



Archimandrite Ephraim of the Athonite Vatopedi Monastery **Answers Questions About Spiritual Life**

—*How can repentance be combined with spiritual joy, compunction and inner peace? Both are needed, but apparently contradict each other.*

—To the extent that a person repents and has that inner lamentation commanded by Christ, he will feel simultaneously that this lamentation is joy-producing. Do not contemplate spiritual things by using the feelings or sentimentality. One may weep because he has a psychological problem, another weeps from sentimentality, while a third weeps for spiritual reasons. Unfortunately, we have not worthily responded to God's call—I am speaking of myself—and we do not measure up to God's grace and long-suffering for us. But we have known holy elders, our contemporaries, who had compassion for people and prayed for everyone with great pain of heart. They were always peaceful, joyful, and easy to be around. This is the wonder of a spiritual person.

—*How can we avoid depression when repenting? Where is the boundary between repentance and depression?*

—In order to help us discern this, we have spiritual guides. One day a nun came to elder Porphyrios, who was clairvoyant. She had read much about remembrance of death and had begun to feel depressed from it, because it was beyond her strength. As soon as the elder saw this nun he could immediately see what the problem was. Before she even said anything, he said to her, "You do not have a blessing to exercise the remembrance of death. Think only about Christ's love." Thus, the *podvig* of repentance should be directed by a spiritual guide who looks at each person's spiritual state. When my elder, Joseph of Vatopedi, was young, he put much effort into self-criticism and began to get depressed because of it. Then our 'grandfather', Joseph the Hesychast, said to him, "Son, work

with this—but only a little, not too heavily.” Of course, after maturing spiritually he had no problem with this practice.

It is because the spiritual state of the monk must be observed — the holy fathers prescribed that the spiritual father, the abbot, be always in the monastery. Of course, he can be absent for a few days, but in general he is continually with the brothers. Our laypeople, for example, see their spiritual father once or twice a month, the more reverent ones once a month; continual association with a spiritual father is not for them. But the holy fathers did institute this for monks because monks are as if walking a tightrope, and they need continual help.

Sunday, December 18

Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday before Nativity

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Commemoration of Venerable Savva the Sanctified (†532)

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Wednesday, December 21

Moleben 5:30 P.M.

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Saturday, December 24

Nativity Eve

Great Compline 5:30 P.M.

Sunday, December 25

Twenty-eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (*New Calendar*)

Divine Liturgy 9:30 A.M.

Feast of Holy Hierarch Spyridon of Tremithus (†348),
Hieromartyr Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem (†250) and
Venerable Herman of Alaska (†1836)

BODILY FASTING FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SOUL

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The Nativity fast begins on November 28 and lasts forty days. The Nativity fast is not as strict as Great Lent or the Dormition fast, and can be compared to the Apostles' fast. It was instituted by the Church so that we would worthily greet the feast of the Nativity of Christ after having cleansed our hearts by prayer and repentance.

The establishment of the Nativity fast, like many other long fasts, dates back to the early days of Christianity. Already in the fourth century, St. Ambrose of Milan, Philastrius, and Blessed Augustine recall the Nativity fast in their works. St. Leo the Great wrote about the antiquity of the Nativity fast in the fifth century.

At first, the Nativity fast lasted seven days for some Christians and a little longer for others. At the council of 1166, held during the time of Patriarch Luke of Constantinople and the Byzantine Emperor Manuel, all Christians were instructed to keep the fast for forty days before the great feast of the Nativity of Christ.

The Antiochian Patriarch Balsamon wrote that "His Holiness the Patriarch himself said that although these fasts (the Dormition and Nativity fasts) are not determined by the canons, let us nevertheless force ourselves to follow the unwritten Church tradition and obligate ourselves to fast ... beginning November 15".

The Nativity fast is the final long fast of the year. It begins on November 15 (November 28 according to the New Style) and goes until December 25 (January 7), forty days in duration, and therefore it is called the Forty Days in the Church typikon, just like Great Lent. Because the last day before the fast falls on the commemoration day of the Apostle Phillip (November 14 of the Old Style), this fast is also called the St. Phillip fast.

