, cut off from an active life, learn to use the weapon

of ceaseless prayer. You were called unexpectedly to undertake a difficult and responsible position, supported by Me. I have given you these difficulties and as the Lord God I will bless all your works, in all your paths. In everything I, your Lord, will be your guide and teacher. Remember always that every difficulty you come across, every offensive word, every slander and criticism, every obstacle to your works, which could cause frustration and disappointment, This is from Me.

Know and remember always, no matter where you are, That whatsoever hurts will be dulled as soon as you learn In all things, to look at Me. Everything has been sent to you by Me, for the perfection of your soul.

All these things were from Me.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation

was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's

elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans

We may be entering an economic depression. We live in hard times, and things may get much harder. It is becoming more and more clear that this is no mere recession: it looks more and more like a depression. We see people asking, "Where is God when it hurts?" And there is something important about the answer to "Where is God when it hurts?": something very important, something profoundly important.

I believe in one God, the *Spiritual* Father Almighty.

I'm not sure how to explain this without saying something about Orthodox monasticism, but the Orthodox concept of a *spiritual father* is of someone one owes obedience in everything, and who normally assigns some things that are very difficult

to do, unpleasant, and painful. And this seems a strange thing to be getting into. But there is method to what may seem mad: we do not reach our greatest good, we do not flourish, we do not reach our highest heights, if we are the spiritual equivalent of spoiled children. And the entire point of this duty of obedience is to arrange things for the good of the person who obeys in this situation. *The entire point of obedience in what the spiritual father arranges is for the spiritual father as a spiritual physician to give health and freedom through the disciple's obedience.*

In that sense, only monks and nuns are expected to have spiritual fathers to shape them. The rest of us have God as our Spiritual Father, and we can kick against the goads, but God the Spiritual Father is at work in every person we meet. *God the Spiritual Father is God the Great Physician, working everything for our health and freedom if we will cooperate.* People and situations he sends us may be part of his will for us as instruments, or they may be part of his will for us as sons of God, but God's will unfolds in each person who acts in our lives: kind people and cruel, having excess and having lack, getting our way and having our will cut short as a spiritual father does to form a monk under his care, becomes part of the work of God the Spiritual Father. Even economic nightmares become part of "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

When God gives us our true good, *nothing* can take it away.

What exactly is our true good unfolds in the saints' lives, which are well worth reading: many of

them lived in great hardship. Some were martyred; the beloved St. Nectarios lost his job repeatedly for reasons that were not just unfortunate, but completely and absolutely unfair. God was still at work in his life, and he is now crowned as a saint in Heaven. God allowed things to happen, terrible things to happen, but not one of them took him away from God giving him everything he needed and ultimately working in him the glory of one of the greatest saints in recent times.

The Sermon on the Mount says some harsh words about how we use money, but these words set the stage for a profound treasure that we can still have, even in an economic depression:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, [*or, today, where economic havoc can ruin our financial planning*] but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal [*or, today, where your treasures cannot be taken away even by a complete economic meltdown*].

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the

air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the godless seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The life of St. Philaret the Merciful speaks volumes:

Righteous Philaret the Merciful, son of George and Anna, was raised in piety and the fear of God. He lived during the eighth century in the village of Amneia in the Paphlagonian district of Asia Minor. His wife, Theoseba, was from a rich and illustrious family, and they had three children: a son John, and daughters Hypatia and Evanthia.

Philaret was a rich and illustrious dignitary, but he did not hoard his wealth. Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about "these least ones" (Mt. 25:40); the the Apostle Paul's reminder that we will take nothing with us from this world (1 Tim 6:7); and the assertion of King David that the righteous would not be forsaken (Ps 36/37:25). Philaret, whose name means "lover of virtue," was famed for his love for the poor.

One day Ishmaelites [Arabs] attacked Paphlagonia, devastating the land and plundering the estate of Philaret. There remained only two oxen, a donkey, a cow with her calf, some beehives, and the house. But he also shared them with the poor. His wife reproached him for being heartless and unconcerned for his own family. Mildly, yet firmly he endured the reproaches of his wife and the jeers of his children. "I have hidden away riches and treasure," he told his family, "so much that it would be enough for you to feed and clothe yourselves, even if you lived a hundred years without working."

The saint's gifts always brought good to the recipient. Whoever received anything from him found that the gift would multiply, and that person would become rich. Knowing this, a certain man came to St Philaret asking for a calf so that he could start a herd. The cow missed its calf and began to bellow. Theoseba said to her husband, "You have no pity on us, you merciless man, but don't you feel sorry for the cow? You have separated her from her

calf." The saint praised his wife, and agreed that it was not right to separate the cow and the calf. Therefore, he called the poor man to whom he had given the calf and told him to take the cow as well.

That year there was a famine, so St Philaret took the donkey and went to borrow six bushels of wheat from a friend of his. When he returned home, a poor man asked him for a little wheat, so he told his wife to give the man a bushel. Theoseba said, "First you must give a bushel to each of us in the family, then you can give away the rest as you choose." Philaretos then gave the man two bushels of wheat. Theoseba said sarcastically, "Give him half the load so you can share it." The saint measured out a third bushel and gave it to the man. Then Theoseba said, "Why don't you give him the bag, too, so he can carry it?" He gave him the bag. The exasperated wife said, "Just to spite me, why not give him all the wheat." St Philaret did so.

Now the man was unable to lift the six bushels of wheat, so Theoseba told her husband to give him the donkey so he could carry the wheat home. Blessing his wife, Philaret gave the donkey to the man, who went home rejoicing. Theoseba and the children wept because they were hungry.

The Lord rewarded Philaret for his generosity: when the last measure of wheat was given away, a old friend sent him forty bushels. Theoseba kept most of the wheat for herself and the children, and the saint gave away his share to the poor and had nothing

left. When his wife and children were eating, he would go to them and they gave him some food. Theoseba grumbled saying, "How long are you going to keep that treasure of yours hidden? Take it out so we can buy food with it."

During this time the Byzantine empress Irene (797-802) was seeking a bride for her son, the future emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (780-797). Therefore, emissaries were sent throughout all the Empire to find a suitable girl, and the envoys came to Amneia.

When Philaret and Theoseba learned that these most illustrious guests were to visit their house, Philaret was very happy, but Theoseba was sad, for they did not have enough food. But Philaret told his wife to light the fire and to decorate their home. Their neighbors, knowing that imperial envoys were expected, brought everything required for a rich feast.

The envoys were impressed by the saint's daughters and granddaughters. Seeing their beauty, their deportment, their clothing, and their admirable qualities, the envoys agreed that Philaret's granddaughter, Maria was exactly what they were looking for. This Maria exceeded all her rivals in quality and modesty and indeed became Constantine's wife, and the emperor rewarded Philaret.

Thus fame and riches returned to Philaret. But just as before, this holy lover of the poor generously distributed alms and provided a feast for the poor. He and his family served them at the meal. Everyone was astonished at his humility and said: "This is a man of God, a true disciple of Christ."

He ordered a servant to take three bags and fill one with gold, one with silver, and one with copper coins. When a beggar approached, Philaret ordered his servant to bring forth one of the bags, whichever God's providence would ordain. Then he would reach into the bag and give to each person, as much as God willed.

St Philaret refused to wear fine clothes, nor would he accept any imperial rank. He said it was enough for him to be called the grandfather of the Empress. The saint reached ninety years of age and knew his end was approaching. He went to the Rodolpheia ("The Judgment") monastery in Constantinople. He gave some gold to the Abbess and asked her to allow him to be buried there, saying that he would depart this life in ten days.

He returned home and became ill. On the tenth day he summoned his family, he exhorted them to imitate his love for the poor if they desired salvation. Then he fell asleep in the Lord. He died in the year 792 and was buried in the Rodolpheia Judgment monastery in Constantinople.

The appearance of a miracle after his death confirmed the sainthood of Righteous Philaret. As they bore the body of the saint to the cemetery, a certain man, possessed by the devil, followed the funeral procession and tried to overturn the coffin. When they reached the grave, the devil threw the man down on the ground and went out of him. Many other miracles and healings also took place at the grave of the saint.

After the death of the righteous Philaret,

his wife Theoseba worked at restoring monasteries and churches devastated during a barbarian invasion.

This merciful saint trusted God the Spiritual Father. He cashed in on the promise, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well."

In terms of how to survive an economic depression, the right question to ask is *not*, "Do I have enough treasures stored up on earth?" but "Do I have enough treasures in Heaven?" And the merciful St. Philaret lived a life out of abundant treasure in Heaven.

The biggest thing we need right now is to know the point of life, which is to live the life of Heaven, not starting at death, but starting here on earth. C.S. Lewis lectured to students on the eve of World War II when it looked like Western civilization was on the verge of permanent collapse. I won't try to repeat what he said beyond "Life has never been normal" and add that God's providence is for difficult circumstances every bit as much as when life seems normal. God's providence is how we can survive an economic depression. The Sermon on the Mount is no mere wish list only for when life that is perfect; it is meant for God's work with us even in circumstances we would not choose, *especially* in circumstances we would not choose, and speaks of the love of God the Spiritual Father who can and will work with us in an economic depression, if we will let him, and work with us no less than when life is easy.

(Some have said not only that God provides in rough times as well as easy times, but that God's providence is in fact clearer in rough times, such as

an economic depression, than when things go our way and we can forget that we need a bit of help from above.)

God the Spiritual Father wants to use everything for our good. Everything he allows, everything in our lives, is either a blessing or a temptation that has been allowed for our strengthening. His purpose even in allowing rough things to happen is to help us grow up spiritually, and to make us Heavenly. *The Great Divorce* imagines a busload of people come from Hell to visit Heaven, and what happens is something much like what happens in our lives: they are offered Heaven and they do not realize Heaven is better than the seeds Hell that they keep clinging to because they are afraid to let go. Heaven and Hell are both real, but God does not send people to Hell. C.S. Lewis quotes someone saying that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "*Thy* will be done," respecting their choice to choose Hell after Heaven has been freely offered to them. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the inside. Hellfire is nothing other than the Light of Heaven as experienced by those who reject the only possibility for living joy there is. And neither the reality of Heaven nor the state of mind we call Hell begins after death; their seeds grow on us in this training ground we call life. We can become saints, heavenly people like St. Philaret, or we can care only about ourselves and our own survival. God the Spiritual Father wants to shape us to be part of the beauty of Heaven, and everything he sends us is intended for that purpose. But in freedom he will let us veto his blessings and choose

to be in Hell.

Heaven is generous, and that generosity was something Heavenly that shone during the Great Depression. People who had very little shared. They shared money or food, if they had any. (And even if you have no money to share, you can share time; if you do not have a job, you can still volunteer.) St. Philaret shared because he knew something: "Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about 'these least ones' (Mt. 25:40)..." In this part of the saint's life, the reference is to some of the most chilling words following The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory,
and all the angels with him, then he will sit on
his glorious throne. Before him will be
gathered all the nations, and he will separate
them one from another as a shepherd
separates the sheep from the goats, and he will
place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats
at the left. Then the King will say to those at
his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the
foundation of the world; for I was hungry and
you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave
me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed
me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick
and you visited me, I was in prison and you
came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord,
when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or
thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we
see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or
naked and clothe thee? And when did we see

thee sick or in prison and visit thee?

And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

St. Philaret the Merciful will be greeted before Christ's awesome judgment seat and hear, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I came to you and asked for a little wheat, and you gave me all six bushels you had, and your only donkey with them." God did provide, but the reward is not just that a friend gave him forty bushels of wheat. The ultimate reward is that Christ regards how St. Philaret treated other people as how he treated Christ himself, and because St. Philaret was merciful, there is a reward for him in Heaven, a reward so great that next to it, the forty bushels of wheat from his friend utterly pale in comparison.

Remember this next time you see a beggar. If you can't give a quarter, at least see if there is a kind word or a prayer you can give. This has everything to do with how to survive an economic depression.

We are at a time with terrible prospects for earthly comfort, but take heart. Let me again quote Lewis: "Heaven cannot give earthly comfort, and earth cannot give earthly comfort either. In the end, Heavenly comfort is the only comfort to be had. To quote from my own Silence: Organic Food for the Soul:

Do you worry? Is it terribly hard
to get all your ducks in a row,
to get yourself to a secure place
where you have prepared for what might
happen?
Or does it look like you might lose your job,
if you still have one?
The Sermon on the Mount
urges people to pray,
"Give us this day our daily bread,"
in an economy
when unlike many homeless in the U.S. today,
it was not obvious to many
where they would get their next meal.
And yet it was this Sermon on the Mount
that tells us our Heavenly Father will provide
for us,
and tells us not to worry:
what we miss
if we find this a bit puzzling,
we who may have bank accounts, insurance,
investments
even if they are jeopardized right now,

is that we are like a child with some clay,
trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay
horse,
with clay that never cooperates, never looks
right,
and obsessed with clay that is never good
enough,
we ignore and maybe fear
the finger tapping us on our shoulder
until with great trepidation we turn,
and listen to the voice say,
"Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
and follow our father
as he gives us a warhorse.

This life is an apprenticeship, and even now,
when we may be in situations we do not like, God is
asking us to be apprentices, learning to be knights
riding the warhorse he gives us *even in the
situations we might not like*. The life of Heaven
begins on earth, *even in an economic depression*.

However much power world leaders may have,
God the Spiritual Father is sovereign, and their
summits pale in comparison for the work God the
Spiritual Father is working even now.

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his Christ, saying,
"Let us rip apart their religious restrictions,
and throw off their shackles."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.

Psalms

For the conqueror says: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped."

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

Isaiah

World leaders may work his will as instruments or as sons, but they will always work his will. This is true in an economic depression as much as any other time. God the Spiritual Father rules the world as sovereign on a deeper level than we can imagine, and he works good out of everything to those who love him and are called according to his purpose to make them sons of God.

Some people really hope that if the right government programs are in place, we can get back on track to a better life. But even if governments have their place, "Put not your trust in princes," or rather, "Do not put your trust in governments," is not obsolete. Far from it: government initiatives cannot make everything better, even in the long

haul, even with lots of time, sacrifices, and resources. But having given that bad news, I have good news too. Even if government initiatives fail to do what we want them to, we have God the Spiritual Father trying to give us the greatest good, and the time he offers us his will does not start sometime in the future: it is for *here*, and it is for **now**. He works his will alike through instruments like Satan and Judas, and sons like Peter and John, but in either case he works his will now, not sometime in the future when some human effort starts achieving results. Again, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

God and the Son of God became Man
and the Son of Man that man might
become god and the sons of God.

St. Maximus Confessor

There was one time when two theology professors were talking when the weather was very rough. One of them said, "This is the day that the Lord has made," and the other said, "Well, he's done better!" And the joke may be funny, but sun and rain, heat and cold, are all given by God. We miss something if we only think God is working with us if it is warm and sunny, if we find ourselves in a violent storm and assume God must have abandoned us, if it seems that God can't or won't help us because the weather is so bad.

And we are missing something if we look at the

news and the world around us, and want to say, "This is the day that the Lord has made... he's done better!"

If we are in an economic depression, say, "This is the day that the Lord has made." You're missing something if you need to add, "Well, he's done better!"

A friend quoted to me when I was in a rough spot,

"Life's Tapestry"

Behind those golden clouds up there
 the Great One sews a priceless embroidery
 and since down below we walk
 we see, my child, the reverse view.
 And consequently it is natural for the mind to
 see mistakes
 there where one must give thanks and glorify.

Wait as a Christian for that day to come
 where your soul a-wing will rip through the air
 and you shall see the embroidery of God
 from the good side
 and then... everything will seem to you to be a
 system and order.

And it is true. It is not just, as some have said, that *God's address is at the end of your rope*. That is where you meet God best. It may be easier, not harder, to find God and his providential care in an economic depression. God is working a plan of eternal glory. Westminster opens with the great question, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." But there is a deeper answer. *The chief end of man*

is to become Christ. The chief end of man is to become by grace what Christ is by nature. God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man and the sons of man might become gods and the sons of God. The Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. The divine became human that the human might become divine. This saying has rumbled down through the ages: not only the entire point of being human, but the entire point of each and every circumstance God the Spiritual Father allows to come to us, as a blessing or as a temptation allowed for our strengthening, as God's will working through instruments or sons, is to make us share in Christ's divinity, and the saints' lives show few saints who met this purpose when everything went their way, and a great many where God worked in them precisely in rough and painful circumstances. If we watch the news and say, "This is the day the Lord has made. Well, he's done better," try to open your eyes to the possibility that "Well, he's done better" is what people want to say when, in the words of C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "*Aslan is on the move.*"

Christ's Incarnation is humble. It began humbly, in the scandalous pregnancy of an unwed teen mother, and it unfolds humbly in our lives. Its humble unfolding in our lives comes perhaps best when we have rough times and rough lives, in circumstances we would not choose, in an economic depression above all. You do not understand Christ's Incarnation unless you understand that it is an Incarnation in humility, humble times, and humble conditions. You do not understand Christ's humble Incarnation until you

understand that it did not stop when the Mother of God's scandalous pregnancy began: Christ's humble Incarnation unfolds and unfurls in the Church, in the Saints, and Christ wishes to be Incarnate in every one of us. Christ wishes to be Incarnate in all of us, not in the circumstances we would choose for ourselves, but in the circumstances we are in, when God the Spiritual Father works everything to good for his sons.

Take heart if this sounds hard, like a tall order to live up to. It is hard for me too. It is hard, very hard, or at least it is for me. But it is worth trying to live up to. Even if we do not always succeed.

God became man that man might become God. In whatever circumstances God gives us to train us, as God the Spiritual Father, let us grow as sons of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

God the Game Changer

Some people wince at terms like *game changer* today the same way they winced in earlier years when they heard, "paradigm shift".

But the terms overuse suggests there might be something that triggered the buzz. When Apple introduced the Macintosh, they changed the scene, not only by causing a few Macintoshes to be sold, but by pushing a permanent shift for mainstream computers to be sold with Macintosh-style Windows, not the older command line MS-DOS. Apple may never have sold the same number of units as Microsoft, and they survived due to a Microsoft bailout, but once Apple introduced the Macintosh, Microsoft considered it non-negotiable to release Windows to compete with the Macintosh environment (even if Vista was a painful enough imitation MacOS to earn the scorn of Microsoft's usual fans). It may be in the end that Apple's biggest gift to the world of desktop computing is Windows: Apple's gift to desktop computing today is that you can now buy, as a mainstream choice, Windows 7 instead of something more like MS-

DOS.

It is no longer a provocative statement that Apple's introduction of the iPhone may be a more profound game changer than the Macintosh. It may turn out, in the end, that Apple's gift to mobile computing may be the Droid and Google-based smartphones—Verizon's "Before you choose a phone, choose a map", and, "iDon't"<http://CJSHayward.com/>"Droid does" marketing campaigns certainly reflect a realization on Verizon's part that shooing Apple away when Apple wanted Verizon to be the iPhone's exclusive carrier was perhaps not Verizon's best decision. But the iPhone changed the game profoundly enough that it was the gold standard everyone was trying to beat, and at least before the Droid, no "iPhone killer" even came close.

In both of these cases, Apple didn't offer their own brand of the existing options: while it was not the first graphical user interface, the Macintosh did not offer an attempt to improve on MS-DOS; it showed what a graphical user interface done right for desktop computing could look like. Likewise, the iPhone did not offer a miniaturized standard desktop environment like Windows Mobile, but it showed what mobile computing done right could look like. While the iPhone may no longer be the only phone that does mobile computing right, the Droid underscores that if you're going to beat Apple now, you need to beat it by the same game as Apple is playing in the iPhone. In neither of these cases did Apple try to beat Microsoft at its own game by providing a better MS-DOS, or a better Windows Mobile. Instead, *they changed the game.*

In our lives, we want God to help us struggle better at the games we are playing.

What God wants to do is something different: to change the game.

God the Game Changer at work: A story

Every Lent, Orthodox remember a great saint with a great story. There was a very accomplished priest and monk who was troubled by the idea that no one had gotten as far as him in asceticism (spiritual work). And he was sent to a monastery by the Jordan, where as the custom was, every Lent monks would go out into the desert. And after a while, he saw a person, and chased this person; after a time he asked for the other person to stop fleeing; the other person called him by name and asked for his cloak, since her clothes were long since gone. He was terrified.

She asked why a great ascetic like him could want to speak with a sinful woman like her. They bowed down and asked each other for a blessing; then she told him that he was a priest and he should bless her, terrifying him even more by knowing that he was a priest. Then they spoke, and the woman called herself a sinner without any single virtue, and asked him to pray. So they began to pray, and a long time the priest looked up and saw her above the ground, levitating. He fell to the ground, weeping in prayer. Then he asked her story.

The woman asked his prayers for her shamelessness; in modern terms, she was a sorority girl who majored in men, money, and margaritas, except worse. Much worse. She went to a religious festival, got to church, and a force kept her from

going in. She tried to go around it, then prayed before an icon of Mary the Mother of God asking to be let in and then saying she would do whatever she was told. Then she was able to enter in; she worshipped, and returned to the icon and asked to be told what to do. Then a voice from on high said, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest."

She was given some money and purchased three loaves of bread as she left, and then went, and struggled and struggled and struggled in what seemed like endless temptations and struggles. She had given free reign to her vices for seventeen years, and for seventeen years in the desert she wanted men, wanted wine and lewd songs, wanted meat, and just kept on struggling. After a time—a long, *long* time—things got easier. And she had been living for almost half a century in the desert, eating desert plants and at the mercies of the elements. It came up in the conversation that she quoted from the Bible with understanding. The monk asked her if she had read them. She said she had never seen another person since making the journey, had no one to read holy books to her, and like most people then, she didn't know how to read. Then she alluded to Scripture and suggested that Christ the Word may teach by himself.

She told him he wouldn't be able to come the next year, but to come the year after and give her communion. The next year illness pinned him down, and the year after he went, then saw her on the other side of the river. She crossed herself and walked over the water. They met again like the first, and she asked him to come again in a year.

He returned in a year to find her dead, kissed her feet and washed them with his tears, and found written next to her her last request and her name,

Mary. He didn't see how he would bury her, as per her request, but when he took a piece of wood and began to dig, an enormous lion approached, and at his command dug her grave. Then he and the lion went their separate ways, and per an earlier request, the monk addressed numerous things that needed correction. Somewhere along the way, he asked in perfectly good faith if she would return to the city. Her answer was that no, she would be returning to temptation and ruin all her work. Old woman as she was, she still couldn't handle the temptation of having all those young men around.

What can we learn from all this? In the Parable of the Talents, a master calls his servants and entrusts one with five "talents" (70 pound silver bars), one with two, and one with one talent. He returns and calls an account. The master commends the servant who was given five talents because he has earned five more, and likewise commends the servant given two talents who has earned two more. Then the we hear a different tune (Matthew 25:24-27):

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was

my own with interest..."

This is a bit of a hard passage. The master represents God quite clearly, and this parable not only has the servant say that his master is (to use different words) cruel, but he harvests where he did not plant seeds and gathers where he has not scattered. Worse than that, the master, i.e. God, seems to endorse the portrayal. What are we to make of this?

One thought is that this is rhetorically abstaining from pressing a point. In other words, we could paraphrase the master's reply, "You wicked and slothful servant! Let's say for the sake of argument that I harvest where I did not plant seeds and gather where I have not scattered. Shouldn't you at least have invested it so I could have it back with interest?"

But in fact a deeper understanding is available, and it hinges on a question. What has God not sown? He created Heaven and earth, all things that can be seen and all things that cannot be seen. The demons themselves were created by God; everything from the highest of the angels to the lowest grain of sand, from the greatest saint to the Devil is a creation of God. What then could there be that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown sin, nor suffering, nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death. He created the Devil, but not the rebellion of angels once created pure. God has not sown this; he has not scattered us out of the glory he intended for us. And he has not planted sin, nor suffering, nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death, but he harvests them.

The servant's accusation, which the master

repeats, is that God is so intent on harvest that he harvests whether or not he has sown. The priest, monk, and *saint* Zosima is among the greatest of saints, and he lived a life of spiritual work and spiritually sober living before God. His life was full of seeds that God sowed, and probably from childhood. And God harvested Saint Zosima's good works. But Saint Zosima needed something. He needed to be knocked completely flat on his back.

But to stop here is to miss the glory of God the Game Changer. The woman in the desert did a great many things that God would never sow. She was a worse sinner than a prostitute. But God harvested her and her sins too, and when Zosima had reached a point where he did not know if there was his equal on earth, God showed Saint Zosima, "*Here is someone who leaves you completely in the dust.*"

Saint Mary wondered how many souls she ensnared. The answer is certainly, "Many," and this is tragic. But God harvested her sins, many as they were, and out of her person, her story, and her intercession God has helped innumerrably more people reach salvation. She is one of the greatest saints the Orthodox Church knows. And something is really destroyed in the story if you omit her numerous sins of sexual self-violation.

And in all this, God changed the game. He did not tear up the fabric of time, but he harvested what was planted in her even more than what was planted in Saint Zosima. God harvests where he has sown, and God the Game Change also harvests where he has never sown. And when he does, he pushes the game to another level entirely.

A present-day example of God's game-changing,

this time not with sin but with injury, is in the life of Joni Erickson. At a young age, Erickson dove the wrong way into shallow water and broke her neck, instantly paralyzing her in all four limbs. And she assuredly prayed what everybody who has such an accident prays if prayer is even considered: "Lord, heal me." And some people are healed, miraculously. But an entirely different, in a way deeper, miracle occurred with her. She adjusted to her loss and is a woman who has not only discovered that her life is still worth living, but has become a vibrant and well-known ambassador for the claim, "Even after a tragedy like mine, *life is still worth living*." None of this would have happened if she had not suffered an injury that cost her the use of all four limbs. For that matter, none of this would have happened if God answered her prayers by giving her the supernatural healing she wanted. Instead, God changed the game. He answered her prayers, not by giving what she asked for, but by moving the game to the next level. God did not plant her injury, but he has harvested where he did not plant and gathered in where he never scattered.

More than a game change

The Gospel is the story of God changing the game. It was much more than Pharisees who did not recognize Christ; his own disciples seemed to have their eyes equally wide shut.

Christ's people looked for a military Messiah who would deliver the Jews from Roman domination. Christ changed the game; he did not offer salvation as military deliverance, but salvation from sin. He didn't give people what they were

looking for; he pushed the game to the next level.

Darkness reigned in the crucifixion of Christ. Something like a quarter to a third of the Gospels are devoted to Christ's passion. The message appears to be very clear: "But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53 NIV). *Game over. All hope is lost.*

Yet this profound evil is precisely what God harvested treasure beyond all beauty. In I Corinthians 15 Saint Paul writes,

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last

Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

And Saint Paul knew a game change in his own life. English translations seem to put this point much more delicately, but Saint Paul, earlier in this chapter, compares himself to a miscarried child, as the least of the Apostles. He almost seems to be saying, "If there's hope for me, there's hope for anybody." And yet God harvested from what was sown in this persecutor of the Church.

The Resurrection is the ultimate game-changing move. Saint John Chrysostom's famous resurrection

homily proclaims:

Let no one bewail his poverty,
For the universal Kingdom has been revealed.
Let no one weep for his iniquities,
For pardon has shown forth from the grave.
Let no one fear death,
For the Saviour's death has set us free.
He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated
it.

By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive.
He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.
And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry:
Hell, said he, was embittered
When it encountered Thee in the lower
regions.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.
It was embittered, for it was mocked.
It was embittered, for it was slain.
It was embittered, for it was overthrown.
It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.
It took a body, and met God face to face.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took that which was seen, and fell upon the
unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!
Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is risen, and life reigns!

Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in
the grave.

For Christ, being risen from the dead,
Is become the first-fruits of those who have
fallen asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion
Unto ages of ages.

Amen.

We would do well to remember the scene a short distance after the funereal scene of joy turned to weeping at the death of King Caspian in Prince Caspian:

"Look here! I say," he stammered. "It's all very well. But aren't you—? I mean didn't you —"

"Oh, don't be such an ass," said [King] Caspian.

"But," said Eustace, looking at Aslan. "Hasn't he—er—died?"

"Yes," said the Lion in a very quiet voice, almost (Jill thought) as if he were laughing. "He has died. Most people have, you know. Even I have. There are very few who haven't."

Earlier in the Gospel, in Luke chapter 7, there is a scene where a widow's only son is carried out on a bier, and Christ says something truly strange: before doing anything else, he tells her not to weep. He is speaking to a woman who has been twice bereaved, and with her last bereavement went her source of support. And he tells her, "Weep not!" He then goes on to raise her son from the dead. That

isn't what is happening in Christ's resurrection.

Christ, the firstborn of the dead, opened death as one opening the womb. And he himself was sown a natural body and is raised a spiritual body. And God did more than simply flip the switch and make Christ's body like it was before death. The marks of crucifixion remain imprinted on his body as Joni Eareckson Tada remains quadriplegic. But Christ moved forward in triumph. He remains forever imprinted with the marks of death suffered for our sakes, and he bears them as his trophy. His victory as God the Game Changer takes us, harvesting what he has sown in our good deeds and our repentance, and what he has not sown in our sins and in evils that happen to us, and alike transforms us as trophies in his wake. Christ God is victor over both sin and death, and this victory is not just something that could be ours at Judgment Day; it is the central reality of day to day life. Saint Seraphim would greet people with the Paschal greeting year round: "Christ is risen, my joy!" While that is not the usual Orthodox custom, that he did so is entirely fitting and not in any sense an exaggeration of the Resurrection's importance. The Resurrection, the greatest act yet of God the Game Changer, is what God will do on a smaller scale in our lives. God sometimes gives us victory in the game we are playing, and sometimes changes the game and pushes us to the next level. It may be a painful and difficult process; it may involve loss and any amount of bewilderment. But when we seem to have lost, it may just be God the Game Changer's power at work.

Christ is risen, His joy!

How to Survive Hard Times

Want to survive?

I learned some pretty big things during the Y2k scare, and some of them have every relevance to how to survive an economic depression.

When year 2000 was approaching, I was part of the doomsday camp. I believed, wrongly, that technology would fail and everything around me would start to fall apart. But did a lot of digging and I think I learned something about what makes people survive really rough situations--and how to survive an economic depression. The economy is in deep trouble, and what I found out then has every relevance now that we are worried about how to survive an economic depression.

When Y2k was approaching, I found a lot of materials on *physical* preparation for such an event, but very little on *psychological* preparation. The most that I can remember reading about that was that when I said on a newsgroup that a Y2k

doomsday would be psychologically as well as physically difficult, someone said that I was right and suggested that Y2k preparations include stocking up on board games and condoms.

That answer seemed, to put it politely, not up to snuff. As far as mental preparation goes, that was the equivalent of saying, "If bad things happen on January 1 2000, be prepared for great physical danger. *Always* remember to look both ways before you cross the street!"

After failing to find something more informative on newsgroups, I went to the library, to look for more information on psychological survival in difficult situations. I did a lot of digging, reading whatever seemed like it might shed light, but finding very little of an answer *anywhere* that I looked. Even a book on psychology and the military said almost nothing about how either soldiers or civilians stood up psychologically to disaster, or what enables a survivor to overcome an incredibly difficult situation.

It was only after a lot of digging that I realized the answer was almost staring me in the face. What makes a survivor is not exactly *psychological*. It is *spiritual*. There was something spiritual about, for instance, people who had survived incredibly hostile situations as hostages and prisoners. It is not exactly that they had some special talent, or drew on some special mind trick or had developed what we would imagine as spiritual powers. It was something almost *pedestrian*.

It had something to do with religious devotion. Faith has something to do with how to survive an economic depression.

