

The Way Into the Kingdom of Heaven

By Saint Innocent of Alaska

We were created to live on earth unlike animals who die and disappear with time, but with the high purpose to live with God — not for a hundred years or so — but for eternity!

Every individual instinctively strives for happiness. This desire has been implanted in our nature by the Creator Himself, and therefore it is not sinful. But it is important to understand that in this temporary life it is impossible to find full happiness, because that comes from God and cannot be attained without Him. Only He, who is the ultimate Good and the source of all good, can quench our thirst for happiness.

Material things can never wholly satisfy us. Indeed, we know from experience that every item we have desired has pleased us only for a short while. Then it became boring, and we started to desire something else. This process of satisfaction and boredom then repeated itself many times. The most striking example of unquenchable thirst for happiness was Solomon, the famous King of Israel, who lived around 1000 B.C. He was so rich that all the household utensils in his palaces were made of pure gold. He was so wise that kings and famous people from far away lands came to hear him. He was so famous that his foes trembled at the mere mention of his name. He could easily satisfy any of his wishes, and it seemed that there was no pleasure that he did not possess or could not obtain. But with all of this, Solomon could not find total happiness to the end of his life. He described his many years of searching for happiness and his continual disappointments in the book of Ecclesiastes, which he began with the following phrase: *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity* (Ecc. 1:2).

Innumerable other wise people who were also successful in life came to the same conclusion. It seems that in the depth of our subconscious something reminds us that we are just wanderers on this earth and that our true happiness is not here but there, in that other and better world known as Paradise or the Heavenly Kingdom. Let man own the whole world and everything that is in it, yet all this will interest him for no more than a short period, while the immortal soul, thirsting for personal communication with God, will remain unsatisfied.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to this earth in order to return to us our lost capacity to spend eternity in the blissful presence of God. He revealed to people that all their evil lies in sin and that no one through their own efforts can overcome the evil within themselves and attain communion with God. Sin, ingrained in our nature since the fall, stands between us and God like a high wall. If the Son of God had not descended to us through His mercy for us, had not

taken on our human nature, and had not by His death conquered sin, all mankind would have perished forever! Now, thanks to Him, those who wish to cleanse themselves from evil can do so and return to God and obtain eternal bliss in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now we will discuss in detail how you can achieve this aim. We will examine:

Which benefits were granted to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ.

How Jesus Christ lived on earth and suffered for us.

Which path leads to the Kingdom of Heaven.

How Jesus Christ helps us to walk along the path of salvation.

The Benefits the Lord Jesus Christ Has Granted Us

In order to evaluate the benefits given us by our Lord Jesus Christ, let us first remember what blessings the first man Adam had while he was sinless, and what sorrows befell him and all of mankind after his fall into sin.

The first man, having been created in the image and likeness of his Creator, had the most vital and close relationship with Him and therefore enjoyed total happiness. God, having created Adam in His image and likeness, endowed him with many of His qualities. The most important of these was immortality. God, being all-just, created Adam sinless and pure. Being all-blessed, He created Adam blessed also, and this blessedness or beatitude was meant to increase in him day by day.

As the book of Genesis states, Adam lived in the most beautiful garden (named Eden or Paradise), planted by God, and there he enjoyed all the blessings of life. He knew no sickness nor suffering. He feared nothing, and all beasts submitted to him as their master. Adam suffered neither cold nor heat. Although he toiled by caring for the Garden of Eden, he did so with pleasure. His soul was filled with awareness of the Divine presence, and he loved his Creator with his whole heart. Adam was always calm and happy and knew no unpleasantness, sorrow, or concern. All his desires were pure, righteous, and orderly; his memory, intellect, and all other faculties were in harmony and were constantly being perfected. Being pure and innocent, he was always with God and conversed with Him as with his Father, and in return God loved him as His own beloved son. In brief, Adam was in Paradise, and Paradise was within him.

