

Ascetic:

Reflections on the Way of Self Sacrifice

By an anonymous Orthodox author [*].

A boy once approached his father, 'Old man, why do you fast?' The father stood silent, bringing heart and mind together, and then:

'Beloved boy, I fast to know what it is I lack.

For day by day I sit in abundance, and all is well before me;

I want not, I suffer not, and I lack but that for which I invent a need.

But my heart is empty of true joy, filled, yet overflowing with dry waters.

There is no room left for love.

I have no needs, and so my needs are never met, no longings, and so my desires are never fulfilled.

Where all the fruits of the earth could dwell, I have filled the house with dust and clouds;

It is full, so I am content—

But it is empty, and so I weep.

'Thus I fast, beloved, to know the dust in which I dwell.

I take not from that which I might take, for in its absence I am left empty, and what is empty stands ready to be filled.

I turn from what I love, for my love is barren, and by it I curse the earth.

I turn from what I love, that I may purify my loving, and move from curse to blessing.

'From my abundance I turn to want, as the soldier leaves the comfort of home, of family and love, to know the barrenness of war.

For it is only amongst the fight, in the torture of loss, in the fire of battle, that lies are lost and the blind man clearly sees.

In hunger of body and mind, I see the vanity of food, for I have loved food as food,

and have never been fed.
In weary, waking vigil I see
the vanity of sleep,
for I have embraced sleep as desire,
and have never found rest.
In sorrow, with eyes of tears I see
the vanity of pleasure,
for I have treasured happiness above all,
and have never known joy.

'I fast, beloved child, to crush the wall
that is my self;
For I am not who I am, just as these passions
are not treasures of gold but of clay.
I fast to die, for it is not the living who are
raised, but the dead.
I fast to crucify my desires, for He who was
crucified was He who lived,
and He who conquered,
and He who lives forever.'

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The ascetic mind is not one of stone, cold and darkened to the outside world. Too often, those who stand apart from the heavenly struggle see it thus, and thereby see it askew. To climb is not to descend, and to grow is not to die. Those who reject the world do so not out of hatred, not out of scorn for the creation into which they have been born, but out of most profound love. It takes a true love deeper than most will ever know, to consider the world with such fondness and thanksgiving that one is willing to let it go. Hope and faith must be of the profoundest sort, if ever they are to give birth to a heart willing to break away from creation, that it might one day be united more fully to it.

The ascetic heart knows the world, and knows that it is good. It can see the tranquil pond, the azure sky, the frail leaf, and catch in every glimpse the radiant shimmer of the Divine. In all things there is God.

The ascetic heart knows creation, and rejoices in its bounty. It sees the breath drawn in and out by all creatures, watches as they mingle together in the Creator's hands. There is fawn, there is bird, there is beast, but all are life, and all life is in Christ.

The ascetic heart knows humanity. In its gentle sight there is no man, no woman—only brother and sister, father and mother, daughter and son. The family of human life is united together with a bond only this heart can truly see, and once it is seen, it is all that can be seen in man. That bond

of communion, reflection of the Divine, is the nature of human being. The ascetic heart knows itself, and knows that it is good. For all that may darken and stain its surface, the handiwork of a Craftsman is still beloved, and what was once made divine can only be sullied and perverted, but never wholly destroyed. The ascetic heart looks within, and knows of a great Beauty to be found inside its own walls. Yet this same ascetic heart also knows of darkness. As much as it has rejoiced over its light and fullness, so much has it bewailed its void and emptiness. A brilliant light which cannot be seen suffers not always from its source, but rather from its surroundings—the ascetic heart is pure, but its purity is covered in shame. It is the unique gift of the ascetic to know this, and her divine blessing that such knowledge wells up tears of grief like none the world can call forth. To gaze deep within and see the Sun darkened with stains is to be pained in soul, to see nature perfected and destroyed at once and in the same breath. Unbridled joy and soul wrenching agony collide; and if their collision be perfect, the ascetic heart is born.

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The boy approached his father, gently, 'Old man, why do you sorrow?'
The old man softened his tears:
'Beloved, my sorrow is my joy.
Where there is no weeping, there is
no rejoicing,
And he who has not sorrowed
has never known delight.