I imagine I may raise some eyebrows by

suggesting faith has something to do with how to survive a disaster. But faith was how many people survived the Great Depression. Perhaps a great many survivors survived despite their useless faith, or maybe it was a crutch, but if it seems obvious to you that faith could have nothing to do with how people survived the Great Depression, then I would ask you to entertain a possibility you might not have considered. Maybe they know something we have forgotten.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Much of the Bible comes from disastrous times. In the Bible's book of Habakkuk, there is a prophet who sees great evil about him. He cries out to the Lord, and the Lord gives an answer that leaves the prophet stunned: the Lord will punish the wickedness of Israel by having an army of terrorists conquer their land. This was a disaster that might be worse than economic collapse. The prophet asks the Lord a question: how can a righteous God look on such wickedness? And the Lord responds without really answering the prophet's question: the Lord responds without giving the prophet what he wants. But tucked away in the Lord's response are some very significant words: "...the righteous shall live by faith."

Those words were taken up in the New Testament and became a rallying-cry against rigid legalism. But they are more than a response to people who turn religion into a bunch of rules; they speak also in situations where legalism is simply not the issue. The prophet cried out to the Lord

about rampant violence. The issue was not really legalism at all. And this is when the words were first spoken: "The righteous shall live by faith." These words were given in terrifying times.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is a non-answer, and a quite deliberate non-answer. The prophet asked how such a pure God could allow such wickedness to exist, and God does not give the answer he is looking for. The Lord doesn't really answer the prophet's question at *all*. It's almost like:

Someone said to a master, "What about the people who have never heard of Christ? Are they all automatically damned to Hell? Tell me; I have heard that you have studied this question."

The master said, "What you need to be saved is for you to believe in Christ, and you have heard of him."

The Lord doesn't tell the prophet what he wants. He gives him something much better; these brief words say, "I AM WHO I AM, and I will do what I will do, and you may not look past the protecting veil that enshrouds me. But in the disastrous times you face, know this: the righteous shall live by faith."

God doesn't just refuse to tell the prophet what he *wants*. He gives Habakkuk something fundamentally richer and deeper. He tells the prophet what he *needs*. What God tells Habakkuk, "The righteous shall live by faith," is a luminous thread appearing throughout Scripture, woven into the fabric of Proverbs and woven through and

through in the Sermon on the Mount. This luminous, radiant thread declares that God is sovereign, in hard times as well as good, and that his divine providence is with his faithful no less. *Even if we are in a depression, God can watch out for us.* (Perhape *especially* if we are in a depression. The surprising report from many survivors is that God's help is much more obvious in hard times than when things are easy.) Just witness this luminous thread in the Sermon on the Mount:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear. Is there not more to life than food, and more to the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add one hour to his span of life? (You might as well try to worry yourself into being a foot and a half taller!) And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither work nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as gloriously as one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, `What shall

we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For people without faith seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own things to worry about. Each day has enough worries of its own.

The righteous shall live by faith, and the Sermon on the Mount has a great deal to say about exactly *how* the righteous shall live by faith. The radiant thread unfolds, unfurls, *beams*, "Money is unworthy of your trust: put your trust in God. Live in the security of faith. Have the true security of faith in God who provides, not the ersatz providence of what you can arrange for yourself. Do not spend your life building a sandcastle for your home and trying to keep it from collapsing. I offer you a way to build a solid house, built on the rock."

And this is not just a statement about how we should not worry about the future when we have it easy. The Sermon on the Mount closes with words that are entirely relevant to surviving the storms of life when we wonder how to survive an economic depression:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

And every one who hears these words of

mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and its collapse was great.

These are not words about nothing more than how to relax and enjoy life when it is easy. These are words about how to prepare for hard times, and how to survive in a disaster. In other words, they are words about how to survive an economic depression.

In hard times as well as good, *the righteous shall live by faith*. Indeed, the words "the righteous shall live by faith" originally come from times with an industrial-strength disaster on the horizon!

The Apostle Paul: Portrait of a *survivor!*

Who can survive stress like an industrial-strength disaster? The Bible paints a picture of one person who survived a lot of really rough times, and not only *survived*, but genuinely *thrived*.

When I was in college, part of the general "foundations of wellness" class was taking the Holmes Stress Point Scale, which assigns points for stressful events to add up to a rough estimate of how stressful your life is. You get a certain number of points for each stressful experience you've been through, and they add up to your total score for how stressful the past year of your life is. The events include:

- Jail term...

- Death of a close friend...
- Outstanding personal achievement...
- Vacation...
- Christmas...
- Minor violation of the law...

The higher a score from stressful events, the more stressful your life is. The scale's explanation is: *If your score is 300 or more, you are at a very high stress level and probably run a major risk of illness in the next year. If your score is 200 to 299, your stress and illness risk are moderate, and if your score is between 150 to 200, your stress and risk are mild.*

My teacher mentioned that one student had computed such a score for a year in the life of the Apostle Paul, who went through a number of events that should score major points for stress:

- Jailed...
- Attacked by a frenzied mob...
- Shipwrecked in the mother of all storms...
- Clandestine escape from a city when people were trying to kill him...
- Physically assaulted by soldiers...

- Survived an assassination attempt...

The student calculated a staggering 675 points for one year in the life of St. Paul!

But the odd thing is that if you read the Book of Acts, St. Paul does not really come across as someone we should pity. We read that some of his colleagues were harassed, beaten, and afterwards were rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of their Lord. When I read the accounts of these events, I walk away with a sense, not that these suffering heroes are poor and pitiable, but that they are giants and they utterly dwarf me. There is something greater in the Apostle, far greater, than a whopping 675 points worth of *externally* stressful events.

It is the same thing, really, as with people who survived a long time being hostages for terrorists. They had dug deep and built their house on the rock, and when stormwinds battered their house, it survived and stood firm. It is the same thing for the bedrock of how people survived the Great Depression. And if we may be battered by hard economic times, we would like our houses to stand firm as well.

Suffering and sonship

It may be that what we fear that in a potential disaster is that we will lose what is good for us. We may fear getting sidetracked when none of our dreams seem to come true. We may fear that God cannot really provide our good if our recession becomes a depression or even an economic collapse--that the Sermon on the Mount is

presumably about how to live in easy times but wouldn't be quite so helpful when we're in a depression. But there is something we are missing. Some of the things that we fear may have a surprisingly positive place in a well-lived life. There is something we are missing in all this.

Suffering has a place in the divine discipleship—the divine sonship—that the Sermon on the Mount is all about. "The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God," as C.S. Lewis echoed the ancient wisdom, a wisdom that plays out in discipleship. Discipleship, service to God in difficulties, providence, and ascetical or spiritual practices all come together: God provides for us and discipules us in hard times as well as good. Sometimes he provides more plainly when we have nothing than when we have everything. In the *Philokalia*, we hear the words of St. Makarios as he explains the place of suffering in discipleship:

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord,

prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills

cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The story is told of a woman who was told the Lord would be with her, and afterwards found herself an incredibly painful situation. When she cried out to the Lord and asked how this could be, the Lord answered: "I never said it would be easy. I said I'd be *with* you." God's way, it seems, is not to make things easy for us, but to strengthen us for greatness in what are often hard situations, and sometimes disasters. He gives us mountains to climb and the strength for climbing.

And we can climb mountains even if we are in an economic depression. Perhaps *especially* if we are in an economic recession. God's providence does not spare us from our suffering. Not even if we're really good Christians—*especially* not if we're

really good Christians! If you read the saints' lives (see the links on the natural cycle clock), you will see that even with all the wondrous providence God provides for the saints, the saints in fact suffer much *more* than the rest of us; they know sufferings worse than most of us have ever been through.

There are saints whose prayers healed others—but who were for themselves never healed of their own major illnesses. If this sounds ironic, remember that Christ also was told, "Physician, heal thyself." Christ is pre-eminent as one who saved others but could not save himself, and "He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is one way of *defining* God's kingdom. Part of how people survived the Great Depression was that they carried the spirit of God's kingdom and worked to save others, and not just themselves. Communities of people survived the Great Depression because, even if no one could save "Me! Me! Me!", perhaps each one could help save *others*.

God's providence does not spare us from our suffering, but he works with us *in* our suffering, often to do things with us that could never happen if we had things our way. It may be precisely *on* the mountain, *in* the act of climbing, that God gives us the strength to climb!

Sometimes God works with us despite our best efforts to fix things so we can have things our way. Wise people rightly tells us, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans," and "You can't always get what you want." And perhaps if we did get what we wanted, we wouldn't get what God wanted for us. Some of us may try to fix our problems and pray to God to take them away—when his plan is to use our problems to build us up.

St. Makarios above quotes Hebrews, and in fact Hebrews is one of the clearest books of the Bible that God works with us in suffering—in fact, that Christ himself was perfected by suffering (source):

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. Therefore, holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.

...But recall the former days when, after

you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Our view of suffering is often that if we are suffering, then we cannot be where we should be. It often seems we can only be where we should be when we are *out* of a difficult situation). It seems that we are sidetracked, and will only stop being sidetracked when we have things our way. But that is absolutely false. God worked with Christ in suffering. God worked with the saints in suffering. God worked with us in suffering. And that means that we can be in suffering and in pain, with our godly plans failing, and we are still just where God wants us: we may not see it, but sometimes our earthly failure is a heavenly victory. If God allows us to be in an economic collapse, he may be doing things with us, good things, that we might never happen if we had the comfort we seem to need. The last words above, about suffering and failure, lead *directly* into the famous "faith hall of fame" in Hebrews 11.

What may be happening in our sufferings is that God is building us into greater people than if we succeed in getting what we want. Including if we

are in an economic depression. This is a basic lesson of people growing up: many young people have big dreams for themselves, but grow by middle age into living for others, growing into something that could never happen if all their youthful dreams came true. And suffering has a place in this—and a greater and deeper value. The Son of God was made perfect through suffering. Innocent suffering is sharing in the suffering of Christ: Christ's suffering is made perfect in his people. St. Paul, the survivor who went through terrible suffering, wrote, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." (Col 1.24 RSV)

Suffering is *not* getting off-track, nor does it force us out of God's plans, so that we only get into God's providence as soon as things are the way we would like. What some of us fear in suffering is that if we are in difficult circumstances, then that must mean we are spiritual failures as well as failing on earth. If we are faithful and still fail in our plans, this does not mean that either God's plans or providence have failed. Often he is working at us when we are suffering and we are so far afield from anything that makes sense to us.

Everything we meet is either a blessing from God, or a trial that God allows for our strengthening. You may say that there is something evil in your trials, and you would be entirely right: there is something evil, and perhaps demonic, in our trials and afflictions. Perhaps you may say that there seems to be something almost demonic about an economic collapse, and you would still be right. But, as C.S. Lewis observes, *all* of us do the will of

God. We may do the will of God as Satan and Judas did, as *instruments*, or we may do the will of God as Peter and John did, as *sons*. But all of us do the will of God, and ultimately Satan and may be no more than a hammer in God's hand. And even if God allows rough trials, he allows them for our strengthening. St. Makarios is very clear: "The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to." Evil is on a leash. Let us be faithful. Every move the Devil plays is one move closer to his loss and God's victory, and ours if we are faithful.

I am not saying that the future holds much suffering. You or I may have a lot of suffering, or actually not that much. I am, however, saying that however much suffering God allows, he can still work with us. He can still work with us in an economic depression. (And that is even *without* going into how a great many people have been in situations they dreaded, and found life to still be beautiful.) As St. Paul, a survivor, closed Romans 8:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Building a house on the rock— *it's not all about you!*

Ascesis refers to disciplined spiritual practice. It's a part of building a house on the rock. In the Orthodox tradition, these include sacraments, church attendance and daily liturgical prayers, reading and listening to Scripture, working to keep the Jesus prayer in your heart ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), growing into the liturgical seasons and internal and external fasting, hospitality, service, thanksgiving, repentance, giving to others who ask your help, cutting back on selfish pleasures, including icons in your prayer, solitude, community, and other practices. All of these can offer different help in growing to spiritual maturity.

But there comes a crucial caveat. None of these, if they are working correctly, are all about us. However essential they are to building a house on the rock, they are infinitely more than tools for how to survive an economic depression. They are tools to living in communion with God and being transformed by his grace. These disciplines, used rightly, can clear away obstacles to our growing in discipleship under God, but if they are used wrongly, they can be extremely harmful.

Using ascetical practices wrongly, as ends in themselves, has the same problem as Eeyore in *The House at Pooh Corner*:

[Piglet picked some violets, decided to give them to Eeyore, and went to visit him.]

"Oh, Eeyore," began Piglet a little

nervously, because Eeyore was busy.

"To-morrow," said Eeyore. "Or the next day." Piglet came a little closer to see what it was. Eeyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind.

"Oh, Eeyore," he began again, "I just—"

"Is that little Piglet?" said Eeyore, still looking hard at his sticks.

"Yes, Eeyore, and I—"

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," said Piglet.

"It's an A."

"Oh," said Piglet.

"Not O—A," said Eeyore severely. "Can't you hear, or do you think you have more education than Christopher Robin?"

"Yes," said Piglet. "No," said Piglet very quickly, and he came closer still.

"Christopher Robin said it was an A, and an A it is—until somebody treads on it," Eeyore added sternly.

Piglet jumped backwards hurriedly, and smelt at his violets.

"Do you know what A means, little Piglet?"

"No, Eeyore, I don't."

"It means Learning, it means Education, it means all the things that you and Pooh haven't got. That's what A means."

"Oh," said Piglet again. "I mean, does it?" he explained quickly.

"I'm telling you. People come and go in this Forest, and they say, 'It's only Eeyore, so it

doesn't count.' They walk to and fro saying 'Ha ha!' But do they know anything about A? They don't. It's just three sticks to them. But to the Educated—mark this, little Piglet—to the Educated, not meaning Poohs and Piglets, it's a great and glorious A. Not," he added, "just something that anybody can come and breathe on."

Piglet stepped back nervously, and looked round for help.

"Here's Rabbit," he said gladly. "Hallo, Rabbit."

Rabbit came up importantly, nodded to Piglet, and said, "Ah, Eeyore," in the voice of one who would be saying "Good-bye" in about two more minutes.

"There's just one thing I wanted to ask you, Eeyore. What happens to Christopher Robin in the mornings nowadays?"

"What's this that I'm looking at?" said Eeyore, still looking at it.

"Three sticks," said Rabbit promptly.

"You see?" said Eeyore to Piglet. He turned to Rabbit. "I will now answer your question," he said solemnly.

"Thank you," said Rabbit.

"What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becomes Educated. He instigates—I think that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else—he instigates Knowledge. In my small way, I also, if I have the word right, am—am doing what he does. That, do instance is?"

"An A," said Rabbit, "but not a very good

one. Well, I must get back and tell the others."

Eeyore looked at his sticks and then he looked at Piglet.

"What did Rabbit say it was?" he asked.

"An A," said Piglet.

"Did you tell him?"

"No, Eeyore, I didn't. I expect he just knew."

"He knew? You mean this A thing is a thing Rabbit knew?"

"Yes, Eeyore. He's very clever, Rabbit is."

"Clever!" said Eeyore scornfully, putting a foot heavily on his three sticks. "Education!" said Eeyore bitterly, jumping on his six sticks. "What is Learning?" asked Eeyore as he kicked his twelve sticks into the air. "A thing Rabbit knows! Ha!"

We need to avoid being Eeyores with our spiritual discipline, or our spirituality, or our faith, or our religion. Letters serve a greater purpose, and so do ascetical practices: we should not, like Eeyore, stare at an A and tell ourselves that it is our Education and Learning, or Prayers and Church Attendance as the case may be.

The point of ascetical practices is to be steps of the Great Dance: living the life that God shares, and becoming one of the sons of God. It's not merely a set of survival skills that work in an economic recession or depression, or even an economic collapse, even if "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own," is quite practical advice. The point is to seek first the kingdom of a God who knows our survival needs: as God told Habakkuk before a disaster, "The

righteous shall live by faith." The luminous thread beams brightly because it is more than just a white thread. It *shines*, and it shines with the light of Heaven, a light of divine love that illumines Creation.

What Eeyore doesn't get about the luminous thread is that it is the light of Heaven shining on earth.

Better than an endowment

Some years before I became Orthodox, I was at a class where someone was commenting on Proverbs, and its texts that say, in essence, "Put your trust in God, not money." ("Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," Prov 11:4 RSV.) One point he made that particularly surprised me was, "Endowments aren't so great."

He asked a question: if we want to be independently wealthy, who do we want the "independently" to mean we are independent from? The answer he gave: "*Independent from God.*" If we want to be independently wealthy, we may want something more than mere luxuries. The basic fantasy of life as we imagine ourselves being independently wealthy, is a life that is in control and unlike the actual messiness of our real lives with so many things that are simply beyond our control. And his suggestion, based on real life as well as Proverbs, is that it is actually not good for us to have an endowment that we can trust.

One kind of person counselors work with is the person who cannot be happy without being in control of everyone around them. The basic

problem is that a person who needs to be in control is a tragically shrunken person, and part of what a counselor will try to give a person is an opportunity to step into a larger world. If you believe, "I can't be happy unless I'm in control of everyone I'm involved with," that will set you up for a lot of unhappiness.

This is not just because it is really hard to control everyone else. A few people who want to control others really do manage to control others around them, but they are really as unhappy as others who want the same thing but don't manage the control over others they always want to establish. As Chesterton observed, there may be some desires which are not achievable, but there *are* some desires which are not *desirable*.

If you want the world to be small enough that there is nothing outside your control, you want to live in a small and terribly shrunken world. If you let go of that kind of control, you may find that you have let yourself into a much bigger world than if you were the biggest thing around, and in the process you become bigger yourself. Instead of being a tin god ruling a world as cramped as a cubicle, you become servant in God's vast mansions. And being one of many of these servants is a much better position to be in than dominating as a tin god.

And there is more to this larger world, the larger world of serving in God's great mansions. The words, "The righteous shall live by faith" were given, in full force, when a brutal invasion was coming. Those words may not originally have been about how to survive an economic depression. They were originally more about how to survive something worse: your country being taken over by

terrorists!

The words, "The righteous shall live by faith," and the Sermon on the Mount, apply to some pretty rough situations, *including* an economic recession, economic depression, or economic collapse. Christ's words about not worrying do not apply just to privileged people who have nothing seriously worth worrying about; many of the people who first heard the Sermon on the Mount were on the *bottom* of the totem pole and would see less material comfort than the kind of person most Americans would imagine as a homeless person.

The model prayer Christ would give is not a prayer for something nicer for people stuck on a nasty diet of burgers and KFC; the one physical request is for *bread*—by American standards, quite a dull thing to eat day in and day out, and possibly poorer nutritional fare than fast food—and it is in *this* context that Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, beckons us to store up treasure in Heaven, and invites us to a spiritual feast that unfurls in hard times as well as when everything meets our expectations. He invites us to the spiritual feast, the larger world, that is at the heart of spirituality and religion and is unlocked by faith. The Sermon on the Mount neither assumes nor needs a high standard of living to have real treasure.

The invitation to dance the Great Dance is open to us now as ever. All of us are invited to the Great Feast. Even if we've snubbed words like, "Money doesn't make you happy," and, "The best things in life are free," not only do those truths remain open to us, but the Divine Providence is no less open. If our external circumstances remove all the luxuries that serve us, we may discover that not only is it

better to give than receive, but it is also better to serve and be served. We might take a tip from how people survived the Great Depression. If we are unemployed, we might serve others and find something that technologies and luxuries can't give, and if our 401(k) plan becomes a 404(k) and vanishes, we might lean on God's providence and discover that God's providence gives us more than money could.

There's a sign that was seen around my hometown that says, "Money may not do everything, but it sure keeps the kids in touch!" And I wonder if that is precisely what we gain if we do not know what will meet our needs in the future: our material needs can "keep the kids in touch" for God. Especially in an economy in shambles. And if that happens, we have something no money could buy: keeping in touch with God in a way that is ultimately a Heavenly transformation.

The prodigal son: "I wish you were dead!"

The parable of the prodigal son begins:

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he

went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the husks that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, `How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, `Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, `Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Today, one of the ways parents might give money to children is letting them "borrow against their inheritance:" they wouldn't have to pay the money back, but they lose that much of their inheritance when their parents die. And this is considered a fairly normal arrangement.

This *isn't* what is going on here. The younger son's request telegraphs something loud and clear:

"I wish you were dead!"

We see a first glimpse of God's love—a love to the point of madness. Out of all responses the father could have to this affront, he gave every last penny he was asked for. The love to the point of madness may be easier to see later on, but it is already present in the gift by which he answers the ludicrously inappropriate request.

The son goes off to live life the way he wants to. And living life the way he wants to hits rock bottom. The big party he imagined he'd make for himself turns into famine and dire straits that leave him coveting the unappetizing husks that he is feeding to unclean, vile swine. He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots, not his father.

He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots. Just like some of us here. We don't want to have to wait under the authority of a Father who calls the shots. We want money and control, with things lined up here and now. What is it we are telling God if we ask him to give us money and control on our terms? Something a bit like, "I wish you were dead."

The younger son has discovered that life with his father out of the picture is not so glorious and wonderful. And he realizes the extent of his fall. So he resolves to go back and beg, not even for forgiveness, but possibly his father might even contain his wounded resentment enough to let him work for pay and be able to buy bread. (Who knows? Maybe a long shot, but what real alternative did he have?)

What was the father doing in all of this?

When husbands have gone off to war, there have been wives who have stood by the path of the

doorway, looking for some hope that their husbands may return, looking and waiting, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... *never* giving up! And the father in our story was doing *exactly* that.

The father was looking, waiting, and saw his son far off, and completely cast off his upper-class dignity to run and embrace him. Love to the point of madness! He didn't even wait for an apology before embracing him and kissing him!

And when the son made a full confession, hoping maybe to toil for his father's scraps, the father pulls out all the stops: the best robe, a ring for his finger, and the best food possible for a royal feast. *This is love to the point of madness!*

But the story continues on to a more sobering note:

Now his older son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, 'Look, I have served you for all of these years, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a goat kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always

with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

We have an Eeyore here.

This story has been called the parable of the two prodigals, meaning that not only did the one son tragically fall, but the other, elder son also tragically falls from the glory his father would have wished for him. At the beginning, the younger son wished that his father was dead. At the end, did the older son wish his father was dead?

The older son is a tragic spiritual Eeyore.

His statement could have come from a very different angle. For all of the years the older son was in his father's service, he toiled, and he may not have had rich party food—only solid, nourishing, ordinary food day by day. For all these many years, he worked hard in the context of the father training him, and drawing him into mature manhood. In the meantime, his brother has been ripping up his own soul, losing even what he thought he had at the mercy of merciless people with no one else who cared for his well-being. The brother who all but told his father, "I wish you were dead," was in every sense save the literal, himself *dead*.

If it is painful to lose one's parents, it is another level of pain to lose one's child, and the father had seen one of his sons—not to mention the older son's only brother—die a living death. Now he was back, and in every sense *including* the literal, alive. Was killing the fatted calf even *enough* of a celebration?

The older son didn't get it. How well did his service to his father work? Not very well; it went

badly enough that instead of sharing in his father's joy at a lost son who "was dead, and is alive again," acts bitterly affronted and indicts his father searingly. Which is to say, the son's hard work didn't *work*, any more than Eeyore's laborious staring at his three sticks achieved the true heart of "Learning" and "Education."

The point, though, is not really the tragedy of the older son. The point is that God welcomes people who turn to him, and welcomes them with open arms. It is only one step to turn to God, even if you think you are ten thousand steps away. But when are we ready?

It is easy enough to wait for life to *really* begin. When? Maybe when the present illness is gone, or when we get that promotion, or maybe just when we get a job in the first place, or when someone we deal with will become not quite so difficult a person, or when we have something paid off, or when Washington gets its act together. When something big or small changes, *then* maybe we will be in God's blessing. St. Herman of Alaska met some people who were waiting for their lives to *really* begin:

Father Herman gave them all one general question: "Gentlemen, what do you love above all, and what will each of you wish for your happiness?" Various answers were offered... Some desired wealth, others glory, some a beautiful wife, and still others a beautiful ship he would captain; and so forth in the same vein. "Is it not true," Father Herman said to them concerning this, "that all your various wishes can bring us to one conclusion - that

each of you desires that which in his own understanding he considers the best, and which is most worthy of his love?" They all answered, "Yes, that is so!" He then continued, "Would you not say, 'Is not that which is best, above all, and surpassing all, and that which by preference is most worthy of love, the Very Lord, our Jesus Christ, who created us, adorned us with such ideals, gave life to all, sustains everything, nurtures and loves all, who is Himself Love and most beautiful of all men?' Should we not then love God above everything, desire Him more than anything, and search him out?"

All said, "Why, yes! That's self-evident!" Then the Elder asked, "But do you love God?" They all answered, "Certainly, we love God. How can we not love God?" "And I a sinner have been trying for more than forty years to love God, I cannot say that I love Him completely," Father Herman protested to them. He then began to demonstrate to them the way in which we should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always remember them; we try to please them. Day and night our heart is concerned with the subject. Is that the way you gentlemen love God? Do you turn to Him often? Do you always remember Him? Do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments?" They had to admit that they did not! "For our own good, and for our own fortune," continued the Elder, "let us at least promise ourselves that from this very minute we will try to love God more than anything and to fulfill His Holy Will!"

The time for God is not at some indefinite point in the future when things will fit our hopes better. The time to work with God, in a sense the only time we should be concerned with, is now. Not later, *now*.

More precious than gold

When I was a child, I remembered a story about a fearsome dragon who told a knight that if the knight would tickle the dragon's throat with a sword, he would have a great treasure. The knight rode up on his horse and approached the dragon, already afraid, and asked if the treasure was as good as a good horse and a good suit of armor. It was more, the dragon said. The knight asked if the treasure was as good as a silver suit of armor, and shield and sword to match. It was, the dragon assured him. The knight then asked if the treasure was better than gold. The dragon answered that it was more precious than rooms full of gold. So the terrified knight trembled and tickled the dragon's throat with his sword, and asked what the treasure was. And the dragon turned and ripped the knight's sword out of his hand, breathing out a tremendous deluge of fire and smoke and roared, "Your *life!*" And the terrified knight, having lost his sword, fled as best he could, and grasped a treasure far more precious than rooms and rooms full of gold.

Hard times may still let us know what is truly important, and what is truly treasure.

Even if we are in an economic depression, we have a treasure worth more than rooms and rooms full of gold: our lives.

For the righteous who walk by faith, hard times may even turn out to be good times.

St. John Chrysostom once wrote to people who think they are somebody if they conspicuously ride on a horse and have an armed servant clear the way before them, and told them that they were missing something and have *all* the wrong priorities. These words seem like they have nothing to do with how to survive in an economic depression—but on a very deep level, they have *everything* to do with how to survive in an economic depression where we may lose any number of things that seem so essential. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

And I know that I am disgusting my hearers. But what can I do? I have set my mind on this and will not stop saying these things, whether or not anything comes of it. For what is the point of having someone clear the way before you in the marketplace? Are you walking among wild beasts so that you need to drive away those who meet you? Do not be afraid of the people who approach you and walk near you; none of them bite. But why do you consider it an insult to walk alongside other people? What craziness is this, what ludicrous folly, when you don't mind having a horse follow close behind you, but if it is a person, you think you are disgraced unless the person is driven a hundred miles away. And why do you have servants to carry horse _____, using the free as slaves, or rather yourself living more dishonorably than any slave? For truly, anyone who bears so much pride is more repulsive than any slave.

Therefore people who have enslaved themselves to this vile habit will never come within sight of true liberty. No, if you must drive away and clear away anything, do not let it be those who come near you, but your own pride. Do not do this by your servant, but by yourself, not by this material weapon, but by the spiritual one. Since now your servant drives away those who walk alongside you, but you yourself are driven from your rightful place by your own self-will, more disgracefully than any servant can drive your neighbor. But if, descending from your horse, you will drive away pride by humility, you will sit higher and place yourself in greater honor, without needing any servant to do this for you. I mean that when you have become modest and walk on the ground, you will be seated on the horse-drawn carriage of humility which carries you up to the very heavens, the carriage with winged steeds: but if falling from the horse-drawn carriage of heaven, you pass into that of arrogance, you will be in no better state than crippled beggars who are carried along the ground—no, much more wretched and pathetic than they are: since they are carried because of their bodies' weakness, but you because of the disease of your own arrogance.

Some of us also need the carriage of humility, even if we are not even in a position to make everybody get out of our way. And some of us might benefit from the loving interdependence that was how people survived the Great Depression.

In tough times—and in tougher times—we may

lose things we have set our hearts on, but it may be that however much we resist, God will give us something better. What if I lose my car, for instance? How could I get something better? But it is entirely possible that I could get something better than my present car. I might get something better than my own Rolls Royce, even better than my own private jet. I might get more *interdependence*, where *I* do not get around by what *I* do by *my* car. I may still be able to go places, but now by the love of my friends and family.

In that case, if I get some groceries, or a ride to church, I am not getting it as something run by me, me, me; I am riding on community and love. And the love of another who cares about me is a much bigger thing than economic self-sufficiency. It's the same thing as food tasting better if it is prepared with love for hospitality—then it isn't just food. You are, in a very real sense, eating a friend's love, and that is a richer and deeper kind of sustenance—and a richer, deeper, and fuller *goodness*!

Who knows? I might ride even higher than this if my car is taken from me. Perhaps I might respond to the humiliation of losing my car by starting to let Christ chauffeur me to Heaven in the flying Rolls-Royce of humility. Maybe I might even start being grateful, and be carried by the car of gratitude, and look for ways that I might launch into the heavens on the immense celestial starship of service to others.

And it is the starship of service to others—of saving others even though I cannot save myself—that shines with celestial glory. "It is more blessed to give than to receive"—the Sermon on the Mount again. Perhaps I might stop thinking about my own survival and instead think about how I can save

others even though I cannot save myself. Some people did not just survive the Great Depression; they learned that life is beautiful. They stopped being tin gods trying to rule over a shrunken world and became servants of God and each other in the vast mansions of a glorious God. In the Great Depression, they did not have gold, but they grasped a treasure vaster than rooms and rooms full of gold. For some, the Great Depression was a wakeup call to what is truly important in life.

And that is true wealth.

Why are some of us not living this way already? Repentance is terrifying. In the tale of the prodigal son, the son who had devoured his father's property was in far from his father's house, and had real work to get back. He had to *travel* in a much rougher sense than taking a plane, train, or bus, and faced much nastier dangers than "Dinner in New York, breakfast in London, luggage in Sydney."

Our word "travel" comes from the French *travailler*, referring to work, and not exactly easy work: with slightly different spelling, the same word appears in English as "travail," meaning a mother's struggle in childbirth. Travel was hard, gruelling, and dangerous labor, and not for the faint of heart. And the prodigal son undertook travel with far less of the strength—not to mention absolutely none of the wealth—by which he had gotten there. The feat would have been comparable to running a marathon, or at least a marathon where your path might well go through the turf of thugs lying in wait and quite willing to kill anyone who would *travail* into their ambush.

And yet this is exactly what the prodigal son did. His brother may have done the ascetical work

of prayers and fasting; but the younger son undertook something much tougher: repentance which is, in a spiritual sense, what the younger son did to return home.

Repentance has been called unconditional surrender. It has been called other things as well, and it terrifies: it is a decision to return home and beg for mercy when you have no grounds to expect to be treated like anything but the vilest of the scum of the earth. Perhaps the Father's love to the point of madness may respond otherwise when we have repented. Perhaps we when we surrender conditionally and expect to be razed to the ground, we find ourselves walking away triumphant victors whose refusal to surrender was holding on to defeat for dear life, terrified to let go of our defeat because we think it helps us. Perhaps we have nothing, really, to lose but our misery. But that isn't our concern when we need to repent.

But if we can repent—for all of us have much to repent of—and step into the Sermon on the Mount and begin to live by faith, then the Father's love will answer, and give us something better than whatever we grasp for in our forgetfulness that a provident God already knows our needs just as well in an economic depression as any other time. In an economic depression as much as any other time, the Father's love can meet these needs much better than we will if we control our inheritance ourselves.

