

## THE SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS OF THE WESTERN MAN AND THE HOPE OF ORTHODOXY

Your Graces, bishop of Dervi Ezekiel

Your Eminence, bishop of Sisanion and Siatista, Paul

Give us your blessings!

Ladies and Gentlemen, beloved sisters and brothers in Christ!

Blessed Youth!

May our Triune God bless all of us abundantly!

**W**e have the privilege of living in an age in which stone upon stone no longer remains. The disintegration of society is the last result of the values and ideals exalted by Western society. As an orthodox **celibate** priest, I consider it a quite positive and challenging fact to live in a culture in ruins. Those values and ideals were idols destroyed by the power of their own deceptive effectiveness.

Now, beloved brethren in Christ, we have the possibility to begin anew with the enriching experience of the past. We can see this “point zero” with the eyes of Christ. So this “zero” may become the wedding wreath by which one can marry Orthodoxy! Thus, we can speak about the “fertility of zero”.

Those idols and values which about we have already spoken, were the product of an unconscious but mistaken search for the authentic Value, for the true God, in whom all values are recapitulated. In fact, these “ideals” were created in order to

justify man's egoistical passions. This exaltation of man led Western society, which is rather a mentality, a way of existing dispersed all over the world and not in a determined geographical area, not only to abandon belief in God, but even in man.

One being baptized means they are planted into the garden of the Orthodox Church . Baptism also signifies "burial" of the old man with Christ *in* the baptismal font and resurrection of the new man with Christ *from* the baptismal font. After the prayer of the Confirmation the priest anoints and seals the baptized making on the person the Sign of the Cross with the Holy **Chrism** (Holy Myron), on the forehead, the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth, the ears, the breast, the hands and the feet.

This renders real the descent of the Holy Spirit in the heart, body and soul of the baptized, so that he may develop spiritually. But even if the baptized is newly planted in the sacred garden of the Orthodox Church; even if he may develop spiritually, he withers away and fades when he is not "watered" by the "**salubrious** waters" of the Divine Liturgy that is to say the Body and the Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.

To talk of Orthodoxy is not easy and it may be quite irreverent, because in order to have even a glimpse of what it is, it is necessary to give completely of one's self, of one's whole life. So, all I'm going to tell you through this homily does not look like a naturalistic portrait of the Orthodox Church limited to appearances, but rather a sketch outline more akin to a drawing, an icon, an imperfect image; lines and curves

articulated in variegated structures ruled by hidden reason. Reason which is an invitation to go beyond one's self, offering an extraordinarily beautiful glare, in order that stripped of natural visual faculties the blind may see the Church, the Body of Christ, in mystery.

Who is the blind? Blind is the man whose inner world is so cloudy because of his passions, so that he cannot see the brilliant Light of Christ and consequently cannot discern which thoughts come from the angels, which thoughts come from the demons and which emanate from his proper nature ; that means spiritual confusion in its fullness.

Blind also is the humble: he has not eyes that are closed in upon the appearances like the previous one, but he has eyes that were ruined by the saltiness of the waves that is to say - abundant tears. Stripped of his own faculty of vision the humble child of God wears new eyes: the eyes of Christ.

These eyes are the new glasses by which one goes deeper and deeper in the depths of his heart, where they discover edible fishes of a unique beauty: that is the Grace of Jesus Christ who remains silent within our hearts since the day of our Baptism, waiting for a cup of Love from us, that is to say our cooperation with Him. Thus a cry that runs through all ages emerges from the deep of the existence: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!"

When praying with joy-making mourning, sighs resound like thunder while tears fall like rain, irrigating the barren soil of one's heart. So, the crucified Lord helps us carry the burden of

our multiple and extremely heavy passions. It's Lord Himself who carries the burden.

The profound and intense presence of the Holy Virgin, our *Panaghia*, during this spiritual course is at hand. When Jesus Christ is born within our hearts we become God-bearing by grace and by participation. We are calling for help and her Son rejoices; so does His Mother when we 're calling for help from her Son, crying from the depths of our passionate and malicious hearts for His mercy!

An Orthodox Christian differs essentially from a Roman catholic and also from a Protestant because of the fact that he has a living relationship with the Mother of God without loving excessively, idolizing, adoring or **depreciating** her. An Orthodox Christian loves and respects highly the Holy Virgin like his mother and much more than his mother, he makes prostrations before her icons and honors her. An Orthodox Christian goes to God through Our Lady; so did God: He met us through His Mother as proclaims the Akathistos Hymn:

*Hail, celestial ladder by which God has descended;*

*Hail, bridge that bears men from earth to heaven!*

In the matriarchal community of the Holy Mountain in Greece, the reign of the Mother of God is clearly perceptible. She is the Mother of the monks, their *Geróntissa*. As the unique Lady of the peninsula, she oversees its stones that are laid side by side in sequence to form an orderly path; by reason of her intercessions to her Son there is an old definite order. This

definite order is our Holy Tradition that is to say Jesus Christ Himself who abandoned and abandons always Himself unconditionally to me and then from me to you, from one generation to another, the same living God during the ages, the same consuming fire!