If Adam had not sinned, he would have remained forever blessed, and all his descendants would have enjoyed blessedness. It was for this very purpose that God had created man. But Adam, having succumbed to the tempter-devil, transgressed against the law of the Maker and took pleasure in the taste of the forbidden fruit. When God appeared to Adam right after he had sinned, Adam,

instead of repenting and promising obedience henceforth, began to justify himself and to blame his wife. Eve in turn blamed the serpent for everything. And so it was that sin became a part of human nature, deeply injuring it because of the lack of repentance of Adam and Eve. The existing communion with the Maker was cut and the blessedness lost. Having lost Paradise within himself, Adam became unworthy of the external Paradise and was therefore banished from it.

After the fall into sin, Adam's soul darkened: his thoughts and desires became muddled, and his imagination and memory began to cloud. Instead of peace and joy he met sorrow, agitation, ruination, misery, and woe. He experienced hard labor, poverty, hunger, and thirst. And after years of unsurpassed sorrows, sickly old age began to oppress him, and death neared. Worst of all, the devil, the perpetrator of every evil, obtained through sin the ability to influence Adam and to further alienate him from God.

The whole of nature, which had previously served Adam as a means to happiness, had now become hostile to him. From then on Adam and all his descendants began to suffer from cold and heat and to experience hunger and the effect of changes in climate and environmental conditions. Animals became unfriendly toward people and looked upon them as enemy or prey. Adam's descendants began to suffer from different diseases, which gradually became more varied and severe. Men forgot that they were brothers and began to fight with each other, to hate, to deceive, to attack and to kill each other. And finally, after all kinds of hard labors and tribulations, they were doomed to die, and, as sinners, to go to Hades and experience eternal punishment there.

No man, even the most talented and powerful, nor all of mankind in unison, could ever restore what Adam lost when he sinned in Eden. What would have happened to us and to all of mankind if Jesus Christ in His mercy had not come to redeem us?

But we should all thank our Heavenly Father for taking pity on us. He loves us far more than we are capable of loving ourselves. And because of His infinite love, He has sent His only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to rid us from our sins and from the snare of the devil and to lead us into the eternal Kingdom of Heaven.

Through His teachings Jesus Christ scattered the darkness of ignorance and all possible error and enlightened the world with the light of the true faith. Now anyone who desires it can come to know the will of God and attain eternal life.

By His way of life Christ showed us how to live to attain salvation. And He also assists us constantly in everything good. By His most precious blood Jesus washed away our sins and made of us children of God, who were slaves of passions and the devil. Those torments we, as transgressors of the will of God, would have had to suffer, He bore for us. By His death He crushed the power of the devil,

destroyed the power of hell, and delivered us from death. By His resurrection He gave us life and opened the gates of Paradise to all. Therefore, death is no longer an irreversible tragedy but a passage from this temporary world of vanity and sorrows to the world of bright and joyous life. By His ascension into heaven Christ glorified our nature, enabling us to share eternal bliss with the angels and all the heavenly creatures.

It is impossible fully to comprehend and to describe all the benefits that the Lord has prepared for us. Let us just say that all who choose to believe in Him and to live a Christian life will become sons of God, will attain Paradise, where the angels and the just reside, and will see God face to face. They will rejoice with a pure and eternal joy, knowing no weariness, sadness, or troubles.

It is so wonderful that Jesus Christ gives these benefits not to a chosen few but to each and every person who desires to receive them! The path to salvation has been shown and arranged; it has been made as smooth and level as possible. Besides this, Jesus Himself constantly helps us along the way, so to speak, leading us by the hand. It only remains for us not to oppose Him, not to be obstinate, but to surrender ourselves to His will. So you can see how much Jesus Christ loves us and what great blessings He is bestowing upon us!

Let us consider for a moment what would happen if Jesus were to appear before us now and ask: "My children! Do you love Me for all that I have done for you and do you value those blessings that I bestow upon you?" Who among us would not answer Him: "Yes, Lord! I love You and am grateful to You!"

If, then, we truly love Jesus Christ with our hearts and not just with our words, and if we are grateful to Him, are we then not bound to carry out what He wills for us to do? When a person truly loves his benefactor, he expresses his gratitude by doing what pleases his benefactor.