In hard times in the past the Lord's arm and providence have shown more plainly than they sometimes do here. Do you want to know how to survive an economic depression? The answer is very simple. It's not a matter of what you arrange. It's a matter of what *God* provides. When there is no natural hope of God's saints being taken care of,

it may be a supernatural providence that we don't see as often when we have easy times.

In hard times as well as easy, the luminous thread woven throughout Scripture, appearing in one place in the words, "the just shall live by faith," and another place in a Sermon on the Mount that says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you"—this luminous thread is at the heart of faith, spirituality, and religion—and this luminous thread is more. It is a participation in the life of a God of love to the point of madness.

The luminous thread is spun by a God of love to the point of madness.

It may be in hard times that we fear that in hard times we will lose what is good for us.

But it may be that hard times, whether a recession, depression, or economic collapse, serve as a divinely given clue-by-four when we discover that the Father's love to the point of madness knows, and will give, what is much better for us. And on that point, I would like to quote a praise song about what is truly more precious than gold: the words go:

Lord, you are more precious than silver.

Lord, you are more costly than gold.

Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,

And nothing I desire compares to you.

In one variant, these words answer:

And the Father said:

"Child, you are more precious than silver.

Child, you are more costly than gold.
Child, you are more beautiful than
diamonds,
And nothing I desire compares to you."

These are the words of divine love to the point of madness, of a God who loves saints and sinners alike, of a God who rejoices more over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent. And this is a God who loves us in hard times as well as good, a God of providence who seeks our highest good whenever we turn to him.

God be merciful to us. (Amen!)

50 Things You Can Do Even If the Writing Is on the Wall

As I write, some U.S. journalists have started to say, "We really like our President, but we still have big problems as a country."

Expecting socialism to neatly give us we want is, perhaps, naïve: but it is not my main intent to ask people to read the introduction to *The Black Book of Communism*, or to organize a crusade to straighten out Washington. I would rather talk about what we as people can do if more trouble happens.

Out of the many saints in Russia, God did not stop the concentration camps, but he was at work, in his saints, *in* the concentration camps. It may seem strange to say that Heaven could be present in socialist concentration camps—horrid camps where Hitler sent observers for guidance and inspiration, for the camps planned for Jews—but there were saints sent to those socialist camps, and

those saints brought Heaven with them, because Heaven is there wherever God's saints live and die in faithfulness and prayer. Think I'm being a bit too poetic and unreal? Read about a devout priest who was sent to concentration camps with all manner of painful realities, and brought Heaven with him in the death camps.

The Orthodox Church has great experience living under adverse circumstances, and it is simply not the case that the Church can only function normally in easy times. When St. Constantine ended Roman persecutions against the Church, some saints complained because times had become easy: hard times adorn the Church with martyrs, and what do soft times offer that compares with that? The Church may be stronger under some persecution than when everything goes our way. We may be in for more of a rough ride, and the bad news is that there may be no way to escape it to live normal life. But the good news is that there is an *alternative* to trying to escape it: we can live normal life *in* the rough ride. Orthodoxy is a way of living normally in a hard world.

What I most want to do in this piece is share some of what the Orthodox Church has lived under socialism. There could be significance in the fact that one of the patron saints of America was born in Russia, came over to America and ministered among some very poor people, and then returned to Russia and became the first priest to be martyred under the socialists: St. John Kochurov. Orthodoxy in Russia has had a lot of opportunity to learn to live under socialism.

Here are 50 things you can do even if the writing is on the wall:

1. Don't believe spam.

Don't believe spammers (and other advertisers) who offer ads of a classy-looking watch that will make you happy and contented. Asking a watch to make you *either* of these things is like asking a stone to lay an egg or using gasoline to extinguish a fire. Watches can tell time and maybe do other things, but *no* watch can make you permanently happy.

If you try to buy a watch to make you content, a nice-looking "replica luxury watch" will only feel good for so long; then you'll need the real thing, or think you do, until your discontent grows and you want something you can't get like a watch that is worth as much as your car. But even if you could get it, there would be more standing between you and happiness than not having enough money to keep indulging yourself. You would still be discontent—until you got a watch worth as much as a good house, or maybe a collection of exotic watches, or maybe some super-special watch that ought to be in a museum. But still you won't be content; you'll be less content than when spammers told you you needed a replica watch to live well. And, for that matter, even if you had the money to indulge that fancy, you will paradoxically be less content with a unique, handmade, multi-million-dollar Swiss watch than you were with that first almost-convincing "replica" watch sold to you by a spammer. Trying to get more

and more things that will make you happy doesn't work. As far as the game of being happy by owning a good enough watch goes, *the only way to win this game is not to play at all.*

2. The Bible says, "In humility consider others better than yourself," and it really would have been a lot easier if it said, "Be grateful to God for making you superior." Or at least *I* would have found it easier, at least if an exception were made for me.

But these offensive words conceal a treasure. When I am full of myself, I find it difficult to enjoy and appreciate others. Nietzsche thought of most others as scum and slime and could not enjoy their company. But humility is more than not being so full of yourself; it is a key to enjoying others.

In terms of difficult co-workers, Fr. Arseny lived in a concentration camp where the food was rancid (and tasted like kerosene), there was not nearly enough of it, and some of the people assigned to be his co-workers were hardened criminals (one liked card games where the loser paid with his life, and tried to have him killed). And yet reading his story is not a morose pity party, but a tale of a saint's triumph. *And* Fr. Arseny lived with profound respect for his nasty co-workers and the people in charge of the camp, and found some spark of beauty, some reflection of God, in even the most blackened soul. And his tale is profoundly uplifting.

He knew the secret of in humility considering others better than himself. And he lived a joy unlocked by many holy keys, *including* a humility that lived respect for others.

3. Share.

There was one woman who posted a note to a forum I read, saying that after being distressed that she could not find work, she began volunteering and, if she had no money to give, gave her time to others. There is a seed of the Kingdom of Heaven in her response, and also a seed of how people survived the Great Depression.

I do not say that you should share a big gift that will make things all better. It is better to try starting off by giving a dollar or two when you know it is inadequate: if you can easily write a big cheque that will completely solve a problem, God may not really be working through you. Far from feeling a godlike power to put an end to suffering, most doctors feel powerless in the face of real suffering. (Are we more powerful than doctors?) But what about going to church and putting a dollar or two in the collection plate, even or especially if you cannot afford it, or if you do have a job, bring a meal—nothing fancy, a cheap meal is fine—to a friend or neighbor who cannot find work?

What brought a lot of people through the Great Depression was pulling together: in a

situation where people could not live separate lives, dependent on wealth and independent from others, people pulled together and even if they had less, shared the little they had—as some people are doing, and discovering, today.

"He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is a definition of the Kingdom of Heaven, and some people who have been stripped of the treasures of wealth—no one-person cars, no fancy meals in restaurants, no iPhones and consumer electronics—have grown so poor that they have moved on to *real* treasures, the treasures of God, and communities pulling together, of love and service to others. (The best things in life are free!) They have been, perhaps, like children whose parents pulled them away from their beloved mud pies until it dawns on them that the reason their parents took them away from their mud pies wasn't cruelty at *all*—it was a vacation better than Disneyland.

4. Take the worst parking spot.

I remember a poster which encouraged people to "take the worst parking spot," out of a concern for physical health: if you are going to drive rather than walk, a minute or two extra walking is worth it. But taking the worst parking spot can also be excellent for our *spiritual* health. And our survival.

We often take as much luxury as we can have. And we are softened by it: we get new

conveniences, and we find that we need them. Part of a good preparation for disaster is to wean ourselves, or at least try to weaken our dependency just a little. We become more independent even if we still use them.

What can we do besides take the worst parking spot? We can wear clothing we don't like, for one day only, or spend a weekend without touching a computer, or use desktop computers but leave our smartphones at home. The Orthodox ways of fasting from certain foods are in part a way to take the worst parking spot: the principle is, "Foods have their place but I want to be more spiritually independent and less ruled by my belly." It may be much more than this, but there is a core principle that is not only good for spiritual health when times are easy, but good for survival when times are hard.

How could you stretch your spiritual muscles? What could you do to "take the worst parking spot?"

5. Remember that life neither begins at 18 nor ends at 30.

In older Russian tradition (and, for that matter, older American tradition), children are held very dearly, and elders are held dearly too. One hears a lament that the Russian Orthodox Church has seminaries to form priests but no such schooling to make its devout old women. These elders are not

looked on as has-beens but as treasurehouses.

One (American) friend has said that one decision that he has *never* regretted was that, for the last two years of his grandmother's life, he wrote her a letter each week. After she passed away, he learned that she kept the stack of his letters close by, in her bedstand.

If hard times strike, we will not be able to afford to segregate ourselves by age and market segment.

6. Live real life in a virtual world.

There are many good uses for technology: perhaps the good uses have no exotic sizzle, but technology has been used to support human life: the letter mentioned above uses the full technology of a postal system, online libraries make classic books available, forums work very well for certain discussions, and cars and watches have their uses.

But using technology to escape basic spiritual discipline—I will elaborate shortly—is like using whisky to chase your blues away. However attractive it may seem, it will bite you in the end.

Using technology to anaesthetize boredom—to have the chatter of the TV on, or always be texting when you have time to kill—is using technology to avoid feeling uncomfortable and maybe practicing a little spiritual

discipline. Something deep in older Russian tradition (but not really foreign to older American tradition) is the discipline of silence, a discipline of life without added distractions. It may be hard to explain what the advantage is of not carrying around distractions to anaesthetize boredom, but we grow in silence, and trying to become a mature and rounded person without working through waiting and silence (sometimes *uncomfortable* waiting and silence) is like trying to be healthy without cutting back on junk food or making a deliberate attempt to exercise consistently.

Today it is an exotic storybook image to ride a horse or live "in harmony with nature" in an old rural village where you saw peasants and a priest, guildsmen and maybe a knight; not long from now it may be a faroff, exotic storybook image to meet most of your friends face to face or show the harmony of nature to go in person to a university where people come face-to-face to study, teach, and learn like scholars had since medieval times, or work at a quaint "company" where telecommuting is not yet the norm. The ancient reality of face-to-face community *may* become more exotic than riding horses, but it *is* profoundly more important.

Growing spiritually has never been easy, but it's harder when technology makes it easier to dodge foundational lessons in the spiritual life. But the solution needs to go beyond what

technologies we do and do not use. It is not about not-technology. It is about God; the stories of the saints are not stories about how most of them lived before our cherished technologies, but about how they lived and grew in the divine life. It is about their love for their neighbor, about their prayer, and yes, about their letting go of luxuries: but one hardly walks away impressed with how deprived they were, any more than one learns of the struggles, training and victory of an Olympic gold medalist and says, "Wow, there was one deprived athlete!"

Virtual life is always at our fingertips, but the door to real life is and ever shall be open to us, whether our life is easy or hard.

7. Don't be a cowboy.

The U.S., more than most nations in history, has a rebel for its hero: a Western never has a tight-knit band of warriors sharing the limelight, but a lone, solitary cowboy. Its religious roots are Protestant, not really Catholic and far less Orthodox. And it's not just Protestants who may have more than a streak of the Independent Christian: the expression "American Catholic" has connotations of a sort of Burger King "Have it your way!" version of Catholicism where people announce, "Hi. I'll have an order of ritual, hold the guilt and authority, with a side of feeling extra special, and could we make it a bit more progressive?" This mentality is simply not helpful. There may be enough

points of contact between, for instance, older Russian tradition and older American tradition, but being a cowboy Christian simply does not cut it.

Finding a good Orthodox parish can be hard, but it's worth it. A great many things about the spiritual walk are hard enough *with* the support of a good parish and priest—but much harder without.

8. Pray the Psalms.

I had read through a couple of Shakespeare plays and simply not connected, and then went to a live performance of a play and was riveted. When I asked a Shakespeare-loving friend for his thoughts, he explained, "With due respect to my friends in the English department, Shakespeare (or at least most Shakespeare; I don't mean his sonnets) is not *literature*." I looked at him in puzzlement until he continued. "It's *drama*." That is, *Romeo and Juliet* is not in its living and dynamic form when it is read like a novel, but when it is performed as live drama. Something like this is true for the Psalms: they are in their living and dynamic form not when they are merely read, but when they are prayed, chanted, or sung. And I know I've made the mistake of merely reading them when I should have been *praying* them.

The Psalms offer up the whole human life to the Lord: everything from exultant glory and

thanksgiving to, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And I know that I, at least, don't know them well enough. But if we engage in Psalmody by praying Psalms, God will hear us, regardless.

I hope to pray the Psalms more.

9. Make peace with death, and remember the fact that you will die.

Unlike Russian culture, either ancient or modern, American culture is in strong denial about death. Our medical system does not just prevent (or, rather, *postpone*) death; it hides it when it happens, and death is more off-camera than in most societies. There is a great, often unspoken, collective effort to avoid unpleasant reminders that (if the Lord tarries) each one of us will die. Denial is rarely a helpful way of coping with life or with death.

There is an alternative, and one can ultimately live one's whole life preparing to die. This is not morbid: if every moment brings us to death, it is unreal and therefore morbid to try to live as if this were not the case. Dying each day means in part not only realizing that our bodies will not live forever, and even that our bodies are aging day by day, but it also means dying to have our way: as in the Rolling Stones song, "You can't always get what you want." It is a dying that day-by-day gives birth to maturity and spiritual resurrection. And *this* is how we can

avoid recoiling from aging and death as horrors we are trying to dodge: death, as well as life, is like a thistle: touch it timidly and it will prick you, but grab it boldly, and its spines will crumble in your grasp. When Christ drank his cup to the dregs, there was no bitterness left in the cup: only resurrection that would trample death by death. Few of us get quite *that* far along while we are alive. Still, an imperfect job of facing death with resolve and acceptance is better than a perfect job of sticking your head in the sand. Whether we will die in gruesome circumstances or pass away peacefully in old age, we are all headed towards the grave that holds beggars and kings alike. Today is a good day to begin dying, to die to our self-will and graspingness, to die to how we would like to run the world, and to make peace with the fact that none of us will live forever and triumph over it in that peace. Our triumph comes by accepting it, not by running away from the thought, and if this is a difficult thing that takes years to accept, we might might as well begin making peace with death now.

10. Read **from** the *Philokalia*

The Philokalia is a classic anthology that has been very influential in Orthodoxy in recent years: the more recent classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* shows the place the *Philokalia* holds in the heart of Russian piety.

When I was an Evangelical, some of the biggest excitement we had was when we discovered something about how the spiritual life works, or where we read something that had its finger on the pulse of how spiritual life works. And I would add to both of those, "because both of them were something like the *Philokalia*." The *Philokalia* is not the only Orthodox theology and is not the only kind of spiritual writing out there, but it is, more than anything else I've read, the "*science*" of spiritual struggle and spiritual growth towards contemplation.

I don't want to give a heavy reading assignment, or give the sense that you must read the *Philokalia* cover to cover if you're serious. Many people would be better to dip into it now and then—or, even better, have sections suggested by a good priest (which is probably more like how it was first used than simply reading it cover to cover). But a little bit each day can be very valuable, and I would underscore my remark that it is the "*science*" of spiritual struggle and growth.

11. Say, "Thank you!" But not like they do in *The Secret*.

For people who are not satisfied with their current clunker and wish they had a really nice car, the popular New Age book *The Secret* encourages people to imagine they were wrapping their hands around the leather steering wheel of a top-notch luxury car, and say "Thank you!" for the car they were

attracting to themselves.

The Secret really does encourage saying "Thank you!" but never does it suggest we might say "Thank you!" for the things we already have: certainly the book never suggests that if we are dissatisfied with a regular car that works quite well, we might say "Thank you!" for the car we already have. And they seem to be pretty safe in their assumption that the reader who is invited to drool over a luxury car will not protest, "But I already have a car that works. Can't I say 'Thank you!' for the car that I have?"

All of us have a habit of being ungrateful. There was one time when I was a graduate student who had to choose between paying for medical care and paying for books, but many people who heard of my salary (a bit below \$15000) would be astonished and wish their village could have some fraction of that much wealth to share. And as the case may be, I *survived*. That's something to be thankful for, along with much bigger things: the love of friends, talents and virtues with which to love and serve, the grace of God, and a Heaven that begins in this life and is perfected in the next. There are any number of graces large and small, from being saved from a nasty situation, to eating for one more day, to that daily comic strip or funny story from a friend, to a pleasant chat with a loved one, to the pile of dirty clothes that belong to someone with more than one change of

clothing. It is a profound mistake to think that if we lose our wealth we lose all that we have to be grateful for. Life may be harder. Indeed, it may be *so* hard that we start to appreciate how much we still have to be grateful for!

We can thank God by praying aloud through Psalms and liturgical prayers (such those in the Jordanville prayer book), by keeping our eyes open to what we have to be grateful for and inwardly thanking God when we recognize a blessing, by spending time to "count your blessings," and by sharing with others out of grateful recognition of what we have received as gifts we have not earned.

12. Don't live for activism: live for sonship.

The Renaissance *magus* lived to transform the world, and the *magus* is the grandfather of the Western idea that it is worthy to transform the world. In the *magus's* eyes, society as it exists then and now is just a rather pitiable raw material which gains value when the *magus* starts improving it. The *magus* is also grandfather to statism and grand social programs: the idea that whatever problems a society may have, the solution is for the government to fix it.

The 19th century Russian great Nicolas Federov said, "Our social program is the Trinity." It may take some strained imagining to see the the Trinity as another secular program to improve society, but that's *almost* the point. The insight could also be restated,

"If you look at the Trinity and think that a Church with the Trinity additionally needs a social program as well, you don't get it." In that sense Orthodox saying "Our social program is the Trinity." is like Amish saying, "Our medical system is a lifetime of hard exercise and healthy food," or devout Evangelicals saying "Our juvenile correctional system is families applying love and discipline to our children."

There are saints who have transformed the world, but this was a side effect of their seeking a life of sonship before God. To pick a Protestant example, one of the Wesleys believed that there were Christians, and then there were super-Christians, and then they were missionaries. So he crossed land and sea to be a missionary, and failed completely. He finally returned home as a defeated failure, and while he was on the ship there was a tremendous storm. He heard the sound of singing from the deck, and when he asked the Christians on deck why they were singing in this deadly storm, they simply said that they believed in God. And the terrified Wesley broke down and wept. And after he had hit rock bottom, God used him as a tremendous force in American Christianity, but not before. Even if God did want to make a mark on the world through him, it was not nearly so important as having that Wesley sit at the Lord's feet in sonship. I know it is a tough lesson, but if God is at work with you, he will wait for you to flounder through your plans as

an instrument to change the world for however long it takes for you to let go of them and approach him, not as a mere *instrument*, but as a *son*, and work out of sonship.

Sonship is a theme that may or may not be hit on today (not just because it may be seen as politically incorrect), but it is woven through the Bible. The New Testament does not just talk about the Son of God; it also talks about the sons of God, and there is an ancient maxim that the Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. Don't live for a secular transformation of the world; live to let God transform you in sonship. Anything else is putting the cart before the horse, and it's hard to be practical and get a horse to keep pushing a cart in a straight line!

13. Empty yourself of noise.

All of the Christian walk is a walk of being emptied; to become of like mind with Christ is to empty yourself (Philippians 2:5-11 RSV):

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him

and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Other things in Orthodoxy involve emptying yourself (humility, for instance, or chastity), but here I would like to talk about emptying oneself of idle noise. The idea that idle chatter is something to avoid is not obvious because noise is indispensable to our way of life. We have not only noise in conversation and technology, but inner noise.

My priest has said more than once that when we are praying, we should not strive to have *good* thoughts, however good, but *no* thoughts. Heaven is silent, without our worrying and plans and schemes to have things our way, and a saint is not someone who has nothing to worry about or who has very good plans and has God's blessing on those plans, but someone in whom the silence of Heaven has taken root.

The place for this silence is not sometime in the future when, maybe, we imagine we will have nothing to worry about: it is now. There will always be something to worry about, but the Sermon on the Mount with its "Do not worry" does not say, "Here is how you should live life if everything goes your way," but "Here is how to live life now, in the situation

you are in here and now."

I write this as a worrier who has just begun to experience the peace and silence of Heaven.

14. Mind more than what you eat.

The U.S. has been called a "toxic environment" for weight: it's not just supersized meals that make it easy, easy, easy to eat more than is good for you.

But what isn't talked about is that the toxic environment is more than oversized food portions: the toxic environment is in us, and if we understand it simply as a battle of willpower, we have *already* lost. Perhaps you have bent over to uproot a weed and pulled until you almost strained yourself because you had not imagined what a root system that tiny-looking weed had. Overeating has a remarkably deep root system.

Do you watch a lot of television, for instance? What I am interested in here is not that the human body burns fewer calories watching television than sleeping; it is that, even if food is never even *mentioned*, watching television feeds the root system of overeating. Or are you big into fantasy? Playing obscure games? Chances are that you aren't a big TV watcher, but this feeds the root of the problem as well. Or are you interested in the occult? Do you read a lot of romance novels? Do you dally around with SecondWife? *Guess what?* You're doing the same thing.

"*Foul!*" I expect to hear: "*It's none of your business!*" And perhaps it isn't my business, personally, but this has every relevance to what we have to do if we are really going to uproot this weed.

The common thread running through all of these things—and more—is that they are different kinds of medication to provide a painkiller for our life. And if we want a painkiller to adjust life, we want it for all of our life: someone who wants a painkiller for constant backaches wants the pain to be continuously medicated away, not just every once in a while. This basic habit is one we can use with different drugs, and one of them is food. If we treat existence as something to medicate, and look for things to medicate it, then we may use food to medicate it—and it's awfully hard to say no to the pleasure of food, and staying in it as long as we can, if life is something we want medicated away.

This is what is missing if you are only told how many calories to take from what food groups and what food to avoid. If you are trying to use food and other things to medicate life, continuing in that basic attitude while trying to cut back is a nasty game: the only way to win that game is not to play at all. Not that it is easy to uproot the whole root system: trying to reject and progressively uproot using things like food to medicate is not an easy game at all. But it is a game that *can* be won, and the prize is much better than

a smaller waistline.

We're obsessed with waistlines. But the biggest cost of eating too much is *not* what it does to your waistline, but to your immortal spirit: people who indulge too deeply in physical sweetness lose the ability to enjoy or even seek spiritual sweetness. The lie that traps is to think that good is a way of delivering pleasure that happens to nourish the body. The truth that frees is to know that food is a way to nourish the body that happens to deliver pleasure. And there is more than this.

Fasting is good, but eating is a much more powerful good. One Orthodox bishop, in a place where there are many faithful but shockingly few clergy, gave advice to a community that rarely had a priest. He said two things:

- Keep meeting together.
- Eat together.

Family eating around a table is a powerful thing. Friends eating together is a powerful thing. Table fellowship is a powerful good, and we have not progressed because we have moved to individual meals fried in microwaves.

And this is leaving out the greatest meal of all. The Orthodox teaching is clear: Adam and Eve lost paradise by eating, and we are called

back to paradise by eating. The Eucharist is the one sacrament from which every other sacrament flows, and it blesses our whole lives.

The ultimate alternative to a life that is medicated away is a life offered to God, and received back, under the brilliant, blazing shadow of the Eucharist. The unspoken command of "Do not escape" is not given to us for misery, but joy, given that we may find the paradise, here where God has put us, rather than in a doomed effort to escape. "Eucharist" comes from the Greek for thanksgiving, and it is a life unlocked by thanksgiving and in touch with the many things it can be thankful. The "bad" news is that you can't escape, but the good news is that you don't need to.

15. Don't live by throwing things away. Or at least cut back a bit. Living in a disposable world is not good for us, and it's definitely not going to help if disaster strikes.

One Ukrainian friend who immigrated to the U.S. wrote about defeating clutter, writing that her more Spartan husband, who is Russian, purchased few things, but then chose good quality items that was built to last. And this relates, perhaps somewhat strangely, to what another friend said about buying clothing: don't buy a shirt at Navy Pier because, however fashionable it may be, the shirt will wear out quickly. Just go to a

second-hand store, and find something that may well "work like iron" because the clothing, even if it is second-hand, was made a time when clothing was *not* made to wear out. These two people's attitudes, of "Don't buy much, but buy high quality" and "Don't buy your clothes at Navy Pier: shop at second-hand stores" have a lot more in common than you might think.

The U.S. economy works by having people buy things more often, and part of this is that things are meant to break down (or go out of fashion, or become obsolete, or...). The disposable mindset is deeply enough rooted that even if Orthodox Christians really try to avoid throwing away "prospora" (bread that has been blessed), there is nothing like an Orthodox Jewish seminary practice of burying paper in a Jewish cemetery if it has the Divine Name or part of the Mosaic Law written on it. When we need to dispose of worn-out icons, we bury them according to canon law, but it is common practice to print bulletins with maybe an icon on the front and some bit of liturgy or Scripture inside, created to be used once and then thrown away. This is a major red flag.

One joke tells of a couple of students who wanted to try out marriage, for as long as they both shall love. And a professor who had warned them about treating marriage as something you can throw away *did* attend the wedding—and gave the gift of paper plates. A lot more is "disposable" in American culture

than just paper plates: we have disposable relationships, disposable personal philosophies, disposable jobs and careers. We assign a shelf life to almost everything. It is true that if the economy comes to a grinding halt, a stack of paper plates won't last very long. But we have other problems with disposable relationships, beliefs, and the like if disaster strikes. It's not just that, in a depression, disposable plates are a luxury you cannot afford: disposable relationships are a luxury you cannot afford, too, even more than disposable plates. Disposable relationships aren't exactly good for us even in good times, but then there's at least the illusion we can afford such luxuries. In a disaster we do not have even *that* illusion.

We need places to take root and deepen. Even warts have something to give to us: it is a mistake to think that saying we need to take root with people and communities is the same as saying that they will always be perfect. It has been said that a person knows the meaning of life when he plants a tree with the full knowledge that he will never live to sit in its shadow. That may be beyond most of us, but we can all strive for a little more permanency each day, each week, each month, each year, each decade.

16. Rethink harmony with nature.

In "Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature," I wrote about

restoring some bygone age:

Here is what you might do one day to live a bit more like prehistoric Grecians, or ancient Celts, or medieval Gallic peasants, or whatever. Keep in mind that this is at best half-way to its goal, not a full-fledged return to living like an ancient in harmony with nature to a day, but making a rough equivalent by using what is closest from our world:

- However exotic the setting may seem to you, remember that it is a fundamental confusion to imagine that the setting was exotic *to those inside the experience*. We not only meet new people frequently; we see new technologies invented frequently. In The Historic Setting, people most likely were born, lived, and died within twenty miles, and even meeting another person who was not part of your village was rare. A new invention, or a new idea, would be difficult to imagine, let alone point to. So, for one day, whatever you're doing, if it feels exotic, avoid it like the plague. Stop it immediately. Don't read anything new; turn off your iPod; don't touch Wikipedia. Don't seek excitement; if anything, persevere in things you find boring.
- Remembering that there was a lot of heavy manual labor, and stuff that was shared, spend your nice Saturday

helping a friend move her stuff into her new apartment. Remember that while stairs were rare in antiquity, it would be an anachronism to take the elevator. Be a good manual laborer and do without the anachronism.

- Remembering how the Sermon on the Mount betrays an assumption that most people were poor enough that houses would only have one room, spend your time at home, as much as possible, in one room of your house.
- Remembering that the ancient world had no sense of "Jim's trying to lose weight and is on an old-fashioned low-fat diet, Mary's a vegan, Al's low carb...", but rather there was one diet that everybody day ate, go to McDonald's, order a meal with McDonald's McFries McSoaked in McGrease, and a sugary-sweet, corn-syrup-powered shake.

If you just said to yourself, "He didn't say what size; I'll order the smallest I can," order the biggest meal you can.

- Remembering that in the ancient world the company you kept were not your eclectic pick, spend time with the people around you. Go to your neighbor Ralph who blares bad '80s rock because he thinks it's the best thing in the

world, and like a good guest don't criticize what your host has provided—including his music. Spend some time playing board games with your annoying kid sister, and then go over to visit your uncle Wally and pretend to tolerate his sexist jokes.

- Lastly, when you head home do have a good night's sleep, remember that a bed with sheets covering a smooth mattress was only slightly more common than a Frank Lloyd Wright home is today, go to sleep on a straw pallet in your virtual one room house. (You can use organic straw if you can find any.)

This may seem, to put it politely, a way you would never have thought to live like an age in harmony with nature. But let me ask a perfectly serious question:

What *did* you expect? Did you imagine dressing up as a bard, dancing on hilltops, and reciting poetry about the endless knot while quaffing heather ale?

When we think of "harmony with nature", we often associate it with some exotic experience: it's like getting out of the office and going camping on vacation. Or maybe something more exotic and special than that. The idea that chores could be a form of harmony with nature—even the chores associated with technology and luxury—is almost inconceivable.

But there is a truer and deeper harmony with nature in a trip to the grocery or hardware store than an adventure vacation. One LinkedIn question was quite perceptive: it noted that in other days people hunted or gathered or farmed their food, and people's relationship to nature was not an extra, but the core of how life itself worked. Now it is an add-on and a special luxury: if we fish for our food on vacation, it is never simply how we can get food. It's almost like Wii warriors meticulously donning period-accurate athletic garb and playing frisbee as a full-fledged historical re-enactment, like a Civil War re-enactment.

There is a reason parents have assigned chores, and not just because the chores needed to get done. Persevering through chores instead of always having your way helps children grow to be mature adults and not be spoiled brats. And it has a connection to the more ancient understanding of being in accord with nature, a deeper understanding that ultimately reached into virtue. (Not to mention that it's just a little bit more like what living off the land was like when there was no alternative!)

It may be that if something seems hollow about robotic pets (if not vampiric), it has something to do with a pet that needs no chores from you—no feeding when you don't feel like it, no arrangements if you are going to leave town, no cleaning out the litterbox.

Your pet is there when you want to give it attention, but you can ignore it whenever you want. It is a pet on your terms, and it is entirely at your disposal. And it doesn't compare to the old-fashioned kind of puppy that whines when you want to leave it alone, misbehaves, and is alive enough to need you to do chores.

Learn to love your chores.

17. Don't have all your experiences made for you.

One of the computer professions that has been on the rise is "user experience", which is not exactly about getting the basics to work or even making things be friendly, but about creating a smooth and enchanting experience. This isn't just a computer thing: music, for instance, or movies have their own user experiences, but this sort of thing has been neglected with computers and is now coming into the limelight.

I've read a fair amount about user experience, but one article today drew my attention to something of a spiritual bad smell. It talked about "user enchantment" as a better way of looking at things than "user experience," and to explain the red flag, I would like to talk about experience and enchantment in Orthodox liturgy.

For many people, a first visit to an Orthodox Church may be an enchanting experience.

Things look strange (dare I say *mystical?*): liturgy is chanted, there are pictures all around that may not look anything else they have seen, and different things happen. And this is just on a material level. But for all this, the experience has things that a user experience professional aiming for enchantment would wince at. In many parishes, most people stand, and your first time standing for over an hour brings pain to your legs and back. And, if you come more than once or twice and want it to be exotic, you will find that it's not that exotic after a while. If you look for an experience that will simply be like Disneyland, you will almost certainly be disappointed.

Something about the pictures is hard to see. If you look at them in the hope that they will be normal pictures, you will be disappointed: the pictures look awkward and oddly proportioned, and that impression may last a while. What you may not guess at is that after something has happened, there is something in the pictures, or rather *icons*, that goes much deeper than famous oil paintings in museums. The icons are *windows of Heaven*, something like a fantasy portal or a time machine, or a meeting-place, and something *alive*. Heaven and earth meet there, and the reason that people do things with icons—offer kisses, for instance—is that they are not just a picture to look at on a wall, any more than an open doorway to the outside world is simply a tall picture of the world outside. But it takes

spiritual sight to see this, and despite the images I have used, the experience is not exotic like getting swept off your feet by a movie's special effects is exotic.

