



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"1998, the second year of preparation for the great Jubilee at the close of the second Millennium, will be dedicated in a particular way to the Holy Spirit and to His sanctifying presence within the community of Christ's disciples. The mystery of the Incarnation, which the Jubilee will commemorate, was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church cannot prepare for the new Millennium in any other way than in the Holy Spirit. There must therefore be a renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit."

(from the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II: Tertio Millennio Adveniente n. 44-45)

Monastic Voices

"The essential thing is not just to do good but to acquire the Holy Spirit. He is the one eternal treasure which will never pass away. This Holy Spirit, the All-Powerful, takes up His abode in us and prepares in our souls and bodies a dwelling place for the Father. But He is given to us on condition that we ourselves know how to acquire Him.

Among works done for love of Christ, prayer is the one that most readily obtains the grace of the Holy Spirit, because it is always at hand. It may happen that you want to go to Church but there isn't one nearby; or else you want to help a poor man but haven't anything to give, or you don't come across one; or yet again you may want to remain chaste, but natural weakness prevents your resisting temptation. But prayer is within reach of all, and all can give themselves to it: rich and poor, learned and unlearned, strong and weak, the sick and the healthy, the sinner and the righteous. Its power is immense. Prayer, more than anything else, brings us the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Friend of God, you consider it a great happiness to be talking with poor Seraphim, believing that even he is not bereft of the grace of the Lord. What then is to be said of conversation with the Lord Himself? Truly in prayer we are granted to converse with Him - God who is the source of all life and all grace. But we must pray with words only until the time when the Holy Spirit overshadows us by His heavenly grace. When He is pleased to visit us we must stop trying to pray. After all, why pray "Come and live in us, purify us and save us, O God", when He has already come to us? No - when the Holy Spirit descends we must remain in complete silence, in order to hear and understand all the words of eternal life He will then deign to communicate. Simply go humbly and with love to meet Him, the Con-soler, for whom we hunger and thirst. He is then within you as in His temple.

The fact that I am a monk and you a layman doesn't make any difference. What counts in God's eyes is true faith in Him and in His only Son. It is for this that the grace of the Holy Spirit is given us. The Lord seeks hearts overflowing with love for Him and for their neighbour. A heart like this is the throne where He would sit and reveal Himself in the fullness of His glory.

When divine grace overshadows someone, he attains supernatural peace. Acquire the spirit of peace, and thousands around you will be saved."

(St. Seraphim of Sarov, from Conversations with N. Motovilov.)

Dear Oblates and Friends,

St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) is surely the most attractive and best loved of all Russian Orthodox Saints. He has often been called the Russian St. Francis of Assisi. Certainly there are many stories of his friendship with wild animals. But he also has much in common with St. Antony of Egypt, the Cure d'Ars and Padre Pio. He practised the most extreme forms of asceticism, yet his spirituality was marked by pure joy. Always hard on himself, he was endlessly gentle and compassionate with others. He had a particular love for children, and retained all his life a simple, child-like heart. If our prayers are answered, and the longed-for day of unity comes, we will be able to claim him fully as our own, and celebrate his feast liturgically, in communion with our Orthodox brethren.

To give a brief outline of his life: he entered the monastery at Sarov aged 18. About 15 years later, he was ordained a priest. Not long after his ordination, he obtained permission to live as a hermit, and moved away to a hut he built himself in the forest a few miles away from the monastery. There he kept bees, and tended a small garden, coming in only for the Divine Liturgy on Sundays. He gradually intensified his austerity, scarcely eating or sleeping at all, and practising perpetual silence. Apart from the set liturgical prayers, and the continuous "Jesus" prayer so beloved by the Orthodox, he got into the habit of reading the entire New Testament through each week. One day he was attacked and nearly killed by robbers. His health broken, he was forced to abandon his hut. He returned to the monastery, but continued to live there as a recluse.

After 5 years in this state, he received a visit from the Mother of God, who ordered him to open his door, and be prepared henceforth to receive people from outside. From then on, the monastery was daily besieged by countless thousands who came from all over Russia, from the Tsar himself to the lowliest peasant, hoping to catch even a glimpse of the holy man. Seraphim would call his visitors "my father" or "my mother"; but most frequently simply "my joy". Sometimes he would retreat for periods to a hut rather nearer the monastery, to devote himself again to prayer and silence.