Christ is the center. Around this center point, our lives revolve.

We use to say that the Church is the body of Christ, *corpus Christi*. The same happens with a local Church.

For example, here in Australia, imagine an enormous human body that covers all the territory of our Archdiocese. According to *saint Gregory of Nyssa*, the head of this body symbolizes the Archbishop. His eyes are the symbol of the clergy in total. His hair and beard correspond to the monastic orders and the rest of the body symbolizes the laity. The heart that beats always sending the life-giving blood to all the body and its cells in order that it does never perish reports to the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Communion . What a blessed relationship between us! That's the paradise on earth! The kingdom of God that has already come and not yet .

Referring to the Roman-catholic church through the previous image of saint Gregory of Nyssa we could say that only the head exists and the rest of the body is absent, because they have deified the Pope and they forgot Christ. According to the Protestants the head does not exist, while only the body is present; that's because they believe in a lot of heads and not to the unique One Who is the head of the whole Church.

So, we are speaking about defective ecclesiologies.

If for a Roman Catholic Christian, Christ is not but a fertilizer just for the improvement of the quality of the ground in the **orchard** of the world and finally for the growth of this modern man-centered civilization, for us Orthodox, Christ is rather a bomb which explodes and transmutes everything into Church! The difference is fundamental.

But the absolutely different experience of an Orthodox Christian, an experience that exists nowhere else, is the union of the living and of the departed in the One body and blood of Jesus Christ during the Divine Liturgy, so that Jesus Christ Himself becomes our space-time. All this happens by our Triune God's grace.

Once immersed in such an experience, man realizes a lot of things: within him the worlds of spirit and matter are united. By his body he belongs to the world of matter, by his soul he belongs to the world of spirit. Through the power of Christ, who destroyed the power of the Devil, man has the possibility of going beyond appearances, to see reality with a purified heart. Freed from a mind attached to appearances with the help of prayer, fast and vigil, full of non-possessive love and with Christ's eyes, man is able to elevate himself to the contemplation of spiritual realities.

We commit ourselves to the task of getting rid of our attachment to appearances. This is the work of *μετάνοια* signifying first of all a "change of mind " a "turning of the intellect" or better a "change in the way of one's life". Living in

two worlds, that of the flesh and that of the spirit, recognizing his weakness, his impurity of heart, and how worldly his mind is, the repentant man asks Christ, Who annihilated death, for help and mercy, through the intercessions of our Mother of God and all the Saints.

Every time that the faithful runs towards Jesus by means of prayer, surprised, he finds out that there is abundant time. As time passes the repentant Christian finds out the silence of time, he listens to this silence so full of love. He tastes of this love and goes beyond time *where* he discovers eternity. Losing all self-assurance in this sweetness of love, time is no longer for him the enemy. He meets the risen Christ. As the waters of immortality refresh his body and soul, he loses all fear of the monster Death, which is carried by the river Time. Deeply in his heart he knows that death exists, but Christ the Savior has killed its nerves, so that the agony of the death has been annihilated.

Let's have a look to those who suffer from psychological problems just as neuroses, psychoses, depressions etc. All of them have a problem with space and time. Their relation with space-time is affected. They have a hellish sensation of these two dimensions which causes to them an unbearable anxiety. Sometimes they feel time goes by fast in an anguished way, sometimes they have the impression that it lies depressingly immobile. The same changes happen into their souls in relation to space; if they are outdoors they suffer from panic attacks and they go indoors, where they suffer from a sort of suffocation.

Under the skin of these situations the Fathers of the Church clearly discern wounded feelings and more precisely wounded pride, selfishness, egoism, arrogance, self-importance.

Humility, unceasing wholehearted prayer, participation to the Holy mysteries or sacraments and mainly to Confession and Holy Communion, unify, integrate the whole man and normalize its relation with himself and with space-time.

In the name of progress, under the banner of civilization, Western social reality which does not limit itself to a geographical point, but extends almost all over the world as an **idiosyncrasy** and way of life, exalts phenomena as the only reality, rejecting all that stands beyond logic.

Such an attitude a sensitive man cannot accept without damaging his soul. Any person with the heart of a child cannot but react against such an outlook on things and attitude towards life. Thus, poets and artists of the recent past and most young people of our generation gave and give witness to their non-conformity and search for the true reality, regardless of whether they succeed or not.

The true Orthodox Christian, realizing his weakness as a creature, becomes thereby aware of another reality behind phenomena and thus cannot accept an exaltation of appearance as the only and as the true reality. He transcends phenomena by spiritual contemplation and goes farther; that is why he chooses the way of life-giving death, **uncompromisingly**.

This insight may partly explain the flowering of monasticism today in Athos and the fact that our parishes are packed with young people.

Meanwhile, the young people in Greece, like those all over the modern world, having more or less destroyed all the idols, see our civilization clearly as a dead-end. Having destroyed the idols, they find themselves on the **threshold** of Truth. In order to receive the Truth, the One Who is and Who is not, Who exists beyond existence, we need to have nothing, nothing in order to receive. This is the privilege of our time, living in “abundance” we have nothing, having nothing we are closer to the Truth.