What unlocks icons, and other things in Orthodox worship, is a gradual but lifelong process of transformation of which worship with the parish plays a *part*. It's a bit like saying that hitting a baseball on television is the result of years of disciplined practice. The point isn't to get to the experience of icons being alive and windows you can see through to Heaven; the point is a many-sided spiritual walk.

And the experience is not stand-alone. I have spoken about the experience of Orthodox worship, but the point is not to deliver an experience, but to transform people. The experience may be meticulously cultivated, and it *is* important, but it is one dimension of something deeper. It's not just that there are things you contribute, but it is somewhat myopic to make the experience the center.

This is not just true of Orthodox worship. It is true of human life: marriage, parenting, friendship, work, leisure, and more. You should be giving of yourself, it should hurt at times, and never is there a standalone experience delivered to you. And it is a much greater good than the kind of experience movies and music deliver.

For now we may have the luxury of

standalone experiences being delivered to us. But seeking experiences is a way to create a dependence, and it is a dependence that does not prepare us for rough times. People in the Great Depression had marriage, parenting, friendship, and work. Few of them had iPods with music whenever they wanted.

And iPods wear out.

18. Treat your situation as a spiritual training ground.

In some monastic literature, one reads of spiritual fathers giving rather nasty orders ("obediences") to their monks. At first brush, it seems to be cruelty, pure and simple. The more you understand it, the less cruel it is. These unpleasant "obediences" may sometimes be bitter medicine, but they are the medicine of a physician. The purpose is to bring freedom to the monk: spiritual freedom that dwarfs political and economic freedom, the kind of freedom that even an icy labor camp could not take from a monk, priest, and spiritual father like Fr. Arseny. And the entire of monastic life is meant to be a training ground where even the hard parts are there to build up the monastery's members.

This is a microcosm of life for all of us. It may be true, as some say, that all Orthodox are called to asceticism, not just monks, but there is a bigger point. All of us, whether or not we have the monastic kind of spiritual father,

have an even bigger Spiritual Father, God, who arranges a spiritual training ground in this life. "All things work together for good" (Rom 8:28 KJV) for those studying, being trained, and being formed in the great spiritual academy called life. It's just a little easier to see when you understand monasticism as a training ground.

This is easy enough to say as eloquent words and impressive rhetoric; it is much harder if your life has not been easy, you have been scarred by rough experiences, and it seems that random forces buffet you and knock you away from where you want to be. But let me give an analogy.

My brother, then working at a major internet corporation, mentioned that one of the system administrators, whenever a higher-up would come up to him and ask, "Is there a way to—" would cut him off and say, "Stop! Tell me what you want to do." Wanting to give an example, he described a manager saying, "Is there a way to run a `df` [an obscure Unix command that gives a page or two of information about disks] and send the output to a system administrator's pager?" And a terrible response would be for him to say, "Yes," at which point the manager would say, "Why don't you do that," and have him do something that would look good on paper to a manager, but not even look good on paper to a system administrator. The core issue, the "Tell me what you want to do," might be "A disk got too full recently", with an implication

of "I don't want this to happen again. What can we do so system administrators can deal with this?" And there are things that could be done. Perhaps one might write a program to check if a disk is too full, and send a warning (perhaps even to a system administrator's pager), and another tool to sound an alarm if a disk is filling up quickly. But the Unix `df` command is not just obscure; it was much too verbose for the pagers of the day; even an excellent system administrator would have to do a lot of scrolling to find out if the page was a warning about a problem. So the solution as proposed is to cry "Wolf!" every five minutes, and make on-call system administrators do a lot of busy work to figure out if the constant cries of "Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!" actually correspond to a rare enough real problem. The system administrator mentioned by my brother did not like implementing solutions that were not in his employer's best interests, and what different managers were coming to him and saying, with "Is there a way to [*insert solution that only looks good on paper*]?" is, "I've solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it."

This is not just a story about managers and rude system administrators. It's also the story of much of our prayers: "God, I've solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it." And we bitterly resist when God offers us something that actually *is* in our best interests. On the one hand, St. James tells us, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask

wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (James 4:3 RSV) Our plans to have what we believe will make us happy have much to do with what it means to "spend it on your passions." On the other hand, Christ tells us, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." (John 15:2 RSV) The "pruning", for many of us, means progressively liberating us from our plans to arrange what we think will make us happy. It is God, the Spiritual Father, ever seeking to spur us to grow up.

Blessed are they who struggle in earthly pain, for they may rest in Heavenly victory. Blessed are they whom God frustrates in their desires, for they may reach true satisfaction. Blessed are you when your earthly training ground includes suffering you would never have chosen, because in the same way God has trained legion upon legion of saints before us. Thank God, and ever pray for the spiritual sight to see his loving providence in your life.

19. However terrifying it may be to repent, repent anyway.

Sin is not the most popular term today; saying that we are all terrible sinners is not something we want to hear. But we have sins, and we need to repent of them.

One counselor wrote of a man who was preparing to break off an affair forever, and wept: he had come to the insight that what

made it so hard to break things off was not because he was going to lose the woman he was having an affair with, but because he feared that "some shining part of him would be lost forever." This is a tiny slice of why the *Philokalia* says that *people hold on to sin because they think it adorns them*.

Repentance may be the most terrifying experience a human can adorn; sin is a disease of the soul, and part of its damage is that even if it makes us miserable we are afraid to let it go. Among Protestants repentance has been called "unconditional surrender", and this is absolutely true: lifelong repentance is lifelong surrender, and it is surrender more than once.

But there is another side to repentance. *Before*, it is terrifying and painful surrender. *Afterwards*, there is more than relief: you realize that what you were holding on to, because you thought it adorned you and you would not be able to live without it, was in fact a piece of Hell, and you needed it like you needed one foot stuck in a cruel bear trap. Orthodox speak of repentance from sin as awakening, and part of John the Baptist's proclamation, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here," is, "Wake up, for God's glorious reign is coming here." This is why St. Paul quotes, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." (Ephesians 5:14 RSV) Sin is sleep. It is also spiritual sickness, and for that matter it

is worse than standing in something gross: and repentance is awakening, being healed, and stepping out of something vile and feeling truly *clean*—repentance is all of this and much more. It may be Heaven's best-kept secret.

What are you trying to forget you need to repent of? Call it sin, and repent of it.

20. Learn how to make things and make at least minor repairs.

One of the prominent present-day philosophers of virtue wrote *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. The argument is that in real life, dependency is a normal part of human life, and virtues help us with a real life that includes sickness and not being able to do everything you imagine.

One of those ancient virtues is thrift, and Dorothy Sayers's classic essay, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," talks about how thrift was always considered a virtue. Even if we can dodge this virtue, it's still not a good idea.

It is not that hard to check (or change) a car's oil or sew back a missing button, and if you don't know how to do these things, I'd encourage you to visit a how-to site like eHow.com. You don't have to digest the whole site at once, but what might be a better idea is, when something minor breaks, instead of paying someone to fix it, see if you can fix it

instead. And, for that matter, buy a basic cookbook (if you don't want to use the internet) and start cooking. (You might find that you start feeling better. If you cook food yourself, your body is running on a higher grade of fuel than horrid microwave dinners.)

21. If not now, when?

There is a temptation to believe, "Life will really begin when I grow up," or "when I get into college," or "when I get married," or "when I get a job," or on a smaller scale "when I get my next paycheck," or "when so-and-so comes to visit," or "when quitting time rolls around." Happiness is something we imagine in the future, and sometimes we don't really enjoy what we were waiting for: we have made our habit to be waiting, and we often find something else to wait for. This dirty secret may be enough of a secret that we don't even know it ourselves: it's just that when The Moment We've Been Waiting For finally rolls around, we find ourselves looking forward to another, more remote, Moment We've Been Waiting For. And we still believe, "Then I'll be happy."

There is profound wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount's words, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow" (Matthew 6:34 KJV). The issue is not just worrying; God keeps giving us this now and this today, and we exhaust ourselves trying to arrange our future and waiting for life to *really* begin.

Perhaps there is some place for planning, but there is no place for being so preoccupied that you are not grateful for what God has given you today, and it is something of a missed opportunity to keep pushing back the date when life really begins. Paradoxically, the best way to arrange for contentment when you cross the next big threshold is to begin living that contentment in this now that God has given us (a now, incidentally, in which many of the things you were waiting for have already been given).

The Sermon on the Mount, in saying not to borrow trouble from tomorrow because "each day has enough trouble of its own," is giving very practical advice. The Bible says a great deal to the modern world: in stress management terms, it says, "Do not give yourself double stress by adding tomorrow's stress to today's stress. Today has enough stress by itself." The more stressful things get, the more essential it is to cut needless stress. And it is very hard not to keep being preoccupied with tomorrow in stress if you are preoccupied with tomorrow whenever you look for happiness. Eternity and Heaven are in this *now* that God has given us.

Don't say "This sounds great," and decide to start tomorrow. Start today.

22. Don't wonder why you don't have a good enough [*fill in the blank*]. Wonder instead why you have a [*fill in the blank*] that you are unworthy of.

We live in an economy fueled on discontent: advertisements are designed with the powerful unstated purpose of making us discontent with what we have. And discontent has become a way of life. It is no longer mere possessions that we are discontent with: even friendships and family are the sort of thing we wish we could trade up for something better.

"Who is rich? The person who is content," reads one church sign, and it's true. Advertisements perversely promise exactly what they take away: they invite you to be discontent so you can "trade up" in the hope that something better will give you the contentment they beckoned you to cast away.

Think it would be nice to be a king in the Middle Ages? Here's something to think about. In those days, the higher up you were on the pecking order, the less physical exertion you was expected of you. *However*, royalty needed to do more physical exertion than one would expect of a middle class exercise enthusiast today. If you wish you were a king in the Middle Ages, why don't you sit down and try to make a list of the luxuries you have today that no medieval king could even dream of? The list doesn't just include an obsolete computer or even a car that breaks down. To pick just the area of plumbing, hot and cold running water were unimaginable, like it would be unimaginable today to have a faucet that would pour out clothing whenever you want. Nor would a

king have had daily showers / baths to have a body that didn't smell: a gamy-smelling body was just part of the picture. Nor would there be an indoor toilet that so cleanly removes unpleasant odors. Armchair fantasies of being a king are one thing, but there are things no king could dream of that we take for granted.

Instead of taking things for granted and pining for possessions, or friends, or whatever else that are "worthy" of us, why not be not only thankful but mindful of our many blessings?

It is a strangely joyful thing to realize how many good things God has given us that we do not observe.

23. Live in the real world. (Wishful thinking doesn't really help.)

C.S. Lewis scholar Jerry Root wrote, *C.S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme*. The book is a study of how C.S. Lewis treats "subjectivism": trying to choose your version of reality over God's. Subjectivism is the belief that corresponds to being curved in on yourself in narcissism and pride.

Root's readable scholarship looks both at Lewis's nonfiction work, but four works of fiction from different decades of his life. The villains all act and talk like subjectivists, and the villain in "Dymer", a magician who has taken the hands off a clock because he does

not want to be subject to time, calls to mind for me my own subjectivism/narcissism/pride in employing almost the same image in "A Personal Flag."

The Greek word *hubris* refers to pride that inescapably blinds, the pride that goes before a fall. And subjectivism is tied to pride. Subjectivism is trying, in any of many ways, to make yourself happy by being in your own reality instead of learning happiness in the God-given reality that you're in. Being in subjectivism is a start on being in Hell. Hell may not be what you think. Hell is light as it is experienced by people who would rather be in darkness. Hell is abundant health as experienced by people who would choose disease. Hell is freedom as experienced by those who will not stop clinging to spiritual chains. Hell is ten thousand other things: more pointedly, Hell is other people, as experienced by an existentialist. This Hell is Heaven as experienced through subjectivist narcissism, experiencing God's glory and wishing for glory on your own power. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the *inside*. God is love; he cannot but ultimately give Heaven to his creatures, but we can, if we wish, choose to experience Heaven as Hell. The beginning of Heaven is this life, but we can, if we wish, be subjectivists and wish for something else and experience what God has given us as the start of Hell. When I foolishly wished I could live in the Middle Ages, I found the contemporary abundance

around me drab, and that is a bit of how God can offer us joy and we can experience it as Hellish. Whether you experience the temptation exactly as I do, or in a different form, the end is always the same. And trying to be somewhere else than reality, even in your mind, is only a liability in dealing with the only reality that counts.

If you want to cope successfully even in a disaster, live in the real world you as you are in it.

24. Don't kick against the goads, and that includes in matters of sex, men, and women.

When I was an undergraduate, I gleefully passed on what I had heard, all the more gleefully as it seemed an opportunity to take a stand against wrongful prudishness: a friend, in class, had heard a professor lecture against alleged ludicrous Victorian prudish advice to brides, advising brides-to-be to "GIVE LITTLE, GIVE SELDOM, AND ABOVE ALL, GIVE GRUDGINGLY."

I had gleefully retold the story to over a dozen people until the deflating experience of hearing a friend, whose judgment I otherwise respected, express skepticism about whether it held the ring of truth. Now, some years later after I have developed more of an interest in history, his skepticism makes sense. The external details all look right, at least at first pass, but the letter is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect. It is too perfect in

a way where real historical sources seem to be intractably messy and hard to pin down. There is not a single sentence which does not create or contribute to an effect of more-than-idiotic sexual prudishness and hatred of sexual pleasure. I've read a number of historical sources where the author was suspicious of how deep a good sexual pleasure really is—and not one of them is like this. Some contain even more striking statements—but not one contains sentence after sentence that reads as ludicrous to the modern reader. It's not just a historical forgery; that's almost a surface detail. It gives the impression that someone Wanted to Take a Stand Against Sexual Prudishness, picked a time frame associated with Sexual Prudishness, namely the Victorian era, and wrote for no other purpose than to impress the modern reader with how absolutely ludicrous Sexual Prudishness in any form really is.

Fast-forward a decade and a half. Retro aesthetics have resurrected 1950's black-and-white photography, or photos made to look to us today like they had been taken in the 1950's. Photoshop is on the scene, and hobbyists can make photoshopped images and send them to the web or email. And one of the things passing around the net now is the, um, uh, *authentic* "The good wife's guide," complete with the, um, uh, *authentic* words "Advertising Archives" next to the retro picture of a wife happily greeting her

husband. However convincingly ragged the *visuals* may look, the *advice* is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect in its offensiveness, and where every sentence in the other forgery—the alleged Victorian advice ("alleged", as in *Monty Python's* "alleged Hungarian-English phrase book") for brides-to-be—is apparently written to impress the reader with how ludicrous Sexual Prudishness is, *every single suggestion* in the more recent "discovery" appears written as if to rile up feminists today. (Even if feminists today might not approve of real 1950's advice to housewives, the 1950's-ish *Letters to Karen* is absolutely *nothing* like this.) It appears that someone wanted to impress readers with How Bad Sexism Really Is, picked a time frame popularly associated with How Bad Sexism Really Is, and wrote a forgery (even if "forgery" isn't really the point) designed to impress today's reader with How Bad Sexism Really Is.

These kinds of forgeries reveal something, but not about the Victorian era or the 1950's: people who pick the Victorian era or the 1950's as a popular emblem of something they hate rarely have a particularly empathic understanding of the time period in question, even if they do a good imitation of its external trappings. But that's only half the story. They do take in a lot of people and spread far and wide, and that reveals something about the audience that repeats them.

I'll leave treatment of Bold Denunciations of

Sexual Prudishness to the last volume of Foucault's history of sexuality; what I am interested in is not only why "The good wife's guide" would be created in the first place, but why it would spread like wildfire, as it manifestly has. The answer has to do with a way we are kicking against the goads.

"The good wife's guide" is very revealing. It tells something about the sort of society where it would be so quickly passed on. It tells something about us.

If you've had the misfortune to hear enough dirty jokes, you may notice that when a "beautiful woman" occurs in a dirty joke, unless it's a feminist joke, she does not correspond to the psyche of *any* woman you know. In most dirty jokes, a "beautiful woman" is not a whole person, but something else, the other "person" implied by male desire in its unrefined, unchanneled state. The academic term is "implied other", as when Orientalist Westerners project onto the East the mirror image of what they imagine as Western tendencies: a projection that tells much more about the West than Asia. And here is fleshed out the "implied other" to a decently broad group of feminism as it exists in popular culture today.

If the question is, "Who does feminism see as the enemy?" the best answer is not "Sexist men." Nonfeminist men may be treated as part of the problem rather than part of the

solution, and some feminist writing may speak fondly of castration, but the real enemy is wives who stay home, raise children, and may write a blog about passionate homemaking, but don't want anything more, or rather "more" (the assumption being that an independent, at least part-time professional career is an acceptable aspiration for a woman, but being a stay-at-home mom is despicable). Feminists may take offense at nonfeminist men, but not like nonfeminist women.

Feminism kicks against the goads. Of all the ways that Christians kick against the goads today, I don't know of any that are as acceptable to people, or at least an agree to disagree matter, as feminism or Biblical egalitarianism. If I were to go through queer readings of key passages, I could say that the scholarship is misusing cultural context to neutralize the passages in the Bible where God vetoes their claim, and hold up the scholarship as an example of subjectivist adjustment of Tradition to fit contemporary ideologies. I could pointedly say that every single queer interpretation I've read uses cultural context as a drunken man uses lampposts—for support rather than illumination. And if I were to do this, the more liberal scholars would challenge me, but most conservatives and moderates would be sympathetic, or at least open, to my argument. But if I were to make the same arguments about Biblical egalitarian scholarship, I would hear cries of "*Foul!*",

cries that I was imposing something political on the study. But I've spent a lot of time reading Biblical egalitarian scholarship closely—read through everything I could find in Tyndale's library (on one point) and written a thesis, as well as reading queer scholarship under liberal scholars—and even if the conclusions are different, the scholarship is disturbingly similar. And subjectivist scholarship is a red flag: it is a red flag for socially unacceptable queer scholarship, and it is also a red flag for perfectly socially acceptable egalitarian scholarship. The fact that egalitarianism is seen as a normal position, entirely consistent with being the sort of person who can say the Creed without crossing his fingers, may be a fact about our cultural and historical context but does not change the reality of kicking against the goads.

I've written above that it is a good thing to learn how to cook, for instance, and sew, and change a car's oil. Doesn't that mean androgyny? Well, I cook, sew buttons and have used sewing machines, change my car's oil, fix flats, and lift weights. Sounds a bit androgynous, and I would like to reply to that. (And not just by saying that I work in a male-dominated field where the odds are good but the goods are odd, and for that matter I've lifted weight machines.)

Neither masculinity nor femininity come from imitating what we think the 1950's were like,

nor will they come from any other historical reconstruction. What they do come from is not easy to say. Stephen Clark tried to answer that question in *Man and Woman in Christ*. Clark is quite conservative, and he asserts that simple repetition of the past is impossible. He offers few neat boxes: he does *not* give a simple endorsement of a husband working and a wife staying at home. What he says is rather messy; the only clean statement he makes on that point is that the arrangement of "The husband works a full-time job; the wife works a full time job, and in addition she does all the housework," is clearly condemned (even if it is the most common arrangement). In step with his argument, feminists complain about housewives suffering from depression, this may be because having a woman destitute of adult company for over eight hours a day is *not* truly traditional; in older traditional societies women were in adult company during the day, and may have had much less depression. For reasons like this, Clark gives a rather serious analysis but seems to always end with messy recommendations.

This messiness is appropriate. I've tried to explore this in some of my writing: both in essays like "Knights and Ladies" and longer fiction like *The Sign of the Grail*. And the best answer I can give after my own digging is, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you."

But why am I claiming that feminism kicks

against the goads? Journalist Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty* is first about modesty and second about feminism, and it is an exposé of how immodest living such as feminism has encouraged is a recipe for women's heartbreak. In that regard, it offers detail into a remark in a counselor's book on friendship, on how in years of practicing psychology in California he has seen every sexual arrangement you could imagine, and the more he sees, the more convinced he is that the rules God has given are intended to help us and not to harm us. Shalit discusses how sleeping around and hooking up rips up women: their modesty is still there, but it is driven underground and clogging the pipes with vomit. Not that she is setting out to criticize feminism: Shalit was delighted to meet Mary Daly and to have Daly sign Shalit's copy of Daly's *Wickedary*. But when feminism says that old-fashioned modesty and chastity are not good enough for today's women, Shalit says, "No." She exposes how abandoning the protection of modesty is kicking against the goads. And this is not the only way feminism kicks against the goads.

There's an old joke about a boy whose parents were trying *very* hard not to raise him with any gender preconceptions; his mother worked as a pilot. Someone asked if he wanted to fly airplanes when he grew up, and he said, "No, that's women's work!" And that may be funny, but it is not funny to find out that when kibbutzes ran their experiment on

raising children free from sexist preconceptions, the result of this grand experiment was children who were as confused as any about who they were and what it meant to be human. And there are other signs that the kibbutzes were kicking against the goads. Some of their best efforts to free women from traditional behavior kept finding more traditional behaviors that were

Let's return to what we are supposed to think is the only real alternative to feminism. "The good wife's guide" shows a caricatured "other" that we are to react against, and realize that a woman should be concerned for herself alone, should push back against traditional expectations. The "good" wife we are to react against has no hopes, needs, desire, or personhood of her own; she absolutely does not contribute to shared life with her husband except as an empty slave, and there is not a shadow of the traditional Christian "two shall become one" that can mean anything but unilateral absorption of the wife into the husband. And something of the fallacy of the excluded middle is at play: one gets the impression that progressive feminism, and "The good wife's guide," represent the two basic options: up-to-date feminism, and a caricature that is no closer to nonfeminist women's aspirations than a "beautiful woman" in a dirty joke matches the psyches of real women.

It tells something, not about the 1950's, but about us that today's pop feminism confuses a

beautiful-woman-as-in-a-dirty-joke version of 1950's advice to housewives with a real glimpse into the soul of the Bad Old Sexist 1950's. To be a little more picturesque, "The good wife's guide" is the Bad Old Sexist 1950's as today's pop feminism would like to jack off to it, as the example of alleged Victorian sexual prudishness was before it. The joke ain't on the Victorian era or the 1950's. It's on us.

I wrote above that we shouldn't believe spam when it tells us that we need replica luxury watches. Truth be told, we also shouldn't believe spam that tells us how empty our lives are without Viagra and its kin. I thought I knew several happily married couples in their seventies, and I thought I heard the consistent claim that they were more and more happily married as the years wore on, so that each decade of marriage was better than the last. But my old pharmacy knows better, or say they do; they clearly inform readers that you can't be happily married if you lose 17-21 year old desires. Or maybe the pharmacy is, in fact, *wrong*. There is a great spiritual force bombarding us; it urges on women a feminist duty of stepping outside of modesty and chastity, and into a world of heartbreak; though this is hardly feminist, it urges another kind of heartbreak on men bombarded by spam which hawks porn that is in the beginning as sweet as honey and is in the end as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword, as those who have

fought addiction to porn can attest.

God has created us men and women, and we are trying to escape this fact and ancient wisdom about how to best live as men and women. And we live in a time where, as in feminist fairy tales, we are working hard to subvert what we were given.

It still hurts to kick against the goads.

25. "Put not your trust in princes." (Psalm 146:3 KJV)

Barack Obama may well have unearthly charisma unlike any other U.S. President, ever. I've never heard of anyone else needing to quip, "Contrary to popular opinion, I have not walked on water, nor was I born in a stable." It may be one thing to approve of his achievements or his policies, but it is another to start believing in him as one believes in God—such as "Change you can believe in," and "Yes, you can!" seem to invite. Of course it would be just as bad to believe in John McCain that way, only he does not have such an enchanting charisma, and it's a whole lot harder to confuse him with a Messiah.

The Bible, alongside human experience, warns about putting too much trust in political leaders, even when leaders were much less charismatic and people were much less inclined to look to governments to be their saviors. Government has its place, but please do not believe in it as you should

believe in God. Governments will all ultimately fail us, and it's best not to be caught off guard.

If you believe government is not to be trusted too far, and your government fails you, you have a problem. But if you trust government as a savior and your government fails you, you have *two* problems. *When*—not if—something goes awry, it's really better to have just the *one* problem, and look to God for your salvation.

26. Waste not, want not.

For now, we've been taught to waste, so that it is normal to throw perfectly good things into the trash / recycle bin. This wastefulness has never been good for us as humans, but the poorer we get, the less waste we can afford.

There is a story about a young man who was on a boat who was sinking, and told his friend, "Help! Show me how to swim—I don't know how!" But the time to learn how to swim is not when you are on a sinking boat, and it is better to learn how to cut down on unnatural waste when you can.

27. Beware of subjectivism in the small.

In Orthodoxy there is a *watchfulness*: an inner mindfulness that guards the heart. Learning this watchfulness, however

imperfectly, is a foundational aid in spiritual growth and repenting from sin.

This watchfulness helps uproot problems when they are just a little thought or desire, and uproot them as soon as possible. This applies to anger, to lust, and to the subjectivism in the small that is also called wishful thinking.

The saying, "Procrastination is the thief of time," is true, and it wasn't until I started fighting procrastination that I understood why people would say that—and finally realized how much work *and leisure* time I was losing to the useless time sink of procrastination. I still procrastinate some, but I procrastinate less, and that makes a tremendous difference.

On more of a microscale, there are times that I wasn't *exactly* procrastinating in the sense of dodging work with Facebook, playing games on company time, or making excessive non-professional conversations, but after I read Jerry Root's study of subjectivism as treated by C.S. Lewis, I started finding subjectivism even in things I wouldn't think to hide if someone walked by. For one example, part of my job is troubleshooting computer software. When I had created some new feature and it didn't work, I almost always tested the problem a time or two or three more before starting to investigate why it didn't work. The reason? However irrational, I was hoping that the problem would go away if

I tried again. Not that double-checking can never have the right motive; sometimes trying again is the best thing to do. But my motive was wrong, and I was wasting too much time checking. My motive was wishful thinking, wishing the problem would go away so I wouldn't have to do the hard work of fixing the problem at its source, and this "subjectivism in the small" is no help to my productivity at work. As things are, I noticed a sharp productivity boost when I started exercising watchfulness and began fighting this wishful thinking.

I doubt if this is just an Information Technology issue. The advantage of learning to fight your "subjectivism in the small" is important enough in good times but all the more in a bad economy. Proverbs 22:9 says, "Do you see a man who is diligent/skillful/swift in his work? He will stand before kings, he will not stand before obscure men." If you're unemployed, this is relevant to a jobhunt where it may be hard to stay on task after a demoralizing string of rejections. If you're trying to hold on to your job, this could also help.

28. Remember why you are on earth.

The Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." This is the question that sets the stage for everything else. It is an exceptionally well-chosen

opening that puts first things first.

There is a saying among some Protestants, "Mission exists because worship does not." And I misunderstood it at first, but the point is this: God does not create people so that they can be missionaries. Absolutely no one is created for that purpose. Everyone is created, not for the purpose of being a missionary, but for the sake of worshiping God. However, there are some people who are not in a position to worship God; they cannot do what they were made for. *Therefore*, Christians are responsible for mission and some Christians should be missionaries.

It is in the same spirit that one might say, "Ascesis, or spiritual discipline, exists because contemplation does not." This work is largely about ascesis in its concrete forms, but God did not create us for ascesis; he created us to contemplate him: in the language of the Catechism, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But we ourselves may not be in a position to contemplate God fully; we need the cleansing, the surgery, of ascesis. If ascesis exists because contemplation does not, all Christians are responsible for ascesis and *all* Christians should be ascetics.

But however important ascesis may be, it is not an end unto itself. Contemplation shines through it; for that matter, ascesis is what contemplation looks like when it puts on work gloves and starts scrubbing. Ascesis and contemplation are at the heart of the

Orthodox maxim, "Save yourself and ten thousand others around you will find salvation." To Protestants, this may sound like a warped prescription for missions, but it has a lot to do with how St. Herman of Alaska and other missionary monks brought Orthodoxy from Russia to Alaska. Asceticism for the sake of asceticism is missing the point, and however much asceticism may contribute to survival, it's not enough to just view asceticism as a survival tool. Asceticism is for the sake of contemplation. Survival, missions, and ten thousand other things all fall under the umbrella of, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33)

29. Use money, but don't trust it.

Proverbs says money is not to be trusted: "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," "He who trusts in his riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf, "Riches do not last for ever," "Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist." Money seems like a way to control the riskiness of life, but part of human existence is that we will never be in control. We need to be at peace with not being in control, and be at peace with being under God's care.

God's hand shows more strongly and more plainly when we have little power than when it seems we can get along well enough

without him. People who have no blanket of wealth, and those who face great danger, seem to see providence much more clearly. If praying "Give us this day our daily bread." is a ritual formality to us, we will gain, not lose, the meaning of these words if we can no longer buy a month's food at once. We may exhaust our money, but we can never exhaust God or his care for us.

If you have money, try to use it well, but do not fear that all is lost if you only lose money. You may see God's providence as you have never known it before.

30. Dig deeper than "Eat, drink, and be merry."

The movie *Dead Poets' Society* enchants the reader with what may seem to be a tremendous summons to the fullness of life. And it is not an accident that the movie's celebration of life has the teacher showing students old pictures of athletes who are all dead. A form of "Eat, drink, and be merry" is quoted with warning in the Bible: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (I Corinthians 15:32 RSV). This "exhortation" is no more an exhortation to true joy than students saying before a wickedly tough high school physics test, "Be sure to write your name at the top of the page, because that's the only two points you're going to get." G.K. Chesterton writes, "It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does, not gather the

rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw." Chesterton lived and died decades before *Dead Poets' Society*; it's odd that his words in *Heretics* read so much like a reply.

However bad things get, don't believe that grasping all-too-fleeting pleasures is all you can get. Don't sell yourself short with, "Be sure you put your name at the top, because those are the only two points you are going to get." The best things in life, now as ever, are free: friendship, family, the different loves, God, grace and providence, wisdom, rightly used suffering. Some very nasty things may happen, and they may take away what we think are the best things in life. But it's good to remember what's important in life, and the best things in life are free.

31. Ignore brands.

One teacher asked his students, "Imagine your successful self in the future. With which brands do you see yourself associating?" He looked, and saw no raised eyebrows, no puzzled looks, and certainly no one offended by the question or its implications. All of the students answered it as a straight question, and all of them succeeded in identifying brands that their successful future selves would fit in with.

This teacher mentioned this in writing about how the brand economy does the job today

that spiritual disciplines did in earlier ages. He never to my memory used the term "ersatz," but identifying with a brand is all too often an ersatz spiritual discipline. Russian Orthodoxy is shaped by prayer and fasting, and America's orthodoxy is shaped by iPods and Coke. And people say, "I'm a [*name of brand*] person," and no one really seems to ever be offended.

Sometimes some brands are better: if you are buying an external hard drive, I would recommend Seagate over Western Digital. But I would really wince at saying, "I am a Seagate man;" I may appropriately understand myself as a man, as an Orthodox Christian, as having certain people for friends and family, and in other ways as well, but *not* define my identity by a brand of hard drive. And brand loyalty often exceeds what the products justify. You know all those Chevy fans' bumper stickers that show Calvin relieving himself on the Ford logo? The fanaticism goes well in excess of the functional superiority of the average Chevy over the average Ford, if any such superiority exists. Almost certainly one of the better Chevis is better than one of the worse Fords, and one of the better Fords is better than one of the worse Chevis. Even if Chevis tend to be slightly better than Fords, this is *not* a rational comparison of mere material tools. It's buying into an identity.

For some of us, the items we need to buy are almost branded: it's a tall order to walk into

an electronics store and ask for an a computer that is unbranded. And for things that are available in generic, buying generic may or may not be the best purchase. I can hardly say, "Don't buy branded merchandise." But what I can say is, "Don't buy into the *mystique* of branded merchandise, and never let brands become your spiritual discipline." And practice all the classic spiritual disciplines: reading the Bible, going to church, praying, fasting, silence, giving to the poor, repentance, and the like. Brands are a distraction from these, and we need true ascesis, not ersatz spiritual discipline.