One of Seraphim's spiritual sons was a layman of noble birth called Nicholas Motovilov. He had visited the Saint with his mother when a little boy. Always theologically inquisitive, he had gone to University, and been much troubled by the liberal currents of thought then in fashion. He attempted suicide; he fell ill; he became completely paralysed: the doctors could do nothing for him; he went to see Seraphim; he was healed. From then on he remained something of a favourite with the Saint, who always called him "Friend of God", attributing his cure to the intercession of Our Lady.

Motovilov wrote an account of his conversations with Seraphim. This has become one of the great classics of spiritual literature. During one of these conversations, which was about the Holy Spirit, Motovilov witnessed Seraphim's transfiguration. It is this conversation to which I have been leading up. Space forces me to select and abridge....

Motovilov had all his life wanted to know what is the goal of the Christian life? He had often put this question to people, including priests and monks, but had never been satisfied by their answers. Some had suggested that the goal of the Christian life must be to live as a hermit, and dwell in great austerity, fasting and praying day and night. Others said it was to do good to the poor, to heal the sick, to right injustices in society. Some thought that the goal of the Christian life must be to win as many souls for Christ as possible. Some said that it was an impertinence to ask the question, which is above our understanding: one should simply keep the law, go to Church and do one's duty, hoping for salvation.

One mid-winter's day, Motovilov received a message that Seraphim wanted to see him, since he had something very important to tell him. He hastened to Sarov. It was snowing steadily when they finally met, and Seraphim led Motovilov to sit beside him on a fallen tree trunk, deep in the forest.

"Friend of God," he said, "I'm going to answer the question that has been troubling you, about the goal of the Christian life. None of the various answers you have been given is the right one. Prayers, good works and the rest are good, of course, but they are the means, not the end. They are not themselves the goal of the Christian life. The true goal of the Christian life is nothing other than the acquisition of the Holy Spirit."

"But how can I acquire the Holy Spirit?" asked Motovilov. "How or where can I see such a grace; how can I know whether or not He is in me?"

"In our days," answered the Staretz, "owing to the tepidity of our faith and to the lack of attention we give to God, we are completely estranged from life in Christ. We have lost the simplicity of the early Christians and, with our so-called Enlightenment, we plunge ourselves into darkness. Those first Christians were on familiar terms with the Holy Spirit. He filled them with the strength of His grace, and they knew it. We received all the grace of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, no less than they did. But we have separated ourselves from this grace and become great sinners. Yet the grace is never withdrawn: it continues to shine in our hearts as divine light in spite of our falls and the darkness of our soul. If only someone listens to the voice of divine Wisdom, gives himself to good works and attains true repentance, then the Holy Spirit acts in him and builds in him the Kingdom of God."

"But how," asked Motovilov again, "can I know that I am within this grace of the Holy Spirit?"

Seraphim gripped him firmly by the shoulders. "My friend", he said, "both of us, at this moment, are in the Holy Spirit. Why won't you look at me?"

Motovilov describes then what he saw. "Imagine in the centre of the sun," he writes, "in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you see neither his arms, nor his body, nor his face; you lose all sense of yourself; you can see only the blinding light which spreads everywhere, illumining with its glare both the snow blanket which covers the forest glade and the snowflakes falling thickly on the two of you. You can imagine what a state I was in!"

"What do you feel?" asked Seraphim.

"An amazing well-being!"

"But what exactly is it?"

"I feel a great calm in my soul: a peace which no words can express."

"What else do you feel?"

"A strange, unknown delight. An amazing happiness fills my heart."

"Do you feel anything else, friend of God?"

"I'm perfectly warm."

"Warm? What are you saying? We are in the depths of the forest, the snow lies under our feet and is settling on our clothes. How can you be warm?"

"It's the warmth one feels in a hot bath."

"Does it smell like that?"

"Oh no, nothing on earth can be compared to this! There's no scent in all the world like this one!"

"I know," said Seraphim, smiling. "It's the same with me. It is indeed true that no scent on earth can be compared with this one, because it comes from the Holy Spirit. Didn't the Lord say, 'The Kingdom of God is within you' (Lk 17:21)? This Kingdom is the grace of the Holy Spirit, living in us, warming us, enlightening us, filling the air with his scent, delighting us with his fragrance and rejoicing our hearts with an ineffable gladness. Now you know, friend of God, what it's like to be in the fullness of the Holy Spirit."