'I sorrow for the darkness that
I see within,
for the depth of the divide I have
cast between my mind and my heart.
I sorrow, for I have become
a source of sorrow,
and if I do not weep
I shall never be healed.

'What God has blessed, I have squandered,
and therefore all the mountains weep.
Shall I yet rejoice?
See me, an aged man of squandered days,
a vessel of life confined to death—
yet merry, at peace, rejoicing!

'No, beloved, let us weep.

Let us know sorrow, for then
we know ourselves, then we see.
No more in ignorance, but in truth
let us walk,
acknowledging our woe,
weeping with the earth.
When its sorrow is our sorrow,
then the weight shall crush my bones
—and crushed, I shall be reborn.

'Sorrow is the door, dear boy,
the door of joy pure and true.
With every tear we shed,
we rejoice more fully,
exist more wholly,
love more purely.'

And with this, the old man's words ceased, his mouth was still. And as the
tears brimmed within his eyes, his joy radiated as the sun.

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How captive are we, we fallen children, to the pleasures and passions
that rule our lives. How we treasure the chains which imprison us,
bestowing upon them garlands and wreathes, adorning them as friends.
We sit bound by our desires, a lamentable state, yet we rejoice, for our
eyes are shut fast; and as in a dream we see our confinement as
freedom, our chains as wings.

The ascetic heart knows the darkness of this cell that is our fallen state,
the chill of the stone walls that barricade us as if in tombs while yet we
walk alive. And this heart knows, too, the cunning poison that is our joy,
when founded in these walls—a poison sweet as honey, that dries the
blood even as it tickles the tongue. The ascetic heart knows the deep
reality of bondage, of the lament of all creation when a human person is
bound to death, and recognizes the truth of the chains that bind him. Yet
for the ascetic, the chains lose their appeal, their draw—for he knows
that only the yoke offered by Christ can lead upward, inward, forward to
Life.

One might feel pity, when seeing the ascetic, for he whose heart is borne
aloft to God is the very man whose tears flow more freely than most, who
weeps in time of rejoicing and sorrows at the festivals of the day. Yet
how absent from the need for pity is the man who knows the sorrow of
the world, for it is only he who knows its joy! Only when the illusion of
'life' is seen for all its empty reality, can the space within one's vision that
so long it occupied be filled—at long last—with the vision of Truth.

The sorrow of the ascetic is not a hopeless sadness, but a hope-filled lament for all that is distant from God. It is the heart weeping for its loss, even in the same breath that it receives its gain, just as the father wept for his prodigal son even as the latter rushed with longing into his father's arms. The tears wept in this divine sorrow are tears of purification, the divine waters of baptismal grace welling up anew from the depths of the heart, purifying flesh and soul as they ascend upward and outward, finally to fall to the waiting earth.

It is in sorrow that the ascetic heart finds the doorway to joy. A heart petrified so long by the dry passions and fleeting winds of worldly desires becomes hardened, parched, incapable of change or growth. It is this parched earth that the ascetic waters with her tears, pained at her heart's barrenness, but stirred with profoundest joy at the knowledge that each drop of water transforms the very earth itself.

As sorrow gives rise to tears, so is the hardened heart softened. As the heart is softened, holiness is born. As holiness is born, so divine transformation occurs. And where God transforms life, there all joy and hope, love and peace are found. Thus does the ascetic sorrow, for in sorrow is the door to life.

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The boy approached his father, sat and questioned, 'Old man, why are you alone? Why your solitude?' The elder sighed, his breath light as the sky:

'All the world is one, beloved,
kept entire in the hand of God.
Solitude is an illusion,
a fleeting vision;
for when one is still
he is never alone.

'And yet the world turns,
turns with haste toward its ends—
fleeting, fallen, manmade all.
And we, too, turn,
glancing here and there, with
vision rushed, blurred;
never one, but divided.

'I am alone, beloved, for the sake
of our communion.
Only in solitude is stillness born,
only there is it nurtured—
that great gift by which we live.

Divine silence can be found but
when the heart is still:
alone in its quest,
alone with God.
Thus solitude brings quiet,
and quiet the stillness where
whispers cease,
and here, the voice of God.