32. Limit your exposure to advertising.

Some years ago, I used to say that a television is the most expensive appliance you can buy. The reason? All appliances have an up front cost, and there are electrical bills to pay, and maybe repairs. But the expense is usually limited; an air conditioner may take a lot of electricity, but you pay your electric bill and the expense is paid.

A television, by contrast, costs more than sticker price, electricity, repairs, and perhaps today removal expenses when you want to get rid of it. A television exposes you to the most effective propaganda in history: commercial advertising meant to manipulate you to buy, buy, buy, and seek your happiness in one product after another, always discontent. An article from *The Onion* tells us,

Amazing New 'Swiffer' Fails To Fill The Void

CINCINNATI-The blank, oppressive void facing the American consumer populace remains unfilled today, despite the recent launch of the revolutionary Swiffer dust-elimination system, sources reported Monday.

The lightweight, easy-to-use Swiffer is the 275,894,973rd amazing new product to fail to fill the void-a vast, soul-crushing spiritual vacuum Americans of all ages helplessly face on a daily basis, with nowhere to turn and no way to escape.

"The remarkable new Swiffer sweeps, dusts, wipes, and cleans with a patented electrostatic action that simply cannot be beat," said spokeswoman Judith McReynolds, media-relations liaison for Procter & Gamble, maker of the dustbroom device. "Whether it's vinyl floors, tile, hardwood, ceilings, or stairs, the incredible Swiffer quickly cleans any dry surface by attracting and trapping even the tiniest dirt and dust particles."

"The incredible Swiffer's extendable telescoping action has just what it takes to cut clean-up time in half," McReynolds continued. "Say goodbye to

tedious dusting chores forever... the Swiffer way!"

Upon completing the statement, McReynolds was struck, as she is most days, with a sudden, unbearable realization that she has wasted her life.

Despite high hopes, the Swiffer has failed to imbue a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of its users.

"The new Swiffer, as seen on TV, requires no spray or chemical cleaners, so I'm sure you can understand how excited I was to finally find something that could give my sad, short existence a sense of worth," said Manitowoc, WI, homemaker Gwen Hull. "When you finish the clean-up job, simply tear off the patented Swiffer Cloth and throw it away-as easy as one, two, three. But when I did this, tossing the soiled, disposable Swiffer Cloth into the garbage can like so many hollow, rejected yesterdays, I thought to myself, 'Is that it? Aren't I supposed to feel more fulfilled than this?' It all felt so futile. I felt like that Swiffer Cloth in the trash represented me, my hopes and dreams made manifest. I felt like it was my goals and aspirations for a better life that were lying there in the garbage, never to be heard from again."

"I felt so alone," added Hull, loosening her grip on the Swiffer's convenient extendable handle-which can reach even the tightest corners-causing the product to fall to the floor. "So very, very alone."

Bridgeport, CT, homemaker Christine Smalls tries in vain to overcome her clinical depression using the amazing new Swiffer sweeper.

Hull's reaction was echoed by fellow Swiffer owner Glenn Pulsipher. A 45-year-old telemarketing coordinator for a Van Nuys satellite TV company, he said his recent Swiffer purchase has proven to be an ineffective void-filling measure.

"Ever since my divorce nine years ago, I'd been meaning to keep this place a little more clean and presentable for visitors," said Pulsipher, who last had a houseguest in April 1997. "But with all the different sprays and sponges you have to use, who has the time? But when I saw the Swiffer ad on TV, I thought to myself: Wow, all that cleaning power in one simple, easy-to-use tool! And such a bargain! I guess I thought that maybe if I bought one, my life would be easier, more fun, more special. Well, I thought wrong."

"Not that it doesn't work," Pulsipher added. "It does: It works exactly like

they said on TV. But after using it once or twice, the sad fact was I no longer cared."

"Why would I?" he continued, sinking into his living-room La-Z-Boy to watch ESPN alone for the 478th time this year. "I mean, it's a dustbroom. What more is there to say?"

"Dust in the wind," said Pulsipher, his voice taking on a muted tone of resignation as the TV blared. "That's all our various pitiful and deluded human endeavors ever amount to in the end. My job, my marriage-dust. All dust. And all the Swiffers in the world can't sweep it all up."

Many Swiffer owners have attempted to bolster the fleeting satisfaction the product offers with other Swiffer-related activities, but to no avail. In the past four weeks, more than 40,000 aching empty consumers have logged on to www.swiffer.com to download pages of "Swiffer FAQs" and "Useful Tips" on optimal Swiffer use. Also widely downloaded was the tour schedule for the "Swiffer Mobile," a Swiffer-themed truck-complete with promotional displays, demonstrations of anti-dust technological innovations, and a stated mission to "examine the mundane task of housecleaning under

the keen eye of science"-which will travel to 20 markets across the U.S. this summer. None of these efforts, however, have met with anything but crushing, soul-depleting disappointment and failure.

The hope that the right product will one day come along and bring happiness to consumers' lives is a longstanding American tradition. However, the Swiffer's failure to fill the void has led some to doubt that any product, no matter how revolutionary and convenient, will ever do so.

"It's time we woke up and realized that the wait is never going to end," said Dr. James Ingersoll of the D.C.-based Institute For American Values. "The void is never, I repeat, never going to be filled by something we see on TV and can order with our credit cards."

For others, however, there remains hope.

"Just because the Swiffer and the other 35 new products I've bought over the past three months haven't filled the void, that doesn't mean the next product won't be the one," said Minneapolis homemaker Ellen Bender. "I just ordered the new HyperVac Advanced CyberCarpet CleanWare System, and I just can't wait until it

arrives and completely transforms my flat, unsatisfying life."

Procter & Gamble offered its apologies to those who had pinned their hopes on the new dustbroom.

"We are deeply sorry for the Swiffer's failure to ease the crushing ennui faced by U.S. consumers, and we promise to redouble our efforts to one day develop a product that will succeed in soothing your tortured souls," a statement released by Procter & Gamble read in part.

What more is there to say?

Try to avoid the manipulative illusions in advertising.

33. Avoid Facebook at work.

Facebook can be rightly used: for instance, to log on, get a friend's contact information, and log off. And of course if you are your company's representative on Facebook, you shouldn't stay off of Facebook. But both of these cases represent an atypical use of Facebook. The usual use of Facebook is as an absorbing place where you don't notice the passage of hours. And there is something there that doesn't belong at work, and should at least be used in moderation outside of work.

Some people who know the history of technology may point out that email, and for that matter computers themselves, were things bosses tried to keep out of work because they weren't useful and they distracted people from useful work. Today it would be quite provocative, to say the least, for a company to get rid of office workers' computers as distracting and simply pointless for office productivity. And isn't it benighted to fail to learn from history and be superstitious about, in this case, Facebook?

It's *not* superstitious. There may someday be a time will almost certainly be a time where Facebook is no longer such an absorbing place, and saying that office workers can productively use Facebook will be as obvious as saying that they can productively use web browsers or email. And that time is probably just a few years away. But bosses who want to limit Facebook today are not being superstitious.

Robert A. Heinlein, in *Stranger in a Strange Land* has the "man from Mars," who is at first biologically human but raised on Mars, by Martians, in the alien world of Martian culture and language, come to earth and among other things kiss girls in the most impressive way. A little later on, an inquisitive host tries to understand:

"What's so special about the way that lad kisses?"

Anne looked dreamy, then dimpled. "You should have tried it."

"I'm too old to change. But I'm interested in everything about the boy. Is this something different?"

Anne pondered it. "Yes."

"How?"

"Mike gives a kiss his whole attention."

"Oh, rats! I do myself. Or did."

Anne shook her head. "No. I've been kissed by men who did a very good job. But they don't give kissing their whole attention. They *can't*. No matter how hard they try parts of their mind are on something else. Missing the last bus—or their chances of making the gal—or maybe worry about jobs, or money, or will husband or papa or the neighbors catch on. Mike doesn't have technique . . . but when Mike kisses you he isn't doing *anything* else. You're his whole universe . . . and the moment is eternal because he doesn't have any plans and isn't going anywhere. Just kissing you." She shivered. "It's overwhelming."

Now this is part of a Messiah story, of sorts, but a Messiah story where the hero kills lightly and without guilt, and encourages people to throw off sexual shackles: in other

words a Messiah story as written by a sex-crazed, anti-Christian libertine. So of course, if this insight is expressed, it may well be portrayed in erotic terms. And as an insight from alien Martian culture which has nothing to do with earth. But portraying it that way is backwards.

This alien Martian kissing insight is in fact an insight that the older generation knows, or at least knew, well. When Walkmans were first becoming popular, one friend recounted to me, his mother talked about how if you were running and had a Walkman on, you were not being attentive to your surroundings. There is a basic principle of asceticism: a principle of being attentive that used to be bedrock to American culture (and, quite obviously, Russian culture) that when you are talking with someone, or working, or at church, or practicing a hobby, the moment is eternal because you don't have any plans and you aren't going anywhere. And we have more and more ways to dodge this spiritual lesson, and have noise to keep us away from a life where eternity is in our moments. And this is not good for our spirits.

But it's also practically relevant to work; a company that tries to stamp out Facebook at work is not trying to take on the job of your spiritual director; it is trying to make ends meet. Unrestricted Facebook use doesn't just cost time; it costs momentum and energy; it costs attention; it's a way to take bright employees and have them make poorer

decisions and make lower quality work.

Being able to work in an office, or jobhunt, or work at home, is an area where this spiritual discipline affects success. If the stakes are survival, then this spiritual discipline becomes a matter of survival.

34. Don't try to wag the dog. More specifically, don't try to wag God.

One of my friends has a print-out of two poems side by side:

"Invictus"

by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

"The Soul's Captain"

by Orson F. Whitney

Art thou in truth? Then what of Him
Who bought thee with His blood?
Who plunged into devouring seas
And snatched thee from the flood,

Who bore for all our fallen race
What none but Him could bear—
That God who died that man might live
And endless glory share.

Of what avail thy vaunted strength
Apart from His vast might?
Pray that His light may pierce the gloom
That thou mayest see aright.

Men are as bubbles on the wave,
As leaves upon the tree,
Thou, captain of thy soul! Forsooth,
Who gave that place to thee?

Free will is thine- free agency,
To wield for right or wrong;
But thou must answer unto Him
To whom all souls belong.

Bend to the dust that "head unbowed,"
Small part of life's great whole,
And see in Him and Him alone,
The captain of thy soul.

And my own revision:

“A Professional Courtesy to a Fellow Poet”

Out of the pitch black of my sin and vice,
Chosen only of my own free will,
I thank the God beyond all knowing
For my yet still fighting soul.
In the cunning net of His Providence,
I have spurned kindnesses for my good,
Gifts I have fought as chance left me,
Bloodied, but more deeply bowed:

*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?
It hurteth thee to kick against the goads.*

Beyond this life of pleasure and pain,
Lie the Gates of Heaven and Hell,
Battered I still make my choice,
Seeking neither to bolt nor bar,
From inside, the gates of Hell.

Narrow is the path and strait the gate:
The entrance to Glory beyond,
All trials and tests named in the scroll,
Thy Grace my wounds have bound with salve.

I thank the ranks of men made gods,
Who cheer me on to join their choir,
Thou blessest me beyond any fate,
That I could ever know to ask.

Thy Glory is to transfigure me,
To Live, Thou Thyself:

I AM the Master of my Fate!
I AM the Captain of my Soul!

(I also know what that *means!*)
S.D.G.

Trying to be "the captain on your soul" today is often more of a Oprah-style touchy-feely self-improvement project than an abrasively stiff Nietzschean campaign. But the core is unchanged and the end is the same, and it is a real temptation. It's there when we make our plans without first seeking the Lord's guidance, and then ask God to give a rubber stamp blessing. The severity varies, but all of us do this at least a little. (I know *I* do.)

Peter Kreeft said that the chief advantage of wealth is that it does not make you happy. The statement may sound strange, but it is sensible. If you are having trouble financially, you can believe that if only you had enough money, the toughest difficulty in life would be taken care of. But if you have lots of money and you still have problems, you don't need more money; you need something more *than* money. And something like this—but dealing with much more in life than money—is at the heart of George Bernard Shaw's "There are two great tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." The first tragedy is the tragedy of seeing ads for the Amazing New Swiffer, pining for how perfect your life would be with it, yet despite all your longing and all your best efforts, the Amazing New Swiffer forever remains beyond

your grasp. The other tragedy is getting the Amazing New Swiffer, finding that it really does have the Cool Telescoping Handle the ads say it does, and then becoming painfully aware that you have the same spiritual void as you did before you owned the Amazing New Swiffer. But these two tragedies in life are not the only possibilities.

The third option is the way of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the way of letting yourself be clay, shaped in the hands of the potter; it is the way of trust in providence. The dreams we imagine for our success could be incapable of making us truly happy; but the plans God provides for our growth and maturity can give us a joy we would never expect. There was an Evangelical T-shirt that shows one Christian fish symbol swimming in the opposite direction from a number of predatory fish, and says, "Go against the flow." And if it is talking about what is wrong in the world, then the message is true. But there is another sense of "going with the flow": the lifelong and difficult struggle of cooperating with the flow of God's providence. It may be paradoxical that we need to work to go with the flow, but it really is work to go with the flow, and it really is a flow, such as an Orthodox priest-monk wrote in *Christ the Eternal Tao*: which, from what I've heard, is like what I wrote in, *The Way of the Way* before becoming Orthodox—but better. *Christ the Eternal Tao* places the Fall in relation to the human race leaving a first

tranquility and entering worry and becoming distracted with plans to arrange things our way. If we chase after our own versions of the Swiffer, whether or not we succeed, the chasing and the goal are marks of the Fall. You cannot get happiness either if you fail in your quest for the Amazing New Swiffer or if you succeed in the selfsame quest, but there is another option: to give up the quest altogether and live in something better. And that something better is Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Happiness can never come from trying to wag God. It comes from God wagging us: it comes from praying, not in order to change God, but to actively work with God changing us. Virtue is easy, much easier than vice. Getting to virtue may seem harder than remaining in vice, but this is because we do not see how hard vice is. And something funny happens along the way. If we are wise, we see our quests to be the captain of our souls as sin, nothing less, and we repent of it. And we let God work on us, slowly shaping us. Some time along the way, we think of something else we did not think to ask for: God is the Great Choreographer and we have fought his invitations to happiness by dancing the Great Dance, often without ever recognizing the invitation. And second, in his work with us, in our situations, in our prayers and other ascesis, in our successes and failures, our greatest joys and our greatest pains, he is there, working with us, mending our spiritual diseases and freeing us from internal chains

that were invisible us, preparing us for freedom. And what we find, long after we realized chasing after being the captain of our souls was a silly fantasy that could never satisfy us, we realize that God is preparing us for deep spiritual freedom: beyond a freedom *in* doomed quests, a freedom *from* doomed quests, a freedom not to have one's soul chained by chasing after the Swiffer. God is the Great Physician, ever working to free us from spiritual disease and the constriction of sin; God is the great Spiritual Father arranging everything in our lives for our freedom: beyond the freedom we know to ask for, another, deeper kind of freedom that we would never even think to ask. God ever seeks to free from chains we do not see how we can live without. And God is the giver who gives us ever better, ever wilder gifts than we ask.

It matters not how strait the gate, nor how charged with punishment the scroll: we turn to God with head ever bowed: and the Master of Our Fate shapes us to be, after him, *the captains of our souls*.

35. Never settle for ersatz sacraments.

There is something that might be called "sacramental shopping:" buying something, not really for the use you will get out of it, but to adjust things inside. This chief ersatz sacrament, and the ersatz spiritual discipline of consuming brands, are two major pillars in

the ersatz religion of the ersatz god called Money. But it is not the only ersatz sacrament.

Many first world nations are working really hard to unleash the goodness of sex; and yet their birth rates are almost morbidly low compared with nations with no pretension of such a "celebration" and "unleashing." The chief good of sex is seen as a pleasurable experience. If you say that the chief good of sex is that it brings life in the world, you are seen as a bit of a sophist or a slightly self-deluded fool. These are symptoms of a real problem, the same problems that are blared loud in spam hawking a range of porn up to and including smut that makes *Penthouse* look like Botticelli. (And, as mentioned before, Viagra ads that proclaim that our natural lust, even if we lay the reins on the horse's neck, is never enough: we always need to goad ourselves more, more, more.) We are trying more and more to get the ultimate sexual thrill, and somehow it never satisfies. And where an older generation would merely call using porn (and relieving yourself) sin, and serious sin at that, we *know* it as an addiction; men are learning the hard way that addiction to porn is as joyless a chain as addiction to some narcotics. All this is tied to approaching sex chiefly as means to pleasure, and used that way it is much worse than what happens when we use eating as our constant pleasure delivery system.

This is a much nastier ersatz sacrament,

partly because sexuality runs to the core of our being.

The *only* way to win this game is not to play at all...

We need *real* sacraments.

36. Live the Eucharist.

Orthodox believe in seven sacraments, but you can also say that there are a million sacraments, or only one: the Eucharist.

I am not sure what really to say about the Eucharist; perhaps one starting point might be the Holy Grail. Respected Arthurian scholar Richard Barber wrote *The Holy Grail* that he began his research expecting a paper-thin Christianization of originally pre-Christian pagan sources, and came to believe that the Holy Grail in medieval literature centered on the Eucharist, so much so that the so-called secrets of the Grail were in fact the so-called secrets of the Mass, an orthodox spiritual interpretation of the Mass and its various details. I am not sure I believe him all the way; I'll get to that momentarily, but this adds weight to C.S. Lewis's and Charles Williams's Arthurian commentary where they talk about the Holy Grail absorbing into itself all the Celtic pots of plenty, a Holy Grail which is significant precisely as the first fount of the Eucharist. Whatever other influences may be present in medieval Arthurian legend,

it is a clumsy move to try to interpret Christianity as at most a superficial influence in the Arthurian legends and the Grail, and it really tells more about the reader than the text.

And I wanted to make an Orthodox treatment of the Holy Grail, and engage the legends. I wrote my last novella, *The Sign of the Grail*, after reading a lot of medieval forms of Arthurian legends, and I believe there is more than meets the eye to the legends' presence in *The Sign of the Grail*: if the narrative is dreamlike, it follows the Arthurian tellings of never-never land. And, sadly enough, part of my impetus was that I was studying in a theology program with not-very-theological theology; reading the legends almost felt like theology compared to my coursework. But I found out something during and after my writing: I succeeded, in a way, but found that I was trying to do something that was impossible, or rather didn't make sense.

In the days that the legends of King Arthur and his court began spreading, the Western Church discouraged people from involving themselves with "idle romances;" online versions of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* are no warmer; and the Eastern Church's response is more, "the holy what?" I had to overlook a spiritual foul smell to become engrossed in the legends, and the foul smell has become a full-fledged stench over the centuries—it's not just *The da Vinci Code*. Richard Barber may be right that the Holy Grail in the medieval

legends was not taken from non-Christian legends and given a Christian resurfacing. But in today's Grail questing, the Christian dimension has shrunk almost to oblivion, and been replaced by more occult forces.

In the medieval legends, the Holy Grail is something elusive: if you grasp it, it very soon slips through your fingers. You may quest for it, but it is almost by definition something beyond your reach. It has been said that if the *definition* of dinosaurs includes being extinct, then it is true on purely philosophical grounds that no dinosaurs exist: if Jurassic Park were to open up, it would still be true that no dinosaurs exist: even if enormous, ancient kinds of reptiles were right next to you, they could not be dinosaurs *by definition*, because they are not extinct. And this is very much like the quest for the Holy Grail. It is like King Pellinore in his pursuit of the ugly Questing Beast that would forever elude him. Part of the (implied) definition of the Holy Grail is that it is something you can't have.

Orthodoxy doesn't really have a tradition of questing for the Holy Grail, nor does it offer any obvious means to possess the Holy Grail. The only game in town is to *become* the Holy Grail.

The sanctification of Holy Communion is a mystery *en route* to the transformation of the faithful. Bread and wine really and truly become the body and blood of Christ. The

Eucharist is not consecrated to remain in the chalice; it reaches its full stature only when the vessel that receives it is no longer a lifeless cup, but a living vessel: a living person. And that reaches its full stature in transformed believers and transformed lives. The wine becomes the blood of Christ, and becomes the divine life that is lived by the body of Christ, the Church. There are icons where the chalice is present: one layer of Rublev's icon of the Trinity is the Father and the Spirit on either side in the Heavenly reality reflected in earthly chalices. The chalice is easier to see in an icon of Christ, the bread of life. But in these layers, not only is every chalice mystically the first chalice: we are made to be more truly the Holy Grail than the Holy Grail itself. We are to receive the Eucharist, and live it in our lives.

There was a Russian saint who authorized more frequent participation in Communion when hard times were descending on Russia. I am wary of treating why some devout Orthodox receive Communion almost every week, and others only on the highest of feasts, but whether Communion is frequent or not, it is a powerful aid for hard times.

37. Hope for God to be a cruel man, harvesting where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered (see Matthew 25:24).

There is a Chinese saying associated with Taoism: "Heaven's greatest mercy is without mercy." And there are senses in which

Orthodox would not say this: Orthodoxy decisively rejected Novatianism, which is an Orthodoxy without the principle of oikonomia. Both oikonomia, the principle of mercifully relaxing strictness, and akgravia, the principle of striving for strict excellence, are of profound importance. But there is another way in which God's greatest mercy is without mercy. All of us have the spiritual disease called sin, and God the Great Physician will never stop until he has uprooted all of it. Sin is a spiritual cancer, and as long as we live on earth, we need to repent. And the Great Physician will not stop so long as there is one tiny tumor hidden in our smallest toe. In that way, the Great Physician who is also the Great Choreographer arranging for our good in hard times and easy is merciless: he is a cruel man, altogether without mercy. I've been through chemotherapy; it could perhaps have been worse, but it was one of the nastier things I've been through. But, in my chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the doctors and nurses weren't aiming to give me an enjoyable experience; they were aiming to give me my *life*, and I am profoundly grateful to them for this. Sometimes God's work with us is very pleasant. He wants to give us every good, and even his calls to repentance are meant to give us a host of good things, joy included. But all of us have the seeds of Hell inside us, and all of us need unconditional surrender to the Great Physician. And to those of us who hold on to sin because in our warped state we think it adorns us, God's

greatest mercy is without mercy.

How then does God harvest where he has not sown? The Nicene Creed's opening words announce, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The first chapters of Genesis proclaim that the world is God's creation. God has created everything outside himself: the very demons owe their existence to God as much as the angels do. Every fish, rock and tree; every good or bad person, every angel and demon, time itself—all these are sown by the Great Sower. Then what is there to harvest that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown evil, nor sin, nor death. And he harvests where he has not sown. The Devil killed Christ in the hour that darkness reigned, but this was the beginning of the three-day Pascha of Christ's resurrection, where Christ crushed death, the Firstborn of the Dead (Colossians 1:18), who opened the doors of death so that all might enter: the moment Satan seemed to secure certain victory was only the final sacrifice by which God secured checkmate. God did not sow the death of his Son, but he harvested where he had not sown: God harvested from the death of his Son the resurrection of his sons, the saints, his whole Church. And the same is true in the saints' lives. The gulag where Fr. Arseny served was nothing other than the work of the Devil. God did not sow this, but he worked in it, and he harvested

from it a saint's life that touched others. God did not sow those evils, but he worked in them. As "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (I John 3:8), but not by turning back the clock and simply erasing them, but by moving forward and transforming them. And the story of Fr. Arseny is the story of God's triumph in and through his people, triumph even in a death camp. Have you ever met a recovering alcoholic who has been dry for years, and who shows a singular warmth and caring for others? Some of the most beautiful people I know have been recovering alcoholics, and God has harvested where he has not sown and destroyed the Devil's work. And the same is true of our sins and the problems in our lives: God will, if we let him, transform them and harvest where he has never sown.

We live in a time of unusual fragmentation; the postmodern age is more of a bazaar than much that went before, but one and the same God who harvests where he has never sown also gathers where he has not scattered, and gathers into himself. We were all made for communion with God, but sin has scattered us much farther than our expulsion of Paradise. But God is stronger. Even if he has not scattered, he wills to gather all to himself.

Must we allow God to be cruel? We do not have the authority to veto God on this. Some have complained about "The God I believe in would never [*fill in the blank*]," but the God

we believe in surprises us and catches us off guard. If we correct God on how he may love, this is a problem, and sticking our head in the sand does not make hard times genuinely easier. Better open ourselves to the infinite mercy of a God who is cruel, harvests where he has never sown, and gathers where he has never scattered.

Fighting this will never help us, and certainly not help us survive hard times.

38. Pray all the time.

The *Philokalia* say a lot about the Jesus Prayer, and *The Way of the Pilgrim* tells not only of the life and survival of a homeless man amidst many dangers, but of God truly blessing him. Much of his book is about him living the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

39. Read the saints' lives.

I didn't really know what I missed until I started reading the saints' lives. Difficult lives are not the exception in the saints' lives: they are the rule. Yet the deepest thing one encounters is not this, but God's triumph in his saints.

40. Work hard.

There are different kinds of work in life: work that earns money, work at home, and spiritual

work among others. We often pray for God to make life easier for us, when we should pray, "God, give me mountains to climb and the strength for climbing." Every kind of work has merit, and wisdom literature tells us (Proverbs 6:6-11),

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man.

A lot of work we need to do is work without any chief, officer, or ruler: job hunting, for instance. The word "wisdom" in the Bible does not conjure up the image of a seer with deep, piercing insights; we would do well to read it as "skill for living" if nothing else.

Seven Habits of Highly Effective People makes an interesting point in its introduction. When the author looked through wisdom literature from different ages, he noticed a recent trend. All of the wisdom literature aimed for skill for living, but the most recent wisdom literature offered what he called a "personality ethic" that sought success in superficial tricks and techniques. Almost all of the other wisdom literature recognized a "character ethic" that said true success in life

is a matter of character and virtue that reaches to the core of our being. "Get rich quick" has been called "the perennial cry of the lazy man," and lots of ads on the web promise a secret that will provide lots of steady income but require little time or work. And the best response is like the wisdom books: "Consider the ant, lazybones. How long will you fall for these scams? Get off your duff, roll up your sleeves, get to work, and keep working!"

41. Go beyond work.

It is true, not only that virtue is easier than vice, but that the Christian life is a life of grace, a Sabbath rest in God: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10 KJV). Someone said, "I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." The rest on this side of hard work is only laziness, but the rest on the other side of work is Heaven, and it begins in this life.

42. Go beyond nice, but don't settle for mean.

Being nice is not enough. We in America work hard at being nice, at making other people feel good and at trying to avoid hurting other people's feelings.

But do not confuse being nice with Christian love. Love, like a person, has soft flesh and a hard spine. How a person feels now is not the

only concern to love: a much bigger concern is giving what you can to the other person's growth for a lifetime. George MacDonald said that love is easy to please but difficult to satisfy, which is a much greater gift than nice. Life is hard, and people can have trouble believing both that God is in charge and that he is good when really hard things happen. But God is *both* in charge *and* good. The problem is that we have confused being nice with being good. We ask what is wrong with God when he fails to be nice, and the answer is that God has never been merely nice. He works for our good on a deeper level, concerned with discipleship and growth and doing better things for us than simply be nice and give us what ask when we try to inform him what will make us happy.

Our hard work to be a nice world may or may not last. I would not assume that nice is permanent any more than a booming economy is permanent, and some have suggested that nice will come to be replaced by mean. But as for us, we don't need to be merely nice, let alone merely mean. We need a concern for others' growth as people, and we need love with soft flesh and a hard spine.

43. Pay attention to the wallflowers in life.

One theologian, speaking in a chapel, told how when he was younger his mother told him, to pay attention to the wallflowers at a dance, not the eye-catchers dancing in the

center of the room. The wallflowers were ultimately much more interesting, his mother told him. And, he said, she was right, and the lesson wasn't just about dancing. When they are considering what doctrines to explore the most, he suggested that we look at the wallflower doctrines.

This is not just a truth about dancing and theology either. Good software developers may use buzzwords on an as-needed basis when dealing with people who expect them, but in the best software developers' favorite professional conversations, the discussion is all about professional wallflowers that the best computer science has been discussing for years, if not decades. It is a *faux pas* to use a string of buzzwords, much like trying to show off your vocabulary by constantly dropping the F-bomb.

"Local" is one of the eye-catchers, and there may be something to it; there is a good case that our ability to make our own private worlds with likeminded friends from the internet loses something that was part of life when life was local because there was scarcely an alternative. "Green" is far from being a wallflower, and there's something to it. But turning off the lights (like reducing and reusing) was once part of the old-fashioned virtue of thrift before it was rediscovered as being green, and for that matter Christians spoke of stewardship before being green was such a watchword. Ages before that, Christian theologians spoke of the tie between humans

and nature, looking on the natural world with respect. But the point is not just that local and green have taken a few moves from the wallflowers. The eye-catchers are not as interesting as the wallflowers.

There are other wallflowers in life, and they are also interesting.

44. Don't assume that because Church Fathers could not imagine the world we live in that their words are irrelevant.

The wisdom of the Fathers may be all the more relevant. It is true that we have been able to cast off much of thrift like a shackle, but the words of the Fathers on thrift were not just because of economic conditions unlike ours; they are written because thrift is good for us as humans. The Fathers could not imagine porn as it comes to us, but what is obsolete about the words of Proverbs on lust is all on the surface: if Proverbs tells us that lust is toxic, these words lose nothing today. (Ask a recovering porn addict.) If our technologies and our culture give us more ways to indulge narcissism, the words of the Fathers on pride are far from obsolete. Old warnings about addiction to too much alcohol are *more* relevant, not *less*, when drinking too much alcohol serves as a gateway to meth and cocaine. And this is just some of what the Fathers say about sins; what they say about goodness is even deeper.

The Fathers represent advice that transcend their historical situation to speak to other times and ages. Possibly some of the details need to be adapted, but this is really a side issue. The Holy Spirit moves in the Fathers, they speak to human life, and they have much to teach us.

Some postmodern scholarship that I've read makes a critique of the philosophies that immediately preceded postmodernism, and then assumes, "without loss of generality" as mathematicians say, that nothing more needs to be said about anything else people have said in the ages before. It does help keep articles to a manageable length if postmodern philosophy is compared only to one other philosophy. But more is going on. There is a real temptation to compare a new trend only with what came right before it, and not consider that much older trends may have a better alternative. This is a loss; we need wisdom that has been accumulating for ages.

45. Store up treasures in Heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount speak to us today:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

If danger is looming, we may conceive of a practical response in terms of laying up treasures: gold, which can be stolen, or stocks, which can crash, or money itself, which can fall prey to inflation. But we shouldn't be reaching for treasures in earth: we need treasures in Heaven: golden virtues that can strengthen us for hard times, community that can pull together, and kindnesses that may be responded to when we least expect it. And even this much is a materialist view of treasures in Heaven: storing up treasures in Heaven teaches us to work with the divine providence that we need most in disasters. It puts first things first:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

These words are tied, if subtly, to their context: storing up treasures in Heaven gives us a sound eye, while merely storing up treasures on earth stores up blindness, the blindness of being penny wise and pound foolish. The last thing we need in a rough situation is for the light in us to be darkness; it is in disasters we need a sound eye more than any other time, and trying to solve our problems by storing up treasures on earth is simply not up to the task before us.

The Sermon on the Mount continues after

this:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Virtues are one kind of treasure in Heaven, and they are powerful in themselves: one Greek word, *arete*, means both virtue and excellence. But this last passage from the Sermon on the Mount says more. The Sermon on the Mount does not *need* to say, as I have, that virtues and other treasures in Heaven can do things on earth. The major point is that God looks out for us in his divine providence, and we are better building our lives on this providence than trying to do everything ourselves. We are better off living the lifelong lesson of trusting in God than trying to get enough money to replace the providence we do not trust God for.