During our disturbances, trials, troubles, sorrows, across the ruins of our lives, very shyly, a beautiful, blessed light shakes! No hand can lay hold of it; it escapes, but in our sadness it may be seen in the palm of our hand!

Saint Simeon the New Theologian who wrote hymns of love to God, describes wonderfully these comings and goings of the Grace to the soul and the body of the Christian.

Nowadays many young people are looking for the Truth, for authenticity in their lives. Some look for the solution in drugs or in the Eastern religions and **philosophies** –mirages in the desert which attract modern thirsty man. Others meet Orthodoxy, the living water, embrace it and become monks or remain laymen. In Greece, many young people are becoming monks in Mount Athos, having had had the experience of zero, in other words having realized how “magnificent” is our dead-end civilization.

By means of prayer and based on our life-giving Tradition modern young people can learn to fight the **triple** evil: flesh, mundane way of life and the devil, which influences one's inner world, wherein one can discern three fundamental passions: lust of power, **avarice** and sensuality.

It's very important to understand that in Orthodoxy we don't eradicate our passions; they cannot be uprooted. Moreover this would sound like a Buddhist teaching. For us Orthodox, passions are loving powers of the soul which have been "derailed" so as instead of being directed towards God and our fellow-man they are dispersed to objects of passion and lust.

The basic aim of one's spiritual life is by means of life in the Church they may "transform" their passions into Love for God *-vertically* and their fellow-men *-horizontally*. This reminds us Saint Gregory the Theologian who speaks about the two-dimensional, cross-shaped love that characterizes a blessed man. Spiritual love contains these two dimensions and that is the Holy Cross. Crucifixion, burial and resurrection consist a triple necessity in spiritual life.

*Crucifixion* means one crucifies their senses on the cross of the prayer, fasting and full attention.

*Burial* means that the intellect goes deep into the heart and rests there in the nest of the grace, eliminating totally all fantasies.

*Resurrection* means that one's intellect/nous meets this grace and the total man is unified. Both their body and soul rejoice at the uncreated, divine energies of the Holy Spirit exactly as the

prodigal and homeless son did when he returned to his homeland.

As the Christian prays, either in his house or in the church, his heart is comforted with Eternity; through him waters of hope irrigate the whole creation; through the whole creation he venerates the Creator, through him the Heavens declare the glory of God; through him the full moon in the firmament offers a silent chant to God, through him the stars glorify the Lord; through him the waters and showers of rain, the dews, the crystals, all the flowers and trees, the birds and the fishes, all the animals of the earth and of the sea, all creation visible and invisible venerates the Creator and gives Him glory. Through prayer, the true Christian circumcises the foreskin of his heart, renewing and recoloring in himself the whole world, throwing light forward in thousands of rays on the march of creation, bringing it back to the Creator with thanks-giving and love. Man is a microcosm containing in himself all creation. He is a well where waters from everywhere converge. As he repents, he mediates for all men, for all creation.

“God became man in order that man may become God by grace and participation” says the Orthodox Church; as when you put a piece of iron into the fire, the iron becomes fire by participation with the fire, while remaining iron by nature. There is one Fire, without beginning and eternal, without parts and undivided, being three Suns of the one Divinity. One God, the Father, of the one Son, begetter; and of the Holy Spirit, the source. Unity unconfounded and Trinity undivided, while in no way moving out of its place of secrecy, this fire rises in the

man's heart, inside of his heart. By means of the Orthodox baptism this Fire has entered into our hearts, it is hidden within us, yet a great and deep darkness covers all of us and we do not see this joy-giving Fire which is not different from the Light of the resurrection of Christ or the Light of His Transfiguration. This is Christ's Light; Christ Himself Who gives light to our darkened souls. The clouds of our passions are covering this Light. Immaterial, uncreated light and perfect love is the Future Kingdom, which begins down here and finds its fulfillment in Heaven. *The beyond is in this life.* This great spiritual reality declared by the same words a non-Orthodox: the great French surrealist poet Arthur Rimbaud.

From a worldly point of view, one who aspires to become a true Orthodox nowadays, may be regarded as weakly and defective; nevertheless, when they are dropped into the sea of spiritual life, when they are deeply concentrated in their heart, they are giving birth to prayer by the presence of the Holy Spirit; furthermore our Holy Virgin, our *Panaghia* is at hand to rescue them from every danger!

The spiritual life of a true Orthodox Christian is not self-willed. It implies obedience to his Bishop, to the spiritual counsels of his spiritual father and respect for the Church's tradition and order. Renouncing his own will, one is brought nearer to God, wearing an incorruptible and radiant robe which the Spirit weaves for them with the pure fleece of the Lamb.

With millions of prayers and remembrance of death the true Orthodox "compels" (in quotes) the Spirit to weave for him and

for all the naked a robe of glory, of sparkling white, so as their whole life, either socio-economic or political may become proportionately a paradise on earth.

With faith to our Triune God, to our Church which is and remains the boat of Love and at the same time the life-boat for all of us, with the blessings of our Holy Mother's intercessions too, let's go on shipboard awaiting the voice of the Captain Jesus: heave up anchor and raise the mainsail!