The Nativity fast is a winter fast; it serves to illumine the end of the year for us with a mystical renovation of our spiritual oneness with God and our preparation for the feast of the Nativity of Christ.

St. Leo the Great writes, "The very observation of abstinence is marked by four periods, so that throughout the course of the year we would know that we continually have need of purification, and that with a distracted life we always need to strive through fasting and almsgiving to eradicate sin, which multiplies through the frailty of the flesh and unclean desires."

According to the words of St. Leo the Great, the Nativity fast is a sacrifice to God for the fruits we have gathered. "*As the Lord generously gave us the fruits of the earth,*" writes the holy hierarch, "*so should we also be generous to the poor during the fast.*"

In the words of St. Simeon of Thessalonica, "*The forty days of the Nativity fast is an image of the fast of*

Moses, who having fasted for forty days and forty nights, received the words of God inscribed on stone tablets. But having fasted for forty days, we gaze upon and receive the living Word from the Virgin, inscribed not on stones, but incarnate and born, and we partake of His Divine flesh.”

The Nativity fast was established so that by the day of Christ’s Nativity we would have cleansed ourselves through repentance, prayer and fasting; so that with a pure heart, soul and body we could reverently meet the Son of God Who has appeared to the world, and so that besides the usual gifts and sacrifices we would bring Him our pure heart and desire to follow His teaching.

The rule of the Church instructs what we must abstain from during the fasts—*“All who piously fast should strictly observe the canons concerning the quality of food; that is, abstain during the fast from certain foods, not as from things defiled [may that not be], but as from things not appropriate to the fast and forbidden by the Church. Foods from which we should abstain during the fasts are: meat, cheese, butter, milk, eggs, and sometimes fish, depending upon kind of the holy fast.”*

The rules of abstinence prescribed by the Church for the Nativity fast are as strict as for the Apostles’ fast. Furthermore, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday of the Nativity fast, fish, wine, and oil are not allowed by the typikon, and foods without oil (xerophagy) can be taken only after Vespers. On the other days—Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday—food may be taken with vegetable oil. Fish is allowed during the Nativity fast on Saturdays and Sundays and on major feasts, like the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, on a church’s patronal feast, and on commemoration days of great saints if they fall on a Tuesday or Thursday. If they fall on a Wednesday or Friday, the fast may be relaxed to include wine and oil.

From December 20—25 (old style) the fast is intensified, and fish is not blessed even on Saturday and Sunday. Meanwhile, the civil New Year falls on these days [*for those observing the Julian calendar — Ed.*], and we Orthodox Christians have to be especially focused, so that we might not break the strict fast by parties, eating, and drinking wine.

Fasting bodily, we must also fast spiritually. *“Brothers, in fasting bodily let us also fast spiritually, and break all communion with falsehood,”* commands the Holy Church. Fasting is first of all man’s spiritual struggle with his passions. St. John Chrysostom warns, *“He is mistaken who thinks that the fast consists only in abstinence from food. True fasting is departing from evil.”*

Bodily fasting without spiritual fasting does not bring salvation of the soul; to the contrary, it can even be spiritually harmful if in abstaining from food a person is filled with an awareness of his superiority, knowing that he fasts. True fasting is bound up with prayer, repentance, refraining from passions and vices, uprooting evil deeds, forgiving offenses, abstaining from marital relations, avoiding parties, entertainment, theatres, and watching television. Fasting is not a goal but a means—a means of humbling our flesh and cleansing it from sins. Without prayer and repentance, fasting becomes no more than a diet.

The essence of fasting can be expressed in the following Church hymn: *My soul, if you fast from food but are not cleansed of the passions, in vain are we content with not eating: for if the fast does not bring you correction, it will be hateful to God as false, and you will be like the evil demons who eat nothing at all.”*

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov: “Learn to have restraint in food—by temperance you will bring health and strength to the body and vigor to the mind, so needed for the work of salvation...”

St. Isaac the Syrian: “Fasting with discernment is the spacious dwelling-place of all goodness. Whoever is lazy in fasting brings all goodness to wavering, because fasting was the commandment given to our nature from the beginning as a precaution to eating food, and by breaking the fast our first created fell.”