It is a mistake to say, "Yes, but we do not live in a perfect world and I need something more practical." The Sermon on the Mount is concerned with practical realities in practical life. When it says, to paraphrase, "Don't make yourself bear tomorrow's stress today; each day has enough stress of its own," it is not telling us that it would be nice to have our lives be stress-free. It's telling wise advice for people whose lives are not stress free, and the more stress you are under, the more practical the advice becomes. Having problems in your life but being too practical for the Sermon on the Mount is like having a computer program that you can't get to work, but being too smart to read the manual or try to Google a solution on the web. It's a very *impractical* way to be practical.

46. "Stand back, and take off the shoes from your feet, because the place where you are standing is holy ground!" (Exodus 3:5)

Take off the shoes from your feet. In ancient times, shoes were dead things, made not from synthetic materials but from the leathery dead skin of animals. And these words first spoken to Moses still speak today. If we encounter God, we must spiritually take off dead shoes from our feet: if we are to meet God, it will cost us our dead preconceptions and the dead idols that are a dead weight to us. These words come in Moses's great encounter with God in Exodus 3:13-15, and when Moses draws near he is told to shed his dead shoes on sacred ground.

Today's New Age works very hard to dislodge dead preconceptions. What better way to strip off dead preconceptions than to celebrate any and all religions? To pick a popular topic—an eye-catcher these days—the Mayan "astrological" calendar is a cultural work of beauty; one of the core insights is that each day has an appointed purpose, and Mayan practitioners meet their spiritual leaders to work out how to best live the day as is fitting to its place in the cycles of their calendar. Orthodoxy has something like this: there is a liturgical rhythm which its people are to live out, and what I first read about the Mayan calendar in anthropology helped me to start living a real asset in Orthodoxy. Orthodox, among others, distinguish *chronos* from *kairos*:

There are two [Greek] words [chronos and kairos] that are both translated time, but their meanings are very different. Translating them both as time is like translating both genuine concern and hypocritical flattery as "politeness" because you are translating into a language that doesn't show the distinction.

as I wrote in *The Horn of Joy*. Kairos is appointed time, time where moments are there with a purpose, time such as liturgical time highlights with its rhythms of seasons and days and the varying ways they are lived out. Chronos is time without this meaning, time such as a clock can measure, and in the words of one Orthodox homily, the time of "one damn thing after another." We have largely fallen into chronos and largely forgotten kairos even if we still yearn for what we miss, and the Mayan calendar did and does understand kairos extremely well. But something more (or, rather, less) appears to be going on in the sudden interest in the Mayan calendar.

This something more less has to do with how New Age fails to really remove dead shoes from our feet. New Age is like waterskiing: one moves along quickly, skimming along the top very quickly, where really removing dead shoes from our feet is like swimming: you fall in the water and stay in. What may be going on in the sudden interest in Mayan time is, as

I wrote in *Technonomicon*,

There was great excitement in the past millenium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.

The quotes are because the anthropology I've read talks about the Mayan calendar without making any connection to astrology, even if they find it beautiful and deep. I have run into New Age hope for a Mayan 2012 watershed,

but it never discusses things like, "The Quiché [Mayan calendar-based] reality causes them to scrutinize each day and its character as it relates to their own character, their desires, and their past, as well as the tasks that lie ahead," as *The Dance of Life* tries to explain the beauty and wisdom. *The Dance of Life* is written to challenge one's dead preconceptions; that it does so in an occult way is not the point. No New Age hubbub about December 21, 2012 seems to really challenge the dead shoes we need to be freed from—certainly not the dead shoe of trying to escape a miserable here and now, an idol diametrically opposed to the spiritual beauty not only of the Mayan calendar, but of the Christian calendar too. Whether the Mayan calendar should be understood as "astrological" I am not sure; certainly *The Dance of Life* with its occult bent never connects the Mayan calendar with astrology. But to ask the Mayan calendar to deliver an escape from the miserable here and now is to ask it to work against its fundamental beauty and its fundamental principle: the point of the Mayan calendar, like the Orthodox Christian one, is not to provide *escape* from the here and now but further provide us help to *engage* the here and now. However much New Age may offer to open our minds, what it gives here at least is further help nailing the dead shoes to our feet.

All of us stand on holy ground. The whole world is created by God, and to God it

returns. Can we escape? *Never!* Psalm 139
KJV reads,

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy
presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art
there:
If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou
art there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the
sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover
me;
Even the night shall be light about me.
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee;
But the night shineth as the day:
The darkness and the light are both
alike to thee.

The whole world is an emblem of God's glory: God's plan to share his glory with the human race is ultimately the glorification of the entire Creation, and God wills to engage us in the situations we are in. And his glory will ever shock us to remove our dead shoes and enter life more abundantly. There is no place we can flee from God, nor any place that is not holy ground where God will tell us we have dead leather shoes to remove. And taking off our dead leather shoes is lifegiving.

47. Take a cue from an older kind of fermented

drink.

Nourishing Traditions, which calls for a return to less plastic-y industrial foods such as was eaten in nutritional golden ages, has a curious inconsistency. She grinds an axe against what you could buy at a liquor store: her nutritional golden ages include colonial America, but in the "traditional" recipe for punch she censors rum and even substitutes something else to make up the five ingredients for an alcohol-free punch. Not that she is a teetotaler: she advocates another kind of rather different alcoholic beverages that are made by another process, "lacto-fermented" beverages made by a process that isn't found in today's commercially prepared beer, wine, and liquors. But, none the less, she grinds quite an axe against drinks that are commercially available. She offers no convincing, or even unconvincing, explanation for how negatively she treats modern drinks as used in her nutritional golden ages.

When I spoke with a friend who was a big advocate of the *Nourishing Traditions*-style movement, she openly acknowledged that this was an inconsistency and made no blanket condemnation of the modern drinks a liquor store sells (I think she said she enjoys a glass of wine now and then), but she did say something that *Nourishing Traditions* could have said but didn't. The older kind of drinks, home-made fruit of lacto-fermentation rather than yeast fermentation, satisfy in a way that

yeast-fermented commercial drinks don't. And there's something to that. When I brought a jar of lacto-fermented water kefir to church for a special occasion, the remark I got, completely unsolicited, said it was satisfying.

I remember when I was in France, hearing some of the history of Champagne and how it came to be. Early on was discussion about how they raised the alcohol content; today's wine is 12-13% alcohol, but in the ancient world wine was around 4% alcohol. And I'm not sure I've ever had a lacto-fermented drink above 2% alcohol, but there is a difference. However much I may love a good wine, I have to be disciplined because if it tastes good, I could drink a drop more than is good for me if I don't pay close attention to how much. But the difference with a good home-made lacto-fermented drink is that the temptation to drink and drink is much less. It's not just that it would take much more of it to get drunk; even if you like it you don't want to keep on drinking because you are satisfied the way you are after a good meal.

This is of course dwarfed by the real motivation for lacto-fermented drinks, namely that they are believed to offer much better nourishment, (*probiotic* and all that), but I mention this because this is a microcosm of pervasive changes that have taken place and are taking place throughout the world we live in, and affecting all our life. If I may make a table of what this is a microcosm of, with one column for each vastly different fermented

drink:

**Yeast-fermented
modern wine**

**Lacto-fermented
ancient drinks**

At least a little
buzz.

Satisfaction.

Unwinding to
technology like
television and
radio.

Unwinding to friends'
conversation or music
played by your friends.

New Age exotic
tripping through
(attempts at)
various traditions
and their practices.

Orthodoxy's sublime
and sublimated way of
giving the exotic.

The thrill of new
narcissism.

The joy of humility.

Postmodern pursuit
of philosophical
adventure.

Growing roots, in
beliefs and in life.

Cycling through
new, short-lived

Owning things built to
last and intended to be

Yeast-fermented modern wine	Lacto-fermented ancient drinks
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possessions.	kept.
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Seeking good
nutrition and eating
to nourish the body.

Making Splenda your
tool to lose weight.

Going on a crusade
to solve the world's
problems.

"Just" being a member
of society and
penitently turning the
crusade against your
own sins.

Having friendships
that are beyond
disposable:
transactional

Having friendships
that last for years
unless something goes
seriously wrong.

Trying to make
friendship with
people you choose.

Learning to make
friendship with people
who are in your life
that you cannot
choose.

Porn and related
pleasures.

Marriage and
children.

We seem to be shifting further left, and this is not a good thing.

48. Prepare for losses.

Christ told St. Peter, John 21:18 RSV,

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

These words may be given to all of us.

The Christian Way is a Way of being emptied; its triumph is a triumph precisely *in* loss, a way of life resurrected from death.

The Way before us may be, as for St. Peter, "you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." We may have enough to forgive now, but we may have much more to forgive in the future. If that is the case, the best preparation in the future is to work on forgiveness now, even if you make a mess of it as I do. Forgiveness is a way of emptying, a letting go that is connected to the Man who said from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). And this forgiveness is key to opening us up to receive forgiveness: of all the points in the Our Father given as a model prayer,

forgiveness alone is singled out for further comment (Matthew 6:14-15 RSV):

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Unforgiveness, trying to hold on to what we think is our due, locks us out of God's work to give us a greater good than we are wise enough to look for. But if we surrender to God in forgiveness, emptying ourselves, our emptying is in continuity with the emptying of Christ, who again (Philippians 2:5-11 RSV):

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This Way of forgiveness, this emptying, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life who is Christ Jesus himself who gives triumph where we can anticipate only defeat. Christ's words to St. Peter announce a martyr's triumph, and

Tradition holds that St. Peter was sentenced to be crucified, and said that he was unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was crucified, and asked to be crucified upside down: inverted crucifixion being the one form of crucifixion more excruciatingly painful than Christ's kind of crucifixion. But this is triumph, eternal triumph, a triumph in St. Peter's humbly emptying himself. And if we are emptied, if we forgive, Christ will triumph in us. And this may be the kind of triumph that God works in and through us.

49. Light one candle: it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Some have said that a candle, such as Orthodox use in prayer, is an emblem of Christ: it gives light, and it gives light by emptying himself. Not everyone uses that image, but God is light, and Christ shone with the uncreated light as he was transfigured. The halo of light around the head of a saint on an icon is not just convention: it is there because Christ blazed with glory so that his face shone like the sun. And this same glory manifests, to some degree, in his saints. One saint, at the end of a holy life, lay on his deathbed with his face shining with the light of Christ, and said, "I have not even begun to repent." This is a microcosm of God's emptying victory.

Light a candle. Or *be* a candle.

50. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

All else is commentary.

All of what I have said above has real imperfections and leaves enormous gaps. But I would like to address one question: Have I said I was going to offer guidance for rough situations and pulled a bait and switch, offering spirituality instead? To answer that, I recall one friend in high school who said with some disgust that he wished C.S. Lewis had left his religion out of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I kept my mouth shut, but the suggestion struck me as strange, even clueless, like saying you wished Newton had kept all math out of his physics. To dislike Newtonian physics may be one thing, but it betrays some confusion to say that you like Newtonian physics but treat the math as an intrusion, as if the math had been artificially inserted like zombies and ultra-violence into *Pride and Prejudice*. C.S. Lewis was a man fascinated by myths and legends even before he became a Christian. Tolkein and others showed him his inconsistency in praising a pagan myth of a dying and rising god and then turning his nose up at Christianity as utterly trite; C.S. Lewis became a Christian precisely because he came to believe that the myths he loved all came together in Christ. Lewis crafted *The Chronicles of Narnia* out of love for all of these stories, and it is, to put it politely, a somewhat surprising suggestion to say that the story Lewis found truest and most beautiful simply does not belong in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. And perhaps it is a bit of a surprising

suggestion to say "Tell me what you can about surviving in a disaster, but recognize that your religion is irrelevant to this question."

Robert Heinlein, in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, wrote, when the characters faced a rather daunting emergency,

"...But I took other steps the first night you were here. You know your Bible?"

"Uh, not very well."

"It merits study, it contains practical advice for most emergencies..."

And this in a distinctly anti-Christian book. Perhaps the text goes on to a rather secular application of John, but the Bible is, among other things, God's own manual for how to deal with rough situations. (And this is to say nothing of the Orthodox Church.)

Saints Cheering Us On

The famous Hall of Fame (Hebrews 11:4-40 RSV) tells,

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For

whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested,

offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with

those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The image is of a stadium where athletes have run the full race, have received their crowns of victory, and now stand around cheering those who are still running: the faithful who are still in life's struggles.

This is not just the prophets and righteous saints from the Old Testament cheering on the first Christians; it is also the saints from the ages cheering on Christians today. If in America we have a revolution, and it turns out horribly, we will enter

it with the prayers of the host of saints. In the worst case, it will be an extremely difficult struggle, but there are others who have struggled before us and will stand, crowned in victory, cheering us on to join them in victory.

We have prayers, *from Heaven with love.*

The Arena

1. We stand in an arena, the great coliseum. For it is the apostles who were sent forth last, as if men condemned to die, made a spectacle unto the world, to angels and men.
2. St. Job was made like unto a champion waging war against Satan, on God's behalf. He lost everything and remained God-fearing, standing as the saint who vindicated God.
3. But all the saints vindicate God.
4. We are told as we read the trials in the Book of Job that Satan stands slandering God's saints day and night and said God had no saint worthy of temptation. And the Lord God Almighty allowed Satan to tempt St. Job.
5. We are told this, but in the end of the Scripture, even when St. Job's losses are repaid double, St. Job never hears. He never knows that he stands in the cosmic coliseum, as a champion on God's behalf. Never on earth does St. Job know the reason for the catastrophes that befell him.

6. St. Job, buffeted and bewildered, could see no rhyme or reason in what befell him. Yet even the plagues of Satan were woven into the plans of the Lord God who never once stopped working all things to good for this saint, and to the saint who remained faithful, the plagues of Satan are woven into the diadem of royal priesthood crowning God's saints.
7. Everything that comes to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation which God has allowed for our strengthening. The plagues by which Satan visited St. Job are the very means themselves by which God glorified his faithful saint.
8. Do not look for God in some other set of circumstances. Look for him in the very circumstances you are in. If you look at some of your circumstances and say, "God could not have allowed that!", you are not rightly accepting the Lord's work in the circumstances he has chosen to work his glory.
9. You are in the arena; God has given you weapons and armor by which to fight. A poor warrior indeed blames the weapons God has armed him with.
10. Fight therefore, before angels and men. The circumstances of your life are not inadequate, whether through God lacking authority, or

wisdom, or love. The very sword blows of Satan glancing off shield and armor are ordained in God's good providence to burnish tarnishment and banish rust.

11. The Almighty laughs Satan to scorn. St. Job, faithful when he was stricken, unmasked the feeble audacity of the demons.
12. God gives ordinary providence for easy times, and extraordinary providence for hard times.
13. If times turn hard for men, and much harder for God's servants, know that this is ordained by God. Do not suppose God's providence came when you were young but not now.
14. What in your life do you wish were gone so you could be where you should be? When you look for God to train you in those very circumstances, that is the beginning of victory. That is already a victory won.
15. Look in every circumstance for the Lord to train you. The dressing of wounds after struggle is part of training, and so is live combat.
16. The feeble audacity of the demons gives every appearance of power, but the appearance deceives.
17. Nothing but your sins can wound you so that you are down. And even our sins are taken

into the work of the Almighty if we repent.

18. When some trial comes to you, and you thank God, that is itself a victory.

19. Look for God's work here and now. If you will not let God work with you here and now, God will not fulfill all of your daydreams and then begin working with you; he will ask you to let him train you in the here and now.

20. Do you find yourself in a painfully rough situation? Then what can you do to lighten others' burdens? Instead of asking, "Why me?", ask, "Why not me?"

21. An abbot asked a suffering monk if he wanted the abbot to pray that his suffering be taken away. The disciple said, "No," and his master said, "You will outstrip me."

22. It is not a contradiction to say that both God has designs for us, and we are under the pressure of trials. Diamonds are only made through pressure.

23. No disciple is greater than his master. Should we expect to be above sufferings when the Son of God was made perfect through suffering?

24. Anger is a spiritual disease. We choose the path of illness all the more easily when we do not recognize that God seeks to train us in the

situation we are in, not the situation we wish we were in.

25. It is easier not to be angry when we recognize that God knows what he is doing in the situations he allows us to be in. The situation may be temptation and trial, but was God impotent, unwise, or unloving in how he handled St. Job?

26. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds by any means. We live instead in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods. And that is the greater blessing.

27. Some very holy men no longer struggle spiritually because spiritual struggle has worked out completely. But for the rest of us, struggle is a normal state. It is a problem for you or I to pass Lent without struggle. If we struggle and stumble and fall, that is good news. All the better if we cannot see how the thrusts and blows of the enemy's sword burnish away a little rust, one imperceptible speck at a time.

28. Do you ask, "Did it have to hurt *that* much?" When I have asked that question, I have not found a better answer than, "I do not understand," and furthermore, "Do I understand better than God?"

29. We seek happiness on terms that make success and happiness utterly impossible. God destroys our plans so that we might have

the true happiness that is blessedness.

30. Have a good struggle.

31. There is no road to blessedness but the royal road of affliction that befits God's sons. Consider it pure joy when you fall into different trials and temptations. If you have trouble seeing why, read the Book of James.

32. Treasures on earth fail. Treasures in Heaven are more practical.

33. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for what good you do. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is how the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.

34. If you have hard memories, they too are a part of the arena. Forgive and learn to thank God for painful memories.

35. Remember that you will die, and live in preparation for that moment. There is much more life in mindfully dying each day than in heedlessly banishing from your mind the reality. Live as men condemned to die, made a spectacle before men and angels.

36. Live your life out of prayer.

37. It takes a lifetime of faith to trust that God

always answers prayers: he answers either "Yes, here is what you asked," or "No, here is something better." And to do so honestly can come from the struggle of praying your heart out and wondering why God seemed to give no answer and make no improvements to your and others' pain.

38. In the Bible, David slew Goliath. In our lives, David *sometimes* prevails against Goliath, but often not. Which is from God? Both.

39. Struggling for the greater good is a process of at once trying to master, and to get oneself out of the way. Struggle hard enough to cooperate with God when he rips apart your ways of struggling to reach the good.

40. Hurting? What can you do to help others?

More than Royalty

One element I remember from a documentary video at Avery Coonley School was talking about some Native American cultures. They commented that, like Christianity, there was an origins myth in which they were placed in a garden, a Paradise. But unlike Christianity, there was no story of leaving Paradise. And yet in Orthodoxy, we insist that Paradise is wherever the saints are. (*Paradise can be every bit here and now!*)

There are certain ways that this is not an obvious thing to say for Christianity, especially if Hell exists, and great saints are often sanctified through great suffering. However, I wish to say more than I said in “God the Spiritual Father,” in which I said that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that makes all the difference.

There is something more to say, but words begin to fail me.

One point where we are in paradise is that every moral injunction, insofar as Orthodox asceticism is moral, is not for God’s benefit, but for ours. St. Maximus Confessor describes three grades of

sonship: *slaves* obey God out of fear of punishment, *mercenaries* obey God for Heavenly reward, but *sons* obey God out of love. And the *Philokalia* contains the striking statement that we owe more to Hell than to Heaven, because more people have obeyed God out of the fear of Hell than out of desire for the delights of Paradise. Nonetheless, if the highest growth is to obey God out of love for him, we are the beneficiaries of our obedience and love. We can be saved from Hell by fearing the torments, or we can grow to seek Heaven's rewards, or we can love as the least inadequate kind of response to God, but we do not benefit God. In the best spirit of de-mythologizing, it can be said that God is perfect from all eternity and has never had needs except in the person of your neighbor, and God is fundamentally beyond being made more perfect by our acts or our love, no matter how much we love him. We benefit *ourselves* the more we obey God out of love for him.

In something of the same sense, ambition, which includes trying to become a bishop, is a sin, but when things are rightly understood, there is a sense in which we cannot overreach and we cannot reach so high as to be guilty of overreaching ambition. Now maybe ecclesiastical office need not be sought after (but I do not condemn honorable seminarians in the world). However, when we talk about what is good for us, about humility, about prayer, about repentance, we cannot reach too far. And humility is a greater thing than the Philosopher's Stone or the Holy Grail, as I just barely graze on in "The Treasure of Humility and the Royal Race:" in short, it opens your eyes and mine to the godlike beauty with which God has imbued every single human being. Humility

transforms everything, or rather it transforms us so that we can be in Paradise anywhere. And monks may be forbidden to seek the lowest of elevations, let alone seek to be the next Ecumenical Patriarch, but there is no degree of the treasure of humility I know of that will bring a confessor's rebuke of "Do you really think such a lofty humility is fitting for someone in your undistinguished rank? Have some more pride like the rest of us!" And humility, in monastics or in the world, is a far greater treasure than any external honor that is to be had. Humility may sometimes be *followed* by ecclesiastical rank, but the real high estate doesn't wait for ecclesiastical office which may or may not come. The treasure and reward of humility is there, immediately, not just sometime later when authorities decide you are ready to bear a heavier cross and push you out of the nest for a greater service.

I would like to comment, very inadequately, on the monastic vow of wealth. It is said well enough that monastics renounce possessions and Orthodox in the world are to practice generosity and detachment, but he who renounces all possessions ends up with God Himself as pre-eminent among *many* possessions. The words "Do not store up treasure on earth" are but a shadow to "Store up treasures in Heaven," and monasticism is scarcely more nor less than a community framework for storing up still more treasures in Heaven. The Gospel may censure the man who stores up treasures on earth and tears down his barns to build bigger barns: but in and out of monasticism Orthodox are summoned to reach positions where their barns are not big enough for the treasures in

Heaven they have come to possess, and they need to tear down their spiritual barns and build up bigger barns. The Gospel implies nothing positive about the man who has great earthly wealth while considering himself much too poor and wearing himself out to acquire even more wealth, but God's fullest blessings are on the monk who considers himself to have no appreciable treasures in Heaven and lives an insatiable desire to get even more treasures in Heaven. The monk who rejects an earthly endowment of wealth is instead given an incomparable Providence that gives him treasures he didn't know to seek. Royalty have such privilege that they are not to touch money: monasticism takes this treasure to the utmost. The monk has lost two hundred and thirty-nine pounds in one vow: if you want to know true treasure, monks have the greatest treasure of all, in this world in the next. St. Constantine, equal to the apostles and great among princes, told one monk that if he had known what rewards monks have in Heaven, he would have exchanged his royal purple for a monk's robes immediately. Monasticism is a unique realm of privilege in the Church. (And the security provided by merely earthly wealth is an illusion and does not compare to the Providence given to married and monastic who do not put their trust in riches.)

What does monastic work pay for a monastic or pilgrim? The answer "100% below minimum wage" is positively misleading. The coin which monastic work pays in, and is more important to a spiritual father than getting work done, is healing from our passions, and freedom from our sins is a coin which no amount of secular money is worth. As regards what monks receive by their labor, I would appeal to the Song of Songs: "Many waters cannot quench

love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.”

All this and more is to be said of monasticism, but it is also to be said that monasticism is no more than the rudiments of the Gospel. If you do not have a monastic spiritual father, all that really means is that you have God for a Spiritual Father. Monastics insist that salvation is possible at every time and everywhere, and is offered to all. However spectacular the blessings of monasticism sound, God’s blessings are offered everywhere. If you should be a monk, by all means become a monk. But if not, do not believe that the God who created and governs all of Creation cares for monks but does not care for you. Christ died for you, and you are made in the divine image to ascend to the divine likeness whether or not monasticism is your path. God has loved you from everlasting to everlasting, and even your ability to choose between Heaven and Hell is part of the glory he built into you.

Moreover the saints, and we are invited to this, are not dependent on their efforts succeeding. We often think of moral victory like a consolation prize, as a palliative to essential failure, but the saints don’t. St. Paul at the end of his life, when he had greater external achievement than almost anyone since, wrote to St. Timothy, “I have fought the good fight. I have run the race. I have kept the faith.” St. Paul, saint that he was, seemed to consider his moral victories of being faithful as more worthy of mention than external victories that included planting churches, writing half the books of the New Testament, and healing and even raising the

dead. He did not need to be successful, and his gargantuan external successes were never mentioned when he claimed a faithfulness that many others can share. There is a crushing character to needing to succeed, and the example of the saints is liberating. We don't need to *succeed*, however noble our endeavor may be. We need only pray and be *faithful*.

We live in a spiritual and visible world, and some say that man, as the recapitulation of the spiritual and visible worlds, as microcosm of all Creation, is higher than the angels. And in this world, there are devils and there is evil, but the devils are always and only on a leash. Meanwhile, the Church Triumphant, the Holy Trinity and every saint before, is watching and cheering us as we run the race. The Church has been called a large yet extremely close-knit family, and every saint standing before the throne of God is praying, or is willing to pray, for us.

And the world we live in is *real*. I am not the only person who has wanted to escape into another world; small literature brings escape from the world while great literature brings engagement with the world. I've wanted to be in Narnia, among other places, and C.S. Lewis says that many kids have their own little world, but for the children, it was real. And this world we are in is itself real. It may not be in its final greatness yet. But it is real and still profoundly great, and after one spiritual adventure I came to realize that being in communion with Christ, I was in a certain sense in communion with all Creation, with the stars in the sky and the starfish in the sea, and insofar as the human person is constituted in the image of the Trinity, I was more in communion with the heretics

than they were with themselves. I am not sure this is officially endorsed language; but I do know that I reached the brink of death and Hell, and my salvation consisted in rejecting a passion of alienation with Creation, and that I am in fact in communion with the Orthodox Church, in communion with God, and in communion with Creation.

Even suffering has meaning. Before I became Orthodox, as a Protestant I said that Purgatory seemed to be a spiritual reality present on earth, whether or not it was a place after death. Now Orthodoxy has been clear in not preaching that some must pass through Purgatory to reach Heaven: but we share in the sufferings of Christ, and spiritual giants suffer more. Part of this is “No servant is greater than his master,” but suffering in our lives is neither random nor meaningless. Marriage and monasticism are both intended to be a crown of thorns to help us grow up; and unlike the world assumed by certain Church Fathers, we live in a world where blessed marriage is almost as much an exceptional holy light as monasticism, and it should be recognized both that marriage and monasticism serve the same goal of self-transcendence, and are different positions on one and the same team.

In *The Orthodox Church*, Vladyka KALLISTOS compares Christians today to the Early Church in terms of what society Christians are surrounded in. He does not make the complaint in ages past, when ancient Roman persecution ended and a saint said that easy times rob the Church of her saints. Now we live in times more reminiscent in pagan terms of Ragnarok or the Kali-Yuga, where Norse paganism

sided with the good gods because they wanted to go down losing on the right side. But this is precisely not the Christian situation. It is more like a business with unrestricted Facebook use, where some people spent all their work hours sunk into social media, while the worker bees became even more focused. Things are darker outside for Christians, but for many the divine light shines more starkly. I have been blessed.

I have titled this piece "More Than Royalty" because whatever is distinctive about royalty, or giftedness, or wealth is a shadow compared to what is built into the human constitution in the divine image. The reference is obvious:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paradise is wherever the saints are! (What more is there to say?)

Death

In the time of life,
Prepare for death.

Dost thou love life?
Be thou of death ever mindful,
For the remembrance of death,
Better befits thee,
Than closing fast thine eyes,
That the snares before thee may vanish.
All of us are dying,
Each day, every hour, each moment,
Of death the varied microcosm,
The freedom given us as men,
To make a decision eternal,
The decision we build and make,
In each microcosm of eternity,
Until one day cometh our passing,
And what is now fluid,
Forever fixed will be made,
When we will trample down death by death,
Crying out from life to death,
O Death, where is thy victory?
O Grave, where is thy sting?

So even death and the grave,
Claim us to their defeat,
Or else,
After a lifetime building the ramp,
Having made earth infernal,
Closing bit by bit the gates of Hell,
Bolting and barring them from the inside,
We seal our decision,
Not strong enough to die rightly in life,
We sink to death in death,
Sealing ourselves twice dead.
Choolest thou this day,
Which thou shalt abide.

Seekest thou a mighty deed,
Our broken world to straighten out?
Seek it not! Knowest thou not,
That the accursed axe ever wielded in the West,
To transform society, with a program to improve,
Is a wicked axe, ever damned,
And hath a subtle backswing, and most grievous?
Wittest thou not that to heal in such manner,
Is like to bearing the sword,
To smite a dead man to life therewith?
Know rather the time-honeyed words,
True and healthgiving when first spoken,
Beyond lifesaving in our own time:
Save thyself,
And ten thousand around thee shall be saved.

We meet death in microcosm,
In the circumstances of our lives and the smallest
decisions,
The decision, when our desire is cut off,
In anger to abide, or to be unperturbed.
Politeness to show to others, little things,
A rhythm of prayer to build up,

Brick by brick, even breath by breath,
Our mind to have on the things of Heaven or on
earth,
A heart's answer of love and submission,
To hold when the Vinedresser takes knife to prune,
The Physician takes scalpel to ransack our wounds,
With our leave, to build us up,
Or to take the gold,
The price of our edification,
And buy demolition in its stead.
Right poetic and wondrous it may sound right now,
Right poetic and wondrous it is in its heart,
But it cometh almost in disguise,
From a God who wishes our humility never to
bruise,
To give us better than we know to ask,
And until we see with the eyes of faith,
Our humble God allows it to seem certain,
That he has things wrong,
That we are not in the right circumstances for his
work,
When his greatest work is hid from our eyes,
Our virtue not to crush,
Knowing that we are dust,
And not crushing our frame dust to return.
Right frail are we,
And only our Maker knows the right path,
That we may shine with his Glory.

Canst thou not save thyself even?
Perchance thou mayest save another.
Be without fear, and of good cheer:
He saved others, himself he cannot save,
Is but one name of Heaven.
Canst not save thyself?

Travail to save another.
Can God only save in luxury?
Can God only save when we have our way?
Rather, see God his mighty arm outstretched in
disaster,
Rather, see glory unfurl in suffering.
Suffering is not what man was made for,
But bitter medicine is better,
And to suffer rightly is lifegiving,
And to suffer unjustly has the Treasure of Heaven
inside,
Whilst comfort and ease sees few reach salvation:
Be thou plucked from a wide and broad path?
Set instead on a way strait and narrow?
Give thanks for God savest thee:
Taking from thee what thou desirest,
Giving ever more than thou needest,
That thou mightest ever awaken,
To greater and grander and more wondrous still:
For the gate of Heaven appears narrow, even paltry,
And opens to an expanse vast beyond all imagining,
And the gate of Hell is how we imagine grandeur,
But one finds the belly of the Wurm constricting
ever tighter.

Now whilst the noose about our necks,
Tightens one and all,
Painful blows of the Creator's chisel stern and
severe,
Not in our day, nor for all is it told,
That the Emperor hears the words,
In this sign conquer,
The Church established,
Persecutions come to an end,
And men of valor seeking in monastery and
hermitage,

Saving tribulations their souls to keep,
The complaint sounded,
Easy times rob the Church of her saints,
Not in our day does this happen:
For the noose is about our necks,
More than luxury is stripped away;
A Church waxen fat and flabby from easy living,
Must needs be sharpened to a fighting trim,
Chrismated as one returning to Orthodoxy,
Anointed with sacred oil for the athlete,
And myrrh for the bride.
And as Christian is given gifts of royal hue,
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh:
Gold for kingship,
Frankincense for divinity,
Myrrh for anointing the dead,
A trinity of gifts which are homoousios: one,
Gold and frankincense which only a fool seeks
without myrrh,
Myrrh of pain, suffering, and death,
Myrrh which befits a sacrifice,
Myrrh which pours forth gold and frankincense.
And as the noose tightens about our neck,
As all but God is taken from us,
And some would wish to take God himself,
The chisel will not wield the Creator,
The arm of providence so deftly hid in easy times,
Is bared in might in hard times,
And if those of us who thought we would die in
peace,
Find that suffering and martyrdom are possible,
We must respond as is meet and right:
Glory to God in all things!
Be thou ever sober in the silence of thine heart:

Be mindful of death, and let this mindfulness be sober.