'Hear me well, dear boy:
my solitude is my communion;
alone, we are together.
In solitude I see Christ whole,
for I am wholly His.
By this vision I am transformed,
my eyes at last beholding Life,
and Life reviving the blood of my veins.
I am Adam, wailing alone before the gates.
I quiet my tears to hear God beside me
—and am healed.

'Thus my solitude, thus am I alone:
to know the depth of Christ within
and heal all that is without.
For when in solitude I come to know God,
I am united to Him in love,
united to Him who fills all,
And my solitude becomes my communion,
as alone I embrace the world.'

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The call to retreat is mystical. There is divine grace even in the pin-prick voice of the inspired conscience, which through its love for the way of the Cross takes note of the desert, there sees a palace, and calls with longing for its transformation into home. It is the voice which called Christ into the sands of Judea, Anthony into the dunes of Egypt, Saba into the valleys of Palestine, and every human person into the desert of his own life. With echoes of the voice of God, this chord within the human soul seeks retreat, departure from the ways of extravagance and ease, and builds within the heart the desire for battle in the solitude of the sand. Who has lived and not at some time heard—however faintly—this call? In the busiest moments, in the most absorbed, who has not felt the inexplicable desire for solitude, for a place of silence and peace in which

to make sense of the world's stage? Perhaps but for a fleeting instant, yet this desire is truly felt, and that instant can change the soul. There is crisis, for in the infinite smallness of that single moment, the great magnitude of life is felt, and a sense of distance formed.

It is the gift of the ascetic heart to live in this moment, to cultivate the seed of so precious an instant into the fruit of a whole life changed, woven to the garment of Christ. In this heart the moment of the call is extended to the span of life, for the call is sweet, and the heart knows that such an invitation cannot but be heeded. Love answers Love, for it is the One who is the essence of love whose voice has pierced the soul. Thus is born the desire for retreat. Yes, to retreat is to flee, but the ascetic flees the world not to abandon it, rather to embrace it. It is not that she hates the world that the ascetic runs, but because she loves it too dearly to be captive to it falsely. To love the world in sin is to shame both the lover and the loved, to deny the holiness of both. Retreat becomes the means for purification, for sanctification, that holy may meet holy, and in purity embrace at last.

Solitude becomes communion, true communion, for our unity as brother and sister is naught but for our union with Christ, and this is in us all most fallen. Fragmented, torn from Christ and ourselves, we can never be whole. The family of humanity is a great and marvelous image formed after the nature of a puzzle with pieces intertwined, embracing. But if each piece will not itself be one, then the puzzle may never be fit. Thus the ascetic plunges into solitude, departure, for here the broken self is healed. Here distractions falls before the gates of contemplation, and fallen being finds reality in communion with the Maker of all. Here, alone, the thread is re-spun, strengthened, purified, brightened, that it may be woven as never before into the fabric of humanity.

Christ will be all in all, and all in Him must be one. But community without self is illusory, finite. The ascetic sees this, and in the vision sees response in flight. Alone, alone in the solitude of prayer, does he join the world at last.

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The boy knelt at his father's knees, 'Dear man, how do you pray?' The old man sighed a gentle sigh, smiling in his eyes. All questions came to this. Here the great meeting place of life, and of its nature the elder spoke:

'Beloved, prayer is life,
and apart from it is only darkness.

It is the breath of the soul which yearns for God,
joining with His breath,
becoming one.

Prayer is the only light by which men can see,
the only vision they are called to adore,

for it is union with God
and in this union—everything.

‘Prayer is the quiet of a storm-tossed will,
an intellect guarded from the seas,
a mind centered upon God Most High.
It is stillness wrought in the midst of motion,
in which all that moves is God,
and with Him, all the world.
Prayer knows no words, if it is true,
for words belittle the presence of the Divine,
confound the conversation of Him who is all in all.
True prayer is beyond words,
transcending speech and thought,
communing with One who is greater than these,
Who works beyond them,
and in Whose presence they are no longer required.
Prayer is the stillness of the tongue,
of the mind, of the heart,
that God and these may come together
apart from words—one.

‘To pray, beloved, is to gather with Christ
at the shores of eternity;
To realize that these shores are within,
manifested in each human heart—
the infinite contained in the finite.
The One who came as Man and dwelt in a womb,
now dwells in the very heart of man.
Prayer is His energy, His activity,
vibrant in the human soul,
alive through His very Spirit,
stirring life to new heights
in the soul that has become quiet,
still enough to feel His breath.