St. Ambrose of Optina: You must fast sensibly; try to conduct the coming fast judiciously, considering your physical strength.

. News From All The Ends Of The Earth

Warsaw, Poland: Prosecutor in Sieradz says that Poland has seen its first case of honor killing. 34-year old Agnieszka, a mother of four, was murdered 2 years ago in June. Prosecution has accused a 40-year old Pakistani called Naaem, who has lived in Poland for 10 years. Agnieszka was from a poor family and at one point of her life she met "a charming prince" – a Muslim from Pakistan, called Naaem. She converted to Islam, married the man and had children. When the young family moved to Pakistan, Agnieszka found herself enslaved by her husband and his family. Working hard and fed with leftovers, she was also beaten. Finally she escaped from the country with the help of the Polish embassy. Naaem also came back to Poland. He promised to support his wife and four children and after some time, two months before her death, she moved to his flat. One day, police found her 9-year old son wandering outside, he said that he was looking for his mother. In eight days her body was found. In Pakistan, in 2007 alone, 1261 women lost their lives and none of the perpetrators was held responsible.

Jerusalem: December 12, 13 Jewish extremists made their way into the Saint John the Forerunner Monastery on the Jirdan River, near the spot where the Saviour was baptized, and desecrated the monastery. Icons and crosses were destroyed, Greek flags which are customarily displayed in the Greek monasteries were burned. The following day, His Beatitude Theophilos, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Metropolitan Isichios of Capitoliada and the Greek consular in Israel arrived at the scene of the crime.

Skopje, Macedonia: On 12th December, the Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje Jovan was arrested, upon the false accusations by the schismatic Orthodox Church of Macedonia, at the border-crossing Medzitlija, on the border with Greece, and taken to prison. It must be remembered that he so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church is an uncanonical organization, founded in 1960s by the communist authorities of Yugoslavia. The Macedonian parishes in the US are uncanonical and Orthodox Christians should not worship there.

New York, NY: Metropolitan Hilarion, First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia and Metropolitan Jonah of the Orthodox Church in America, concelebrated the Divine Liturgy for the first time at the Synodal Cathedral of the Icon of the Mother of God "of the Sign" in New York on Saturday, December 10. The celebration marked the first time in nearly 70 years that the hierarchs of the OCA (formerly, the Russian Metropolia) and ROCOR have concelebrated. It is noteworthy that the Liturgy was



celebrated on the cathedral's Patronal Feast of the Kursk-Root Icon of the Mother of God, which was present during the Divine Liturgy. At the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy, Metropolitans Hilarion and Jonah exchanged warm greetings and spoke of the historic significance of the occasion. Metropolitan Hilarion presented Metropolitan Jonah with the Order of Kursk-Root Icon, First Class, the highest award given by ROCOR. In turn, Metropolitan Jonah presented the OCA's highest award, the Order of Saint Innocent, Gold Class, to Metropolitan Hilarion. One can only

hope that the rapprochement of the two Churches will serve to instill in the OCA love for the traditional Orthodoxy which this jurisdiction once possessed before it took course for renovationism and secularization.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. December bulletin covers' sponsors are the Polomchak family — memory of deceased parents.
2. Today, December 18, following the Divine Liturgy, a Panihida will be served for the blessed repose of handmaid of God Ann Salamon.
3. Yesterday, December 17, we had our Ninth Annual Cookie Walk. People who come to purchase our products commented that we had a very good selection of pastries, the cookies looked very good. We are thankful to all who pitched in in making this Cookie Walk a success. Our special thanks go to those who worked at the Cookie Walk and stayed to clean up. The funds raised by the church in course of this fundraiser totaled at 2,113.50. We are grateful to all our workers for their labors for the sake of the church.
4. Please, continue to look, when grocery shopping, for the ingredients needed for our major fund-raising products. We need margarine, flour, nuts and sugar. No sour cream is needed at this time. Thank you for your continuous support!
5. Tomorrow we clean the church in preparation for the Nativity of the Lord. Church will be open in the morning and in the evening. If you are coming in the evening, please call Janet Petyo.
6. December 28, at 6:00 P.M., the parish board members are asked to assemble at church for a meeting.