Wittest thou not the hour of thy death:

Wete thou well that it be sooner than thou canst know.

Put thy house in order, each day,

Peradventure this very night thy soul will be required of thee.

Be thou prepared,

For the hour cometh like a thief in the night,

When thou wilt be summoned before Christ's dread judgment seat.

If thou wilt not to drown,

Say thou not, I can learn to swim tomorrow,

For the procrastinator's tomorrow never cometh,

Only to-days, to use right or wrong.

If thou wilt not to drown,

Learn, however imperfectly, to swim today,

A little better, if thou canst:

Be thou sober and learn to swim,

For all of our boats will sink,

And as we have practiced diligently or neglected the summons,

So will we each sink, or each swim,

When thy boat is asink, the time for lessons is gone.

For contemplation made were we.

Unseen warfare exists because contemplation does not.

Yet each death thou diest well,

A speck of tarnish besmircheth the mirror no more,

The garden of tearful supplication ever healeth,

What was lost in the garden of delights:

Ever banished our race may be from the garden of delights:

'Til we find its full stature in vale of tears,

'Til we find what in death God hath hid,
'Til each microcosm of death given by day to day,
Is where we seek Heaven's gate, ever opening
wide.

The Lord shepherdeth me even now,
And nothing shall be wanting:
There shall be lack of nothing thou shalt need,
In a place of verdure, a place of rest, where the
righteous dwell,
Hath he set my tabernacle today,
He hath nourished me by the waters of rest,
Yea, even baptism into Christ's lifegiving death.
My soul hath he restored from the works of death,
He hath led me in the paths of righteousness,
That his name be hallowed.
Yea though my lifelong walk be through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evils;
Thy rod and thy staff themselves have comforted
me:
Thy staff, a shepherd's crook,
A hook of comfort to restore a sheep gone astray,
Thy rod a glaive, a stern mace,
The weapon of an armed Lord and Saviour
protecting,
Guarding the flock amidst ravening wolves and
lions,
Rod and staff both held by a stern and merciful
Lord.
Thou prearest before me table fellowship,
In the midst of all them that afflict me:
Both visible and invisible, external and internal.
Thou hast anointed me with oil,
My head with the oil of gladness,

And thy chalice gives the most excellent cheer.
Thy mercy upon me, a sinner, shall follow me,
All my days of eternal life even on earth,
And my shared dwelling shall be in the house of the
Lord,
Unto the greatest of days.

Death may be stronger than mortal men, yet:
Love is stronger than death.

The Consolation of Theology

Song I.

The Author's Complaint.

The Gospel was new,
When one saint stopped his ears,
And said, '*Good God!*
That thou hast allowed me,
To live at such a time.'
Jihadists act not in aught of vacuum:
Atheislam welcometh captors;
Founded by the greatest Christian heresiarch,
Who tore Incarnation and icons away from all
things Christian,
The dragon next to whom,
Arius, father of heretics,
Is but a fangless worm.
Their 'surrender' is practically furthest as could be,
From, '*God and the Son of God,*
Became Man and the Son of Man,
That men and the sons of men,

Might become Gods and the Sons of God,'
 By contrast, eviscerating the reality of man.
 The wonder of holy marriage,
 Tortured and torn from limb to limb,
 In progressive installments old and new,
 Technology a secular occult is made,
 Well I wrote a volume,
The Luddite's Guide to Technology,
 And in once-hallowed halls of learning,
 Is taught a 'theology,'
 Such as one would seek of Monty Python.
 And of my own life; what of it?
 A monk still I try to be;
 Many things have I tried in life,
 And betimes met spectacular success,
 And betimes found doors slammed in my face.
 Even in work in technology,
 Though the time be an economic boom for the
 work,
 Still the boom shut me out or knocked me out,
 And not only in the Church's teaching,
 In tale as ancient as Cain and Abel,
 Of "The Wagon, the Blackbird, and the Saab."
 And why I must now accomplish so little,
 To pale next to glorious days,
 When a-fighting cancer,
 I switched discipline to theology,
 And first at Cambridge then at Fordham,
 Wished to form priests,
 But a wish that never came true?

I.

And ere I moped a man appeared, quite short of
 stature but looking great enough to touch a star. In

ancient gold he was clad, yet the golden vestments of a Patriarch were infinitely eclipsed by his Golden Mouth, by a tongue of liquid, living gold.

Emblazoned on his bosom were the Greek letters **X**, and **A**. I crossed myself thrice, wary of devils, and he crossed himself thrice, and he looked at me with eyes aflame and said, 'Child, hast thou not written, and then outside the bounds of Holy Orthodoxy, a koan?':

A novice said to a master, "I am sick and tired of the immorality that is all around us. There is fornication everywhere, drunkenness and drugs in the inner city, relativism in people's minds, and do you know where the worst of it is?"

The master said, "Inside your heart."

He spoke again. 'Child, repent of thine own multitude of grievous sins, not the sins of others. Knowest thou not the words, spoken by the great St. Isaac and taken up without the faintest interval by the great St. Seraphim, "Make peace with thyself and ten thousand around thee shall be saved?" Or that if everyone were to repent, Heaven would come to earth?

"Thou seemest on paper to live thy conviction that every human life is a life worth living, but lacking the true strength that is behind that position. Hast thou read my *Treatise to Prove that Nothing Can Injure the Man Who Does Not Harm Himself*? How the three children, my son, in a pagan court, with every lechery around them, were graced not to defile themselves in what they ate, but won the moral victory of not bowing to an idol

beyond monstrous stature? And the angel bedewed them in external victory after they let all else go in *internal* and eternal triumph?

‘It is possible at all times and every place to find salvation. Now thou knowest that marriage or monasticism is needful; and out of that knowledge you went out to monasteries, to the grand monastery of Holy Cross Hermitage, to Mount Athos itself, and thou couldst not stay. What of it? Before God thou art *already* a monk. Keep on seeking monasticism, without end, and whether thou crossest the threshold of death a layman or a monk, if thou hast sought monasticism for the rest of thy days, and seekest such repentance as thou canst, who knows if thou mightest appear a monk in lifelong repentance when thou answerest before the Dread Judgement-Throne of Christ?

‘Perhaps it is that God has given thee such good things as were lawful for God to give but unlawful and immature for thou to seek for thyself. Thou hast acquired a scholar’s knowledge of academic theology, and a heresiologist’s formation, but thou writest for the common man. Canst not thou imagine that this may excel such narrow writing, read by so few, in the confines of scholarship? And that as thou hast been graced to walk the long narrow road of affliction, thou art free now to sit in thy parents’ splendid house, given a roof when thou art homeless before the law whilst thou seekest monasticism, and writest for as long as thou art able? That wert wrong and immature to seek, sitting under your parents’ roof and writing as much as it were wrong and immature to seek years’ training in academic theology and heresy and give not a day’s tribute to the professorial asceticism of pride and vainglory (thou hadst enough of thine

own). Though this be not an issue of morality apart from ascesis, thou knewest the settled judgement that real publication is traditional publication and vanity press is what self-publication is. Yet without knowing, without choosing, without even guessing, thou wert again & time again in the right place, at the right time, amongst the manifold shifts of technology, and now, though thou profitest not in great measure from thy books, yet have ye written many more creative works than thou couldst bogging with editors. Thou knowest far better to say, "Wisdom is justified by her children," of thyself in stead of saying such of God, but none the less thou hadst impact. Yet God hath granted thee the three, unsought and unwanted though thou mayest have found them.'

I stood in silence, all abashed.

Song II.

His Despondency.

The Saint spoke thus:
'What then? How is this man,
A second rich young ruler become?
He who bore not a watch on principle,
Even before he'd scarce more than
Heard of Holy Orthodoxy,
Weareth a watch built to stand out,
Even among later Apple Watches.
He who declined a mobile phone,
Has carried out an iPhone,
And is displeased to accept,
A less fancy phone,
From a state program to provide,

Cell phones to those at poverty.
 Up! Out! This will not do,
 Not that he hath lost an item of luxury,
 But that when it happened, he were sad.
 For the rich young ruler lied,
 When said he that he had kept,
 All commandments from his youth,
 For unless he were an idolater,
 The loss of possessions itself,
 Could not suffice to make him sad.
 This man hast lost a cellphone,
 And for that alone he grieveth.
 Knoweth he not that money maketh not one glad?
 Would that he would recall,
 The heights from which he hath fallen,
 Even from outside the Orthodox Church.'

II.

Then the great Saint said, 'But the time calls for something deeper than lamentation. Art thou not the man who sayedst that we cannot *achieve* the Holy Grail, nor even *find* it: for the only game in town is to *become* the Holy Grail? Not that the Orthodox Church tradeth in such idle romances as Arthurian legend; as late as the nineteenth century, Saint IGNATIUS (Brianchaninov) gaveth warnings against reading novels, which His Eminence KALLISTOS curiously gave embarrassed explanations. Today the warning should be greatly extended to technological entertainment. But I would call thy words to mind none the less, and bid thee to become the Holy Grail. And indeed, when thou thou receivest the Holy Mysteries, thou receivest Christ as thy Lord and Saviour, thou art

transformed by the supreme medicine, as thou tastest of the Fount of Immortality?

‘Thou wert surprised to learn, and that outside the Orthodox Church, that when the Apostle bade you to put on the whole armour of Christ, the armour of Christ wert not merely armour *owned* by Christ, or armour *given* by Christ: it were such armour as *God himself wears to war*: the prophet Isaiah tells us that the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation are God’s own armour which he weareth to war.

‘Thou art asleep, my son and my child; awaken thou thyself! There is silver under the tarnishment that maketh all seem corrupt: take thou what God hath bestowed, rouse and waken thyself, and find the treasure with which thy God hath surrounded thee.’

Song III.

A Clearer Eye.

‘We suffer more in imagination than reality,’
Said Seneca the Younger,
Quoted in rediscovery of Stoicism,
That full and ancient philosophy,
Can speak, act, and help today,
Among athletes and business men,
And not only scholars reading dusty tomes.
And if thus much is in a school of mere philosophy,
An individualist pursuit deepening division,
What of the greatest philosophy in monasticism,
What of the philosophy,
Whose Teacher and God are One and the Same?
I stood amazed at God,

Trying to count my blessings,
Ere quickly I lost count.

III.

Then said I, 'I see much truth in thy words, but my fortunes have not been those of success. I went to Cambridge, with strategy of passing all my classes, and shining brightly on my thesis as I could; the Faculty of Divinity decided two thirds of the way through the year that my promptly declared dissertation topic was unfit for Philosophy of Religion, and made me choose another dissertation topic completely. I received no credit nor recognition for the half of my hardest work. That pales in comparison with Fordham, where I were pushed into informal office as ersatz counselour for my professors' insecurities, and the man in whom I had set my hopes met one gesture of friendship after another with one retaliation after another. Then I returned to the clumsy fit of programming, taken over by Agile models which require something I cannot do: becoming an interchangeable part of a hive mind. I have essayed work in User eXperience, but no work has yet crystallised, and the economy is adverse. What can I rightly expect from here?'

Ere he answered me, 'Whence askest thou the future? It is wondrous. And why speakest thou of thy fortune? Of a troth, no man hath ever had fortune. It were an impossibility.'

I sat a-right, a-listening.

He continued, 'Whilst at Fordham, in incompetent medical care, thou wert stressed to the point of nausea, for weeks on end. Thy worry wert not, "Will I be graced by the noble honourific

of Doctor?" though that were far too dear to thee, but, "*Will there be a place for me?*" And thus far, this hath been in example "We suffer more in imagination than in reality." For though what thou fearest hath happened, what be its sting?

"Thou seekedst a better fit than as a computer programmer, and triedst, and God hath provided other than the success you imagined. What of it? Thou hast remained in the house of thy parents, a shameful thing for a man to seek, but right honourable for God to bestow if thou hast sought sufficiency and independence. Thou knowest that we are reckoned come Judgement on our performance of due diligence and not results achieved: that due diligence often carrieth happy results may be true, but it is nothing to the point. Thou art not only provided for even in this decline; thou hast luxuries that thou needest not.

"There is no such thing as fortune: only an often-mysterious Providence. God has a care each and all over men, and for that matter over stones, and naught that happeneth in the world escapeth God's cunning net. As thou hast quoted the Philokalia:

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvellous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of

charity.

- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgement and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul.
- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.

- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

‘And again:

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God’s will. ‘My son,’ says Scripture, ‘if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure’ (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: ‘Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.’ Thus the soul that wishes to do God’s will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For

one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, whilst the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and

have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

'Thou hast earned scores in math contests, yea even scores *of* math contests, ranking 7th nationally in the 1989 MathCounts competition. Now thou hast suffered various things and hast not the limelight which thou hadst, or believeth thou hadst, which be much the same thing. Again, what of it? God hath provided for thee, and if thou hast been fruitless in a secular arena, thou seekest virtue, and hast borne some fruit. Moreover thou graspest, in part, virtue that thou knewest not to seek when thou barest the asceticism of a mathematician or a member of the Ultraneet. Thou seekest without end that thou mayest become humble, and knowest not that to earnestly seek humility is nobler than being the chiefest among mathematicians in history?

'The new Saint Seraphim, of Viritsa, hath written,

Have you ever thought that everything that concerns you, concerns Me, also? You are precious in my eyes and I love you; for his

reason, it is a special joy for Me to train you. When temptations and the opponent [the Evil One] come upon you like a river, I want you to know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that your weakness has need of My strength, and your safety lies in allowing Me to protect you. I want you to know that when you are in difficult conditions, among people who do not understand you, and cast you away, This was from Me.

I am your God, the circumstances of your life are in My hands; you did not end up in your position by chance; this is precisely the position I have appointed for you. Weren't you asking Me to teach you humility? And there - I placed you precisely in the "school" where they teach this lesson. Your environment, and those who are around you, are performing My will. Do you have financial difficulties and can just barely survive? Know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that I dispose of your money, so take refuge in Me and depend upon Me. I want you to know that My storehouses are inexhaustible, and I am faithful in My promises. Let it never happen that they tell you in your need, "Do not believe in your Lord and God." Have you ever spent the night in suffering? Are you separated from your relatives, from those you love? I allowed this that you would turn to Me, and in Me find consolation and comfort. Did your friend or someone to whom you opened your heart, deceive you? This was from Me.

I allowed this frustration to touch you so that you would learn that your best friend is

the Lord. I want you to bring everything to Me and tell Me everything. Did someone slander you? Leave it to Me; be attached to Me so that you can hide from the “contradiction of the nations.” I will make your righteousness shine like light and your life like midday noon. Your plans were destroyed? Your soul yielded and you are exhausted? This was from Me.

You made plans and have your own goals; you brought them to Me to bless them. But I want you to leave it all to Me, to direct and guide the circumstances of your life by My hand, because you are the orphan, not the protagonist. Unexpected failures found you and despair overcame your heart, but know That this was from Me.

With tiredness and anxiety I am testing how strong your faith is in My promises and your boldness in prayer for your relatives. Why is it not you who entrusted their cares to My providential love? You must leave them to the protection of My All Pure Mother. Serious illness found you, which may be healed or may be incurable, and has nailed you to your bed. This was from Me.

Because I want you to know Me more deeply, through physical ailment, do not murmur against this trial I have sent you. And do not try to understand My plans for the salvation of people’s souls, but uncomplainingly and humbly bow your head before My goodness. You were dreaming about doing something special for Me and, instead of doing it, you fell into a bed of pain. This was from Me.

Because then you were sunk in your own works and plans and I wouldn't have been able to draw your thoughts to Me. But I want to teach you the most deep thoughts and My lessons, so that you may serve Me. I want to teach you that you are nothing without Me. Some of my best children are those who, cut off from an active life, learn to use the weapon of ceaseless prayer. You were called unexpectedly to undertake a difficult and responsible position, supported by Me. I have given you these difficulties and as the Lord God I will bless all your works, in all your paths. In everything I, your Lord, will be your guide and teacher. Remember always that every difficulty you come across, every offensive word, every slander and criticism, every obstacle to your works, which could cause frustration and disappointment, This is from Me.

Know and remember always, no matter where you are, That whatsoever hurts will be dulled as soon as you learn In all things, to look at Me. Everything has been sent to you by Me, for the perfection of your soul.

All these things were from Me.

'The doctors have decided that thy consumption of one vital medication is taken to excess, and they are determined to bring it down to an approved level, for thy safety, and for thy safety accept the consequence of thy having a string of hospitalizations and declining health, and have so far taken every pain to protect thee, and will do so even if their care **slay** thee.

'What of it? Thy purity of conscience is in no

manner contingent on what others decide in their dealings with thee. It may be that the change in thy medicaments be less dangerous than it beseemeth thee. It may be unlawful to the utmost degree for thou to seek thine own demise: yet it is full lawful, and possible, for our God and the Author and Finisher of our faith to give thee a life complete and full even if it were cut short to the morrow.

‘Never mind that thou seest not what the Lord may provide; thou hast been often enough surprised by the boons God hath granted thee. Thou hast written Repentance, Heaven’s Best-Kept Secret, and thou knowest that repentance itself eclipseth the pleasure of sin. Know also that grievous men, and the devil himself, are all ever used by God according to his design, by the God who worketh all for all.

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods, and it is a more profound truth, a more vibrant truth, a truth that goes much deeper into the heart of root of all things to say that we may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods.

‘Know and remember also that happiness comes from within. Stop chasing after external circumstances. External circumstances are but a training ground for God to build strength within. Wittest thou not that thou art a man, and as man art constituted by the image of God? If therefore thou art constituted in the divine image, why lookest thou half to things soulless and dead for thy happiness?’

Song IV.

Virtue Unconquerable.

I know that my Redeemer liveth,
 And with my eyes yet shall I see God,
 But what a painful road it has been,
 What a gesture of friendship has met a knife in my
 back.

Is there grandeur in me for my fortitude?
 I only think so in moments of pride,
 With my grandeur only in repentance.
 And the circumstances around me,
 When I work, have met with a knife in the back.

IV.

The Golden-Mouthed said, 'Child, I know thy pains without your telling, aye, and more besides: Church politics ain't no place for a Saint! Thou knowest how I pursued justice, and regarded not the face of man, drove out slothful servants, and spoke in boldness to the Empress. I paid with my life for the enemies I made in my service. You have a full kitchen's worth of knives in your back: I have an armory! I know well thy pains from within.

'But let us take a step back, far back.

'Happiness is of particular concern to you and to many, and if words in the eighteenth century spoke of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," now there are many people who make the pursuit of happiness all but a full-time occupation.

'In ages past a question of such import would be entrusted to enquiry and dialogue philosophic. So one might argue, in brief, that true happiness is a supreme thing, and God is a supreme thing, and

since there can not be two separate supreme essences, happiness and God are the same, a point which could be argued at much greater length and eloquence. And likewise how the happy man is happy not because he is propped up from without, by external circumstance, but has chosen virtue and goodness inside. And many other things.

'But, and this says much of today and its berzerkly grown science, in which the crowning jewel of superstring theory hath abdicated from science's bedrock of experiment, happiness is such a thing as one would naturally approach through psychology, because psychology is, to people of a certain bent, the only conceivable tool to best study to understand men.

'One can always critique some detail, such as the import of what psychology calls "flow" as optimal experience. The founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, outlined three versions of the good life: the *Pleasant Life*, which is the life of pleasure and the shallowest of the three; the *Engaged Life*, or the life of flow, called optimal experience, and the *Meaningful Life*, meaning in some wise the life of virtue.

'He says of the Pleasant Life that it is like vanilla ice cream: the first bite tastes delicious, but by the time you reach the fifth or sixth bite, you can't taste it any more. And here is something close to the Orthodox advice that a surplus of pleasures and luxuries, worldly honours and so on, do not make you happy. I tell you that one can be lacking in the most basic necessities and be happy: but let this slide.

'Of the Meaningful Life, it is the deepest of the three, but it is but a first fumbling in the dark of

what the Orthodox Church has curated in the light of day. Things like kindness and mercy have built in to the baseline, curated since Christ or rather the Garden of Eden, so Orthodox need not add some extra practice to their faith to obtain kindness or gratitude. Really, the number of things the Orthodox Church has learned about the Meaningful Life far eclipse the Philokalia: the fount is inexhaustible.

'But my chief concern is with the Engaged Life, the life of flow. For flow is not "the psychology of optimal experience," or if it is, the *theology* of optimal experience hath a different base. Flow is legitimate and it is a wonder: but it is not additionally fit to be a normative baseline for mankind as a whole.

'*Flow*, as it occurs, is something exotic and obscure. It has been studied in virtuosos who are expert performers in many different domains. Once someone of surpassing talent has something like a decade of performance, it is possible when a man of this superb talent and training is so engrossed in a performance of whatever domain, that sits pretty much at the highest level of performance where essentially the virtuoso's entire attention is absorbed in the performance, and time flies because no attention is left to observe the passage of time or almost any other thing of which most of us are aware when we are awake.

'It seemeth difficult to me to market flow for mass consumption: doing such is nigh unto calling God an elitist, and making the foundation of a happy life all but impossible for the masses. You can be a subjectivist if you like and say that genius is five thousand hours' practice, but it is trained virtuoso talent and not seniority that even gets you through

flow's door. For that matter, it is also well nigh impossible for the few to experience until they have placed years into virtuoso performance in their craft. Where many more are capable of being monastics. Monastics, those of you who are not monastics may rightly surmise, have experiences which monastics call it a disaster to share with you. That may be legitimate, but novices would do well not to expect a stream of uninterrupted exotic experiences, not when they start and perhaps not when they have long since taken monastic vows. A novice who seeth matters in terms of "drudgework" would do well to expect nothing but what the West calls "drudgework" for a long, long time. (And if all goeth well and thou incorporatest other obediences to the diminution of drudgery, thou wilt at first lament the change!) A monastic, if all goes well, will do simple manual labour, but freed from relating to such labour as drudgery: forasmuch as monastics and monastic clergy recall "novices' obediences", it is with nostalgia, as a yoke that is unusually easy and a burden unusually light.

'And there is a similitude between the ancient monastic obedience that was *par excellence* the bread and butter of monastic manual labour, and the modern obedience. For in ancient times monks wove baskets to earn their keep, and in modern times monks craft incense. And do not say that the modern obedience is nobler, for if anything you sense a temptation, and a humbler obedience is perhaps to be preferred.

'But in basket making or incense making alike, there is a repetitive manual labour. There are, of course, any number of other manual obediences in a monastery today. However, when monasticism has

leeway, its choice seems to be in favour of a repetitive manual labour that gives the hands a regular cycle of motion whilst the heart is left free for the Jesus Prayer, and the mind in the heart practices a monk's *watchfulness* or *nipsis*, an observer role that traineth thee to notice and put out temptations when they are a barely noticeable spark, rather than heedlessly letting the first temptation grow towards acts of sin and waiting until thy room be afire before fightest thou the blaze. This watchfulness is the best optimal experience the Orthodox Church gives us in which to abide, and 'tis no accident that the full and unabridged title of the Philokalia is The Philokalia of the *Niptic* Fathers. If either of these simple manual endeavours is unfamiliar or makes the performer back up in thought, this is a growing pain, not the intended long-term effect. And what is proposed is proposed to everybody in monasticism and really God-honoured marriage too, in force now that the Philokalia hath come in full blossom among Orthodox in the world, that optimum experience is for everyone, including sinners seeking the haven of monasticism, and not something exotic for very few.

'And remember how thou wast admonished by a monk, perhaps in echo of St. James the Brother of God who said, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away." For thou wert in the trapeza, with the monk and with a janitorial lady, and he told the janitorial lady that she was fortunate, for her manual labour left her free to pray with her mind, and thou, a computer programmer at the time, wert unfortunate because thy work demanded thy full

mental attention.

'Forsooth! If thou canst have optimal experience, the Jesus Prayer in thy heart as the metronome of silence, if thy business were to weave baskets or craft incense, why not indeed can one attend to the Jesus Prayer, rising as incense before God, in mopping a floor or cleaning windows? For however great monasticism may be, it hath not aught of monopoly in meditative work and prayer before God. Marriage is the older instrument of salvation. The door is open, if thou canst do some manual labour, to do so in prayer to God. And monks are not alone permitted prayerful manual labour: monasticism is but the rudiments of the Gospel, and if monasticism seeketh out perhaps a boon in prayerful manual labour, this is hardly a barbed wire fence with a sign saying that prayerful manual labour is reserved only for monastics.

'Let us say that this is true, and the theology of optimum experience is virtually accepted for the sake of argument, or if thou preferest, thou mayest answer it "Yes" and "Amen." Still, I say it is a quibble, compared to the darker import. Let us set the point aside, and with good reason.'

Then he paused, and ere a moment resumed explaining. 'If I may pull a rare note from the wreckage postmodern, there is the concept of a semiotic frame, perhaps a myth, that determines a society's *possibles et pensables*, that which is understood to be possible in a society, and that which is found to even be thinkable. The knife cuts well against some radicals. And people are in blinders about activism and psychology.

'Think of thy feminist theology professor, who said both right and full that she believed in Tradition,

and in the same breath placed Arius, the father of heretics, alongside St. Athanasius as equally full representatives of that Tradition. When in your theological anthropology class she picked two texts for disability, the obvious agenda, the one and only thing to do for autism (as her agenda fell) was to engage some activist political advocacy for to make conditions in some wise more favourable for that particular victim class. No expression of love was possible save additional political activism. And I would say, and thou wouldst say, that she were too political in her response, and not nearly political enough. (For when all is civil warfare carried on by other means, real concern for the life of the polis but starves.)

Yet one of these reading assignments contained what she did not grasp. Of the two, one was what could be straightforwardly be called either or both of political ideology and identity politics, and it was complete with the standard, footnoteless, boilerplate opening assertion that no one else in the whole wide world could possibly have suffering that could be compared to that of one's own poor, miserable demographic.

But the other text was different in many ways. It was entitled "Love Without Boundaries," and it was a text about love written by the father of a severely autistic son. This latter text did not come close to calling for agitation or plans for a better future: far from it—on these points it is silent. What it did do, however, was take an approach in ascesis, and learn to love without limits. The father did not and could not cure his son, but whether or not the father's love transformed his son, the love the father expressed transformed the *father*. His love was cut from the same cloth as the peace with

oneself which St. Isaac and St. Seraphim with one voice exhort us to acquire, and the love the father expressed rendered him Godlike, in a humble, everyday, ordinary fashion.

‘And in like wise to how thy professor automatically jumped to political activism as how one might exhibit right care for the severely autistic and other disabled, in this day and age the go-to discipline for understanding humans is psychology, and a psychology fashioning itself after hard science, introducing itself by what might be called *the physics envy declaration*: psychologists-are-scientists-and-they-are-just-as-much-scientists-as-people-in-the-so-called-hard-sciences-like-physics.

‘It is a side point that psychologists treat subjects as less-than-human: a near-universal feature of psychological experiment is some stripe of guile, because psychological experimental value would be ruined under normal conditions of intelligent and informed cooperation between fellow men. (Though the enterprise may be named “psychology”, the name were oafishly or treacherously applied: for the name be drawn from the Greek for the study that understands the psyche or soul, a *psyche* or soul is precisely what the discipline will not countenance in man.) Forsooth! Men running experiments think and make decisions; subjects in experiments are governed by laws. Moreover, since physics hath worked long and hard to de-anthropomorphise what it studies, physics envy biddeth psychology to seek well a de-anthropomorphised theory of *ανθρωπος* (*anthropos*), man.

‘It hath been noted, as psychology reinvent more of religion, that classical clinical psychology can raise

a person suffering from some mental illness to be as normal, but nought more. And so positive psychology chaseth after means of enhancement and excellence, to best make use of giftedness. Meanwhilst, whilst this invention is brand new, it is well over a millennium since monasticism was at one stroke a hospital for repentant sinners and an academy for excellence.

‘The point primarily to be held is that psychology is not the ultimate real way, but one among many ways, of understanding how people work, and one that hath stopped its ear to our being created in the image of God. All great Christian doctrines are rendered untranslatable. The article form of what is also thine advisor’s thesis hath as its subtitle “From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions,” and it discusseth the formation of psychology as an emergent secular realm which hath displaced older candidates. But in the West before the reign of psychology there were pastoral paradigms for understanding the human person, and thou knowest that one of the first technical terms Orthodoxy asketh its converts to learn is “passion:” and if the passions thine advisor hath discussed are not point-for-point identical to the passions repented of in Eastern Orthodoxy, still they be by far closer than any of the several emergent framings and meanings of “emotion” as pushed for in the discipline of psychology.

‘That there be a common term for psychology, and more dubiously one for what it replaced, is of little import for us. The term “pneumatology” may have existed and named practitioners from an older tradition; but such were under religious auspices. The study and field of communication is, among fields of enquiry studied in the academy, of vintage

historically recent: yet it would be right stunning to deny that people communicated, and tried better to communicate, before the change when a university department door now heralded and announced, "DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION."

'And what has psychology done since being established as a secular arena? Robert Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land* gets on very quickly to utterly dismissing marriage. But no sooner does Michael stop flailing marriage's lifeless corpse, but he hath made a gaping hole and buildeth up a bond of water brotherhood that is meant to be every bit as heroic, beautiful, and magnificent, that the only remaining way to make water brotherhood truly more wondrous and amazing were to enlarge it until it grew to become true marriage.

'Psychology, whilst being secular, in its completion offers ersatz religion that, though meant to be value-free, provides a secular mystical theology. That this secular religion, fit for all religions and patients, uses guided imagery allegedly from some generic copy-paste of Chinese medicine, Tibetan Buddhism, Native American traditions, and goeth back to Graeco-Roman times; mindfulness from Buddhism's Eightfold Noble Path; and yoga from Hinduism is but an illustration of G.K. Chesterton's observation: *the man who does not believe in God does not believe in nothing; he believes anything*. But put this aside and take psychology's claim of secularity at face value. The *Philokalia* is scarcely but a library of collected works about how to rightly live the inner life. It is not in the main concerned with pleasure or joy: but it has an infinite amount to say about repenting from sins that bear Hell each and every one. Psychology does not trade in

temptation, sin, or passion: but it too offers a rudder for one's inner life, and if it teacheth not the extirpation of things that sully the soul's purity, it has infinite reach in a battleplan to not be conquered by negative emotion.

'And if I may speak to thee of TED talks, there is probably a TED talk to be made, "The Trouble with TED," for they exacerbate this. As thou knowest, one talk gave the staggering announcement that after decades of each generation having higher self-esteem than the last, and the lamented consequence arising that our youth in particular reach record levels of narcissism. Well might she announce that if thou sprayest fuel around and throwest lighted matches on the fuel, sooner or sooner thou wilt have a blaze about thee.

'She also talked about self-touch, about it being soothing to place thy hand over thy heart. Forsooth! This is placed among the same general heading of making love without a partner. Not a whisper was heard mentioning affection towards another person, or for that matter a pet; the remedy stepped not an inch away from solipsism. Monks as thou knowest are admonished to refrain from embraces: be that as it may, it would be healthier for a monk to embrace another than to embrace himself.'

I said, 'What *is* the trouble with TED? For I sense something askance, yet to put a finger on it is hard.'