‘We pray in our weakness, beloved,
for it makes us strong;
We pray in our strength,
for it makes us humble;
We pray in height and depth,
for prayer is our center—
It is the heart and nature of being,

the very root of spiritual life.
We pray when we know not how to pray,
for then it is not we,
but Christ who prays in us;
and the groanings of His Spirit
show the way.

'To pray, dear child, simply sit.
Ask for the blessing of Him
with Whom you wish to commune.
Call Him near to you,
for without Him you have already lost.
Then close your eyes, child,
and banish every thought—
the good as well as the bad.
Whisper out only for His mercy,
and you shall receive it.
Let your heart be still,
Let your thoughts descend within,
for in the heart is Christ,
and only His wings will give you flight.
Then rest there, beloved,
in that place of still silence:
It is time for the Lord to act.

'Prayer shall move you,
if only you will let it.
It will bear you to new heights,
transform your life and being;
But it will cost you your life,
your mind, your heart—
everything.
It will take of your time and energy,
it will consume your life;
But there is no reward greater than prayer.
So work, child.
Open your heart—and pray.'

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The ascetic heart is ultimately a heart of prayer. It is this heart that yearns for communion with God Most High, and will sacrifice all the world for such union. It is the heart willing to cast aside every hindrance and sinful chain that weighs down the soul from its proper dwelling place in

the bosom of Christ God, that the race to obtain the prize may be fought more fully, more readily.

In prayer, the ascetic finds his home; for prayer is the union of man with God, and this the state for which humanity was created at the dawn of time. Such union, wrought by the grace of God in concert with the faithful work of man, is the only true life of the human race. Apart from it, life is but a shadow; within it, the smallest man or woman radiates more brightly than the very sun.

True prayer is not speech, nor is it discussion. These are steps along the path to true, inner prayer, but they are not the goal. Speech is forged of words, and words of finite minds, and finite minds are ultimately incapable of grasping the fullness of divine Truth. Thus words begin the ascent, provide the path which leads to the mountaintop, but cannot reach its peak.

At the height of prayer all speech must cease. The God who transcends speech energizes the human soul and body to the attainment of intimate, personal union with Himself, whence knowledge and communion are of experience and not of words. The heart of prayer communes with God not through any mediating speech or conversation, but through direct connection and communion. God lifts the ascetic to Himself in prayer, and there she comes to know God.

What a mystery is this union of prayer! How can it be that God and man, Creator and created, come together as one? Yet God is not blasphemed in such a notion; all the saints and the whole witness of the holy Church testify to this most personal of unities that is the heart of prayer. Shall we sinful men know greater truths than they? The wish of the Saviour was, and remains, that He and man might be one; in prayer, when prayer be inner and true, His wish is born a reality.

The ascetic prays, and strives to pray. Her prayer is weak, yet it leads to perfection. And this the most profound of mysteries, that prayer, the fruit and goal of all ascetic labor, stands also as that labor's greatest tool. The perfect is attained by the imperfect, and outer, base prayer shall eventually lead to glory. Though prayer be the target, it is also the bow by which the arrow is launched to hit the mark; and so the ascetic heart prays, that it might learn to pray. His cry remains, 'Teach us to pray. Pray within us.'

The ascetic life is summed up in prayer, and prayer is attained by the ascetic life. There can be no true prayer in a soul untrained and unprepared, thus for the call of prayer the whole world is charged to take up the ascetic walk. This walk and this heart are not reserved for a select few, for only the monastics or the clergy, or the greatest of saints; they are the charge of every human person, the call of every human life. In the midst of any station, there can the ascetic heart be fostered—there can it

flourish.

It is the gift of the ascetic heart to know, truly know the world, and it is the gift of the unworthy world to possess the call to this heavenward life. It is the very source of life, for life is in God and God is in prayer; it is the upward call of Christ Jesus in a world of fallen passions; it is the charge of heaven, the life of the angels, offered to frail humanity by a loving and benevolent God. Let there then be no delay: arise, take up this yoke so deft and yet so light to bear, and find in its ultimate struggle the only true peace and rest for the human soul

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