His All Holiness answered me and said, 'All world religions have grandeur, and for an analysis secular all world religions represent a way that a society can live together and persevere. Hinduism is not the sort of thing one *uses up*, whether across years, lifetimes, or centuries even; its spiritual paths are

millennia old, and to destroy it would likely take nuclear war or an apocalyptic event. By contrast, remember thou how thou hast said, "No form of feminism that has yet emerged is stable:" easily enough one finds the living force of body image feminism today, whilst it would scarce be live in the academy in fifty years. Thy friend answered thy remark of something called "Christian feminism," which articulates how traditional Christianity cares for, and seeks, the good of women: for an example, it takes politically incorrect words about husbands and wives and offers the breathtaking change of addressing women as moral agents, and never telling husbands to keep wives in line. That is if anything the exception that proves the rule: for it may bear the external label of "feminism," but its core be much slower to decay than any feminism at all, for it is *not* feminism at all. In thy feminist theology class one author said that in feminist theology, "all the central terms are up for grabs." Meanwhilst, remember thy superior when thou wert an assistant at a bookstore. He hath told thee that books of liberal theology have a shelf life; after five years, perhaps, they are hard to sell. Meanwhilst, his shop published and sold Puritan sermons three centuries old. Thou mayest have a care that they are heterodox: but do not have a care that they will go out of fashion, or if they do go out of fashion, it will not be because the sermons lost their appeal to future Protestants seeking Biblical faith, but something else hath changed features of Protestantism that have survived since the Reformation.

"Thou needest not refute TED talks; a few years and a given talk will likely be out of fashion. There

is something in the structure of TED that is liberal, even if many talks say nothing overtly political: forasmuch, there is more to say than that they are self-contained, controlled, plastic things, where world religions are something organic that may or may not have a central prophet, but never have a central planner. TED is a sort of evolving, synthetic religion, and it cannot fill true spiritual hunger.

‘But let us return to psychology, or rather treat psychology and TED talks, for psychology hath of ages hoped for a Newton who would lead them into the Promised Land full status of being scientists. The study of Rocks and Nothing is the exemplar after which to pattern the study of Man. Forsooth! The problems in psychology are not so much where psychology has failed to understand Man on the ensauple of empirical science. The real concerns are for where they have *succeeded*.

‘In a forum discussion thou readst, a conversation crystallised on care for diabetes, and cardinally important advice not to seek a book-smart nurse, but a diabetic nurse. For it is the case with empirical science that it entirely lacketh in empirical character. In psychology, as oft in other disciplines, a sufficiently skilled practitioner can pick up a book about part of the subject he does not yet understand, and understand well enough what there is to understand. Understanding were never nursed on the practice of direct experience, and understanding here is malnourished.

‘However, the Orthodox Church with monasticism as its heart has *genuine empiricism* as its spine; you know with the knowing by which Adam knew Eve. All else is rumour and idle chatter. If there are qualifications to being a spiritual father, one of the chief of these must be that he speaks and acts out

of first-hand encounter and first-hand knowledge, not that he learned by rumour and distortion. Dost wish that thou be healed by a spiritual physician? Seek thou then a man which will care for thee as a diabetic nurse.'

Song V.

O Holy Mother!

O Holy Mother! Art Thou the Myst'ry?
Art Thou the Myst'ry untold?
For I have written much,
And spent much care,
In The Luddite's Guide to Technology,
And looked all the whilst,
Down the wrong end,
Of the best telescope far and away that I could find.
I have written of man and creation defiled,
Yet for all my concerns,
Of so-called 'space-conquering technologies,'
Which it beseemeth me 'body-conquering
technologies,'
Sidestepping the God-given and holy bounds,
Of our embodied state,
Where better to seek healing,
For an occult-free simulation,
Of the unnatural vice of magick arts,
Than in the perfect creaturely response,
'Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.
Be it unto me according to thy word.'
Then, the gates, nay, the foundations,
The foundations of Hell began a-crumbling,
The New Eve, the Heavenly Mother,
Whom Christ told the Disciple,

'Behold thy Mother!'

In Her is the microcosm of Creation aright,
 And She is the Friend and Comfort,
 Of the outcast, and the poor:
 My money, my property, I stand to lose:
 But no man can take from me,
 A Treasure vaster than the Heavens;
 Perhaps I would do well,
 To say little else of technologies progressively
 degrading humanity,
 And pray an Akathist to the Theotokos,
 And put a trust in Her that is proto-Antiochian,
 Rather than proto-Alexandrian,
 And give Her a trust in the great Story,
 Diminished not one whit,
 If She happeneth not to be a teacher,
 Offering such ideas as philosophers like:
 Her place in the Great Story is far greater than
 that:
 And such it is also,
 With illuminèd teachers,
 Who offer worship to God as their teaching,
 And are in travail,
 Until Christ be formed in their disciples.

V.

He said, 'But let us return to the pursuit of happiness, which hath scathingly been called "the silliest idea in the history of mankind." And that for a junior grade of pursuing happiness, not the clone of a systematic science which worketh out a combination of activities and practices, an America's Test Kitchen for enjoying life, studying ways of manipulating oneself to produce pleasure and happiness.

'It were several years ago that thou tookest a Fluxx deck to play with friends, and the group included five adults and one very little boy. So the adults took turns, not just in their moves, but (for a player who had just played a move) in paying attention to the little one, so that he were not looking on a social meeting that excluded him.

'When it were thy turn to look after the boy, thou liftedst him to thy shoulders and walkedst slowly, gingerly, towards the kitchen, because thou wishedst to enter the kitchen, but thou wert not sure thou couldst walk under the kitchen's lower ceiling without striking his head.

'Shortly after, thou realizedst three things: firstly, that the boy in fact had *not* struck his head on the kitchen ceiling, even though you had advanced well into the kitchen area; secondly, that the boy was dragging his fingers on the ceiling; and thirdly and finally, that he was laughing and laughing, full of joy.

'That wert a source of pleasure that completely eclipsed the game of Fluxx, though it were then a favourite game. And when thou askedst if it were time for thy next move, it were told thee that the game was won.

'In the conversation afterwards, thou wert told a couple of things worthy of mention.

'First, and perhaps of no great import, thou gavest the boy a pleasure that neither of his parents could offer. The boy's father wert a few inches taller than thee, and were he to attempt what thou attemptedst, he in fact *would* have struck his son's head against the ceiling. The boy's mother could not either have offered the favour to her son; whether because her thin arms were weaker, or

something else: God wot.

'Second of all, as mentioned by an undergraduate psychologist, it gives people joy to give real pleasure to another person, and the case of children is special. She did not comment or offer comparison between knowing thou hast given pleasure to any age in childhood and knowing thou hast given pleasure to an adult, but she did comment, and her comment were this: the boy were guileless: too young to just be polite, too young for convincing guile, perhaps too young for any guile worthy of the name. That meant, whether or not thou thoughtest on such terms, that his ongoing and delighted laughter were only, and could only be, from unvarnished candour. Wherewith thou hadst no question of "Does he enjoy what I am doing with him, or is he just being polite?" Just being polite were off the table.

'And this is not even only true for the royal race of men. Thou hast not right circumstance to lawfully and responsibly own a pet, but without faintest compromise of principle, thou visitest a pet shelter nearby to thine own home, and at the shelter also, guile is off the agenda, at least for the pets. A cat can purr, or if it hath had enough human attention for the nonce and thou hast perhaps not attended to its swishing tail, a light nip and swipe of claw is alike of unvarnished candour. Whereby thou knowest of a truth what a cat desireth and conveyeth if it purreth and perchance licketh thine hand.

'Which were subsumed under a general troth, that it is better to serve than to be served, and it is better to give than receive. What is more, the most concentrated teaching about who be truly happy is enshrined in the Sermon on the Mount, and

enshrined again as the shorthand version of that great Sermon chanted in the Divine Liturgy:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

“The word translated, “blessed,” *μακαριος* (*makarios*, hath what we would count as at least two meanings in English: “blessed,” and “happy.” Among English Bible translations there are some, but a few, translations which render the word as “happy,” including Young’s Literal Translation:

Happy the poor in spirit — because theirs is the reign of the heavens.

Happy the mourning — because they shall be comforted.

Happy the meek — because they shall inherit the land.

Happy those hungering and thirsting for righteousness — because they shall be filled.

Happy the kind — because they shall find kindness.

Happy the clean in heart — because they shall see God.

Happy the peacemakers — because they shall be called Sons of God.

Happy those persecuted for righteousness’ sake — because theirs is the reign of the heavens.

Happy are ye whenever they may reproach you, and may persecute, and may say any evil thing against you falsely for my sake — Rejoice ye

and be glad, because your reward [is] great in the heavens, for thus did they persecute the prophets who were before you.

‘In English this is usually, but not always, found in more free translations; the Amplified Bible naturally shines in cases like these as an deliberately unusual translation style intended to render two or more faces of an ambiguity or a phrase bearing multiple meanings. Other languages can be different; in French, for instance, there are separate words *béni* and *heureux* which respectively mean “blessed” and “happy,” but *heureux* appears to be the term of choice in French translation of the Beatitudes.

‘Here, though, the Gospel hath aught in common with Plato. Plato investigated happiness, and the Greek term used was εὐδαιμονία, *eudaimonia*, almost exactly a literal equivalent to “in good spirits,” but the literal sense was taken much more seriously and much farther. It was a primary term for happiness, but what was seen as true happiness was having one’s spirit in good health. This happiness would not be easily confused by counterfeit pleasures such as one can immediately procure with narcotics; and the point is not that real-world narcotics create addiction and horrible misery. The happiness would be just as counterfeit in the pleasure of a person unhealthy in spirit to take some imaginary narcotic that created intense and endless pleasure, without either addiction or the misery that loom in the grievous backswing of narcotic pleasure.

‘Thou rememberest thy surprise, when reading thine undergraduate psychology text, when thou

readedst what wert said of the pleasure principle. For the pleasure principle art an artifact of bad philosophy, which noting perchance that most of our actions bring some pleasure or pleasing result, assumes and defines that every action anyone ever takes is that which is calculated to bring thee the most pleasure. In settings less far back, thou hast listened to people saying that the only motivation anyone takes for any action is that it is calculated to bring them the greatest economic profit, and thou hast borrowed an answer, to say that several people have essayed to convince thee of this as truth, and so far as thou knewest, not one of them stood to gain financial profit from convincing thyself of this purported truth.

‘Thy textbook, like those who try to convince with a charming smile where a reasoned argument is ordinarily polite to offer, said that it were more a virtue than a vice to show kindnesses to others because one enjoyed the feelings it gave, and thou hadst two answers in thy heart: first of all, past the sugar-coating of “more a virtue than a vice” lies an assertion that virtue is impossible in principle, and secondly, that the only theoretical possibility thou couldst care for the poor in order to help thy fellow men is if one received absolutely no pleasure or consolation in any stripe or dimension to care for the poor out of a genuine motive of benefitting others and not whatever probable pleasures their generosity and service might come back their way. That appalling price tag reaches beyond exorbitant. And thou desirest to speak of a “masochism principle” or “pain principle” whereby all decisions and all actions at all times by all men are whatever is calculated to bring them the greatest sufferings, alike useless to assert for any philosopher worthy of

the name. It is hardly to be denied that most decisions bring some pain or have some downside on the part of the persons who make them, so a pain principle mirroring a pleasure principle is alike unprovable, and alike unfalsifiable, an untestable guess that hath not any place in science and scarcely more any place in disciplines seeking to be established as science. It was not until later that thou readst a competent philosopher who said that the existence of pleasure and a reward does not in and of itself make any action which brings pleasure to be motivated solely as a means to obtain pleasure. The thought-experiment were posed, that a man who gives to the poor and enjoys doing so were offered a pill which would give him the full pleasure and benefits of his generosity, but do nothing at all for the practical needs of the poor, would be in but rare cases utterly spurned as a right empty and worthless counterfeit.

Song VI.

Crossing the Great Threshold.

The tale were told,
Of a child starkly scant of mind,
Who received a glittering package, a gift,
And kept the glittering package,
Indeed taking it with him well nigh everywhere,
And after long time,
When the disposable wrapping paper,
Were well battered and now dingy,
An adult asked,
'Aren't you going to open the package?'
The child exclaimed with joy,

Once the toy emerged from the tatters,
 And squealed with joy, saying,
 "Oh, there's *another* present!"
 My Lord and my God!
 Perhaps I will never open,
 The Sermon on the Mount.

VI.

I said myself then, 'O John! O glorious Saint John! Canst thou lead me on a path into the The Sermon on the Mount? For I have trod the path of self-direction, and it well nigh destroyed me.'

Then the Saint said to me, 'Thanks to thee, son, for thy request. I awaited that thou mightest ask, for that thou mightest have the Heavenly reward for asking.

'That which you ask were a work of years or lifetimes; let me chase a humbler quarry: unfolding the first verse only of that great Sermon, which declareth the poor in spirit to be blessed and happy. I will speak to you of the riches of poverty but not the heights of humility, though they be one and the same. Though I may call on other verses to tell what riches are in poverty, I will make no attempt to unfold these other Beatitudes, though to them that which declared the blessedness of poverty that wert one and the same. And I tell thee, through thine interests, that to be poor in spirit is to be no self-sufficient solipsist; rather, it is utterly dependent on the infinite riches of God, and that it is royal: for kings are forbidden to touch money, and in another sense all Christians and especially all monastics are forbidden to touch aught possession, not solely money, in stead of grasping as did the rich young ruler. But poverty be the unstopping of yon Sermon,

an unstopping of virtue in which flowing fount eclipseth flowing fount.

That true poverty extendeth beyond a lack of possessions is taught by calling those blessed who are “poor in spirit,” beyond mere poverty of the body, and it is taught that the monastic vow of poverty includeth the other two: for a monk is bereft of the normal blessing of holy matrimony, and even of his own self-will. *That* thou knowest as treasure, for thou wishest to trade thine own idiorhythmic self-direction for a coenobetic monastery, and to speak even more plainly, the direction of an abbot.

‘In the Sermon on the Mount, poverty beseemeth to be special, for there are two passages: that which commendeth the storing treasures up in Heaven and rejecting the storing up of treasures on earth, then discussion of the eye as the lamp of the body, then exhortation to take no thought for the morrow, for God knoweth and willeth to care for our needs. And when thou hast wealth, be merciful to others, and thou wilt be repaid at great usury by thy true Debtor, God.

‘In fact there is one passage and topic, the longest though length in verses is a trivial measure. The tri-unity is harder to see in modern translations that translate something out to be accessible; one reads of one’s eye being “healthy” or “sound”. The King James version rightly renders “single”, for an undivided wholeness. Fr. Thomas Hopko hath said, before the surge of enthusiasm for mindfulness, “*Be awake and attentive, fully present where you are.*” This attentiveness and full presence is the operation of an activity that is *single*, that neither layeth up possessions, nor defendeth them in worry, nor doubteth that the God who provideth will overlook

thee in His care. In all these is dispersal and dissipation. Poverty of spirit maketh for singleness of eye, and a singleness destroyed by so many of the technologies you trade in.

'It has from ancient times been reckoned that if thou givest to the poor, God is thy Debtor, and under what you would call third world living conditions, I told married Christians to leave to their children brothers rather than things. This too is poverty of spirit, even if it belong only in marriage, in a condition monks renounce. Thou hast read of those who suggest that thou asketh not, "Can I afford what I need?" but "Do I need what I can afford?"

'It is monastic poverty that monastics do not defend themselves, not only by force, but even with words, showing the power that terrified Pontius Pilate. It is monastic poverty not to struggle again over any temporal matter. It is poverty of spirit not to have plans, nor, in the modern sense, an identity. For in ancient times, Christians who were martyred, answered when asked their names, none other than "Christian." And beyond this further layers yet beckon. Poverty is not an absence of treasures; it is a positive, active, thing that slices sharper than any two-edged sword. And monks who renounce property sometimes have something to say beyond "Good riddance!" The force of the rejection, and the freedom that is gained in letting riches go, is more like the obscene and *thundering* announcement: "I lost 235 pounds in one weekend!"

'Thou readedst a church sign saying, "Who is rich? The person who is content." And I tell thee that thou canst purchase by poverty of spirit many times and layers more than contentment with what thou possessest now. I have not even scratched the surface of experiences of monastics who were poor

in spirit to a profound degree, but thou knowest that there are limits to what is lawful for me to utter to thee, and thou knowest that thou art not bidden to chase after experiences, but seek to repent of thy sins for the rest of thy life, which thou knowest to reckon as monastic privilege.'

Song VII.

I Sing a Song to my Apple.

Betimes my salad days were right begun,
I programmed an Apple][,
In gradeschool adventure games and a 4D maze,
Simple arithmetic- and trigonometric-powered
animations.
My father a computer scientist,
Who shared with me his joy,
And in high school a Unix system administrator
became.
My family got, and still hath the carcass,
Of one original 'fat Mac',
So named because it had an available maximum
512k of RAM.
My calculator in high school,
On which I programmed computer-generated art,
And a simple video game, had as much.
Ere my salad days were dwindled,
I remained a Unix programmer,
And judged Mac OSX my preferred flavor of Unix.
Later I had iPhones,
And for the first time in my life,
Owned a computer where I lacked root privilege.
Along the way I got an Apple Watch,
My desire increased as I read about it,

And vanished when I learned it were,
Bereft of such things as even a web browser.
I gave it to my brother,
Who later gave it back before it broke.
I sing a song to my Apple,
A peerless 17" MacBook Pro,
Which through minor design flaw,
Burned through video cards oft enough,
And when the Apple Store stopped receiving those
cards,
So with it went any hope of keeping my Mac
without frequent \$500 repairs.
And along the way,
With the sweetness of a Linux virtual machine,
Realized that OSX had grown monstrous as a
version of Unix.
When I asked about one cardinaly important open
source project,
I were told that Apple had removed parts of the
operating system,
That the project needed to run,
But information technology work in my Linux
virtual machine,
Was the command line equivalent of point and click.
It were a discovery as if I had returned to Paradise.
I sing a song to Apple's technical support,
For when I asked a question,
About command-line-driven Apache configuration,
It took escalations up to level 3 technical support,
Before a Genius knew that Macs *have* a command
line.
I purchased a computer meant to last many years.
I sing a song to my late iPhone,
Bewailed by men who made the Mac great,
Which slipped a pocket near a food bank,
Booted my laptop into Windows and found,

That Find My iPhone was now rendered useless.
I went to see an Apple Store,
And received a followup call,
Giving a good ten days before I could access my
iPhone,
And found out also that Macs were as useless,
As my computer booted into Windows,
To Find My iPhone.
Once I had one from each four,
Offerings for Apple computers:
A laptop one, an iPad one,
An iPhone one, an Apple Watch one;
And ere I were negotiating,
For to buy a replacement iPhone on eBay,
I said that there were many Android devices within
my budget,
And whilst in bed realized,
I wanted full well that the negotiation fail.
Apple's indirect gift to desktops may be Windows,
And Apple's indirect gift to smartphones may be
Android;
For surely no iPhone killer before Android even
came close.
Certainly Windows Mobile answered the wrong
question.
But even if one may argue, legitimately,
That a Mac and a PC have grown remarkably
similar,
And iOS and Android are also more alike than
different,
I was not poisoned by technical merits.
I was poisoned by the corporate mindset,
That all but killed my prospects,
Of finding my iPhone before the battery were
drained completely,

And when I called my iPhone to perchance find it in
my car,
I went to voicemail immediately:
My iPhone's battery wert already dead.
I had known, but not paid attention earlier,
To Steve Jobs as beyond toxic, as a boss;
Screaming and abusive,
To employees he had every reason to cherish,
And after a technical fumble,
Publicly fired an Apple technician,
At an employee motivational event.
And I believed it.
More disturbed I was,
When I read of Jobs's spiritual practices,
Such as an Orthodox might interpret,
As opening the mind to listen,
And draw the milk of dragons.
Technology does things for us,
Though I have found that when I shared my iOS
devices with children,
Squabble and squabble ensued.
Technology does things for us,
But this Trojan horse does things for devils also,
Who cannot give exquisitely beneficial gifts,
Even wert they to try.
The power of devils is real but limited:
Such teaches the Philokalia,
Which though it be filled with love of the beautiful,
Says more about the operations and activities of
devils,
Than aught else that I have read.
And one thing it sayeth,
Through Orthodox Christian Tradition,
Says that devils can tell a man's spiritual state,
And try to inject venomous thoughts in temptation,
Where men have free will, still,

The devils cannot read minds,
Even if they by ruse give one man certain thoughts,
Sting another that the thoughts are in the first man,
And behold, they speak and art deceived,
That devils can read people's minds.
Devilish predictions are called guesses,
Which are sometimes wrong,
The devils see a man walking to journey,
And guess that he travels to visit another specific
man,
But 'tis guesswork; devils can well enough be
wrong.
St. Nilus's alleged prophecies are dubious at
present,
But we may not yet be in the clear.
And if the U.S. has been called "One nation under
surveillance,"
Where No Such Agency has received every email,
It is now clear and open knowledge,
To those that will reflect,
That among most most Americans,
'Every breath and step Americans take,'
Is monitored by Big Brother,
But perhaps it is not just human agencies,
That reap the information collected.
++ungood
(Did anyone besides my most reverend Archbishop
mention that it used to be that you had to seek out
pornography, and leave your car in front of a store
with papered-over windows, and wear your
trenchcoat disguise for the mission, whereas now
pornography seeks *you*?
It is something like a water cooler that hath three
faucets,
Serving cold water, hot water, and antifreeze,

And the handles perplexing in their similitude.)

VII.

The Saint turned to me and said, 'I would remind thee of Fr. Thomas's famous 55 maxims:

55 Maxims by Fr. Thomas Hopko

1. Be always with Christ and trust God in everything.
2. Pray as you can, not as you think you must.
3. Have a keepable rule of prayer done by discipline.
4. Say the Lord's Prayer several times each day.
5. Repeat a short prayer when your mind is not occupied.
6. Make some prostrations when you pray.
7. Eat good foods in moderation and fast on fasting days.
8. Practice silence, inner and outer.
9. Sit in silence 20 to 30 minutes each day.

10. Do acts of mercy in secret.
11. Go to liturgical services regularly.
12. Go to confession and holy communion regularly.
13. Do not engage intrusive thoughts and feelings.
14. Reveal all your thoughts and feelings to a trusted person regularly.
15. Read the scriptures regularly.
16. Read good books, a little at a time.
17. Cultivate communion with the saints.
18. Be an ordinary person, one of the human race.
19. Be polite with everyone, first of all family members.
20. Maintain cleanliness and order in your home.
21. Have a healthy, wholesome hobby.
22. Exercise regularly.

23. Live a day, even a part of a day, at a time.
24. Be totally honest, first of all with yourself.
25. Be faithful in little things.
26. Do your work, then forget it.
27. Do the most difficult and painful things first.
28. Face reality.
29. Be grateful.
30. Be cheerful.
31. Be simple, hidden, quiet and small.
32. Never bring attention to yourself.
33. Listen when people talk to you.
34. Be awake and attentive, fully present where you are.
35. Think and talk about things no more than necessary.
36. Speak simply, clearly, firmly, directly.
37. Flee imagination, fantasy, analysis,

figuring things out.

38. Flee carnal, sexual things at their first appearance.
39. Don't complain, grumble, murmur or whine.
40. Don't seek or expect pity or praise.
41. Don't compare yourself with anyone.
42. Don't judge anyone for anything.
43. Don't try to convince anyone of anything.
44. Don't defend or justify yourself.
45. Be defined and bound by God, not people.
46. Accept criticism gracefully and test it carefully.
47. Give advice only when asked or when it is your duty.
48. Do nothing for people that they can and should do for themselves.
49. Have a daily schedule of activities,

avoiding whim and
caprice.

50. Be merciful with yourself and others.

51. Have no expectations except to be
fiercely tempted to your last
breath.

52. Focus exclusively on God and light, and
never on darkness,
temptation and sin.

53. Endure the trial of yourself and your
faults serenely, under God's
mercy.

54. When you fall, get up immediately and
start over.

55. Get help when you need it, without fear
or shame.

The Saint continued: 'Wouldst thou agree that we
are in a high noon of secret societies?'

I answered, 'Of a troth.'

He asked, 'Wouldst thou agree that those societies
are corrosive?'

I answered, 'As a rule, yes, and I wit that Orthodox
are forbidden on pain of excommunication to join
the Freemasons.'

He spoke again and asked me, 'And hast thou an
opinion about the assassination of JFK, whether it
wert a conspiracy?'

I said, 'A friend whose judgement I respect in

matters political hath told me an opinion that there in fact was a conspiracy, and it were driven by LBJ.'

He said, 'And hast thou spent five full minutes in worrying about either in the past year?'

I said, 'Nay.'

He said, 'Thou hast secular intelligence if thou canst ask if "surveillance from Hell" in an obviously figurative sense might also be "surveillance from Hell" far more literally speaking, but such intelligence as this does not help one enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The devils each and every one are on a leash, and as thy priest hath said many times, *every thing that happeneth to us is either a blessing from God, or a temptation that God hath allowed for our strengthening*. Wherefore whether the devils have more information than in ages past, thou wert still best to live:

Focus exclusively on God and light, and never on darkness, temptation and sin.

Song VIII.

A Hymn to Arrogance.

The Saint opened his Golden Mouth and sang,
'There be no war in Heaven,
Not now, at very least,
And not ere were created,
The royal race of mankind.
Put on your feet the Gospel of peace,
And pray, a-stomping down the gates of Hell.
There were war in Heaven but ever brief,
The Archangel Saint Michael,

Commander of the bodiless hosts,
Said but his name, "Michael,"
Which is, being interpreted,
"Who is like God?"
With that the rebellion were cast down from
Heaven,
Sore losers one and all.
They remain to sharpen the faithful,
God useth them to train and make strength.
Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth
therewith?
Or shall the saw magnify itself against him that
shaketh it?
As if the rod should shake itself against them that
lift it up,
Or as if the staff should lift up itself,
As if it were no wood.
Therefore be not dismayed,
If one book of Holy Scripture state,
That the Devil incited King David to a census,
And another sayeth that God did so,
For God permitted it to happen by the Devil,
As he that heweth lifteth an axe,
And God gave to David a second opportunity,
In the holy words of Joab.
Think thou not that God and the Devil are equal,
Learnest thou enough of doctrine,
To know that God is greater than can be thought,
And hath neither equal nor opposite,
The Devil is if anything the opposite,
Of Michael, the Captain of the angels,
Though truth be told,
In the contest between Michael and the Devil,
The Devil fared him not well.
The dragon wert as a little boy,
Standing outside an Emperor's palace,

Shooting spitwads with a peashooter,
Because that wert the greatest harm,
That he saweth how to do.
The Orthodox Church knoweth well enough,
'The feeble audacity of the demons.'
Read thou well how the Devil crowned St. Job,
The Devil and the devils aren't much,
Without the divine permission,
And truth be told,
Ain't much with it either:
God alloweth temptations to strengthen;
St. Job the Much-Suffering emerged in triumph.
A novice told of an odd clatter in a courtyard,
Asked the Abbot what he should do:
"It is just the demons.
Pay it no mind," came the answer.
Every devil is on a leash,
And the devout are immune to magic.
Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder:
The young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample
under feet.
The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your
feet.
Wherefore be thou not arrogant towards men,
But be ever more arrogant towards devils and the
Devil himself:
"Blow, and spit on him."

VIII.

I told St. John, 'I have just read the panikhida service, and it appeareth cut from the same cloth as the divine services in general.'

He said, 'Doth that surprise thee?'

I said, 'Perhaps it should not. But the Philokalia describes a contrast between life and death: for instance, in the image of an inn, where lodgers come for a night, bearing whatever they possess; some sleep on beds, some sleep on the floor, but come daybreak, all of them pick up their belongings and walk on hence.'

He said, 'How readest thou that parable?'

I said, 'In this life, some live in riches, and some in poverty, but all alike leave this life carrying only their deeds with them. The last English homily I heard, the priest quoted someone who said, "I have never seen a trailer attached to a hearse." Which were, "You can't take it with you," save that terrifying tale of a monk who died with over a hundred gold pieces. ('Twas said he was not avaricious, but merely stingy.) When he died, the community discussed what to do with his nigh incalculable sum of wealth: some suggested a building or other capital project, others some kindness to the poor. And when all was discussed, *they buried all the gold with him*, a costly, potent reminder to monastics that they should not want to be buried with even one gold piece. But the monk could not take the gold with him ere it were buried with him.'

The Saint told me, 'Thou hast read part of Prayers by the Lake, in which St. Nikolai says that birth and death are an inch apart, but the ticker tape goes on forever.

'Rememberest thou also that in the Philokalia we read that those who wish one suffering to die were like one holding a deeply confused hope hope that a doctor would break up the bed of a sick man? For our passions we take with us beyond death, which passions the body mediateth to some

degree.'

I said, 'May I comment something? Which soundeth as a boast?'

He said, 'Speak on.'

I said, 'I am mindful that I am mortal, and that I am the chief of sinners. But the day of my death be more real to me than my salvation, and that I be the chief of sinners eclipseth that God be merciful. I have needed the reminder of the core promise in For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thus there be twain of deep pairs, and I have of the twain grasped each one the lesser alone.'

He said, 'Hast thou not been astonished at God's perfect Providence of years betimes?'

I said, 'Yes.'

He said, 'What thou sayest resoundeth not as boasting in my ears, but many people have wished for the remembrance of death and not reached it, no, not in monasticism even.'

I asked, 'Will I reach monasticism?'

He smiled at me, and said, 'Whither askest thou the future? It is wondrous.'

He said, 'Remembrance of death doeth not to drain life. It is a reminder that life is not a dress rehearsal: or rather that it *is* a dress rehearsal, and *our performance in this rehearsal determineth what we will meet the Resurrection having rehearsed.*

'With death cometh a realization of, "I shall not pass this wise again."

'Such death as we have giveth life a significance

eternal in its import. For thou knowest that all ye in the Church Militant stand as it were in an arena before God and His Christ, before all the saints and angels and even devils, as God's champions summoned to vindicate God as St. Job the Much-Suffering and others vindicate God. And whereinever thou triumphest, Christ triumpheth in thee.

'Knowest thou not that the saints who have run the race and be adorned with an imperishable and incorruptible crown stand about all ye, the Church Triumphant cheering on the Church Militant until every last one hath crossed the finish line in triumph?

'Knowest thou not that every saint and angel, the Mother of God and Christ enthroned on high, all cheer ye who still run the course, each and every one?

'The times preceding the Second Coming of Christ are not only apocalyptic; they are the very thing which giveth the term "apocalyptic" its meaning in thy day. And they be trials and tribulations which perhaps will happen in ages later on, and perhaps may already be begun. But in the end Christ will triumph, and all alike who are faithful. And if thou art alive for the Second Coming of Christ, or if not, God hath provided and will provide a way for thee. Be thou faithful, and remember, "The righteous shall live by his faith."' "

I said, 'I should like to know where God will lead me. I can guess promises of good, but I am happier at least leaving a vessel open for God to fill.'

The Saint's face began to glow, and he said, 'In my day, I said something you may have met in the Reformers: that the age of miracles was no more,

or in crasser tongue, "God wrote the book and retired." So I called "opening the eyes of the blind" to be cleansing eyes from lust, which wert a fair claim in any case, and in particular if there miracles are no more. Thou, it seemeth, art in another age of miracles, or perhaps the age of miracles has never stopped from before the Nativity of Christ, but hath merely hid from time to time. Thou knowest thyself not to be the Orthodox Church's fourth Theologian, but thou hast known some beginnings of theology already, and hath seen more miracles in thine earthly pilgrimage than have I. I perchance engaged in rhetorical discourse about God, and never on earth saw the Uncreated Light. Thou hast seen icons like and thou hast also seen a photograph of inside an altar, where paten and chalice glowed purest white, and unlike mine own self, thou hast been anointed with more than one miraculous oil, dear Christos...'

Then he bowed deeply, and prostrated himself before me, and his face glowed brightly, brightly, ten thousand times brighter than the sun and yet hurt not my mortal eyes, and he asked of me, 'Friend, wherewith askest thou the future? It is wondrous.'

Then there were a scintillating flash of light, beyond intense, and the Saint was gone.

I broke down a-weeping until I realized I was the happiest I'd been in my life.