How Jesus Christ Lived and Suffered for Us

The basis of life is love: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself* (Mk. 12:30-31). Because of our sinfulness, none of us is capable of loving God and our neighbors in such a complete and perfect manner. Only Jesus Christ truly loved everyone, even His enemies.

His infinite love was evidenced in His every word and deed. Being the only-begotten Son of God and God Himself, Jesus Christ in His pity for us came down from Heaven and was incarnate, becoming in everything the same as us, except in sin. Being the Sovereign Heavenly King, before whom all Angels and creatures tremble, He deigned to take on the image of an ordinary person, to restore our

corrupted nature. While possessing all the treasures of the world, He agreed to be born in poverty, lying in a manger in a dark cave.

Being the supreme Lawgiver, Jesus Christ during His earthly life humbly submitted to all the decrees and commandments of the Jewish religious law. Thus, on the eighth day after His birth, He submitted to circumcision, and on the fortieth day His Mother brought Him into the temple and there paid the redemption fee for Him, the Ruler of the Universe. As was fitting for a boy and then later a youth, He always obeyed His earthly Mother and helped His foster father, the elderly Joseph. Once mature, He treated the Jewish elders and leaders with respect, as well as the Roman governors, and paid the required taxes. He willingly lived in poverty and often, while traveling to preach, had no place to rest His head. Christ, to Whom all nature submits, Himself served people and even washed the feet of His disciples, who were uneducated fishermen.

Jesus Christ constantly prayed to His Heavenly Father, even at night when the others were asleep. On Sabbath days at a synagogue, He took part in the communal prayers and the reading of the Scriptures, and on the major feast days He made pilgrimages to the temple at Jerusalem.

With all His love and diligence Jesus fulfilled that commission for which His Heavenly Father sent Him, directing everything toward His Father's glory. He felt pity for all people, especially for the poor and underprivileged, wished well to everyone, and was willing to bear anything in order to ease their suffering. He bore all conceivable affronts and insults from the ungrateful crowd with the greatest meekness, and did not vent His anger on those who slandered Him and plotted intrigues against Him. Some who bore Christ ill-will called Him a sinner and lawbreaker; others called Him a carpenter's son and a shallow person; still others said He was a friend of drunkards and sinners. On several occasions Christ's enemies attempted to stone Him or toss Him from a mountaintop. Jewish scribes called His divine teachings deceitful; and when He healed the sick, raised the dead, or exorcised demons, they explained away these miracles as the deeds of an evil spirit. Some even openly called Him possessed. The Lord Jesus, being Almighty God, could have destroyed them all with one word. Instead, He pitied them as spiritually blind and prayed for their welfare and for their salvation.

In brief, from His early youth till His very death, Jesus Christ constantly did good to all people, even when, instead of being grateful to Him, they caused Him anguish and pain. He was especially hated by the Jewish elders, high priests, and scribes — whose mission it was to teach the people goodness and to lead them toward faith. They worked with all their might to keep the people from believing in Jesus as the God-sent Messiah, distorting the meaning of the prophecies that predicted His coming. They contradicted all that He said or did. Jesus did not grieve so much that the Jewish leaders fought against Him as He did from the fact

that they were rushing blindly toward doom, taking the simple people along with them.

Not long before His death, Jesus worked His greatest miracle: He resurrected Lazarus, who had already been in the grave for four days and whose body had started to decompose. This miracle took place in the presence of a great crowd and made an overwhelming impression on them all. After this miracle, many of the unbelieving Jews started to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. But the high priests and the scribes, being envious of His fame, hastily gathered and decided to put Christ to death without delay, together with Lazarus whom He had resurrected.

Knowing that the days of His earthly life were drawing to an end, Christ gathered his disciples in a room near Mount Zion for the mystical last supper. Here He instituted the Mystery of Holy Communion and gave His last commandments to the disciples. After that He went to the garden of Gethsemane, where He experienced His most agonizing inner sufferings. The anguish was so great that during prayer the sweat on His face became a sweat of blood. At that moment the soul of the Savior was immersed into a terrible darkness and horror at the unbearable sins which He was taking upon Himself. Jesus knew that he had to wash away with His most Holy blood all the countless transgressions of billions of people, beginning with Adam and including all future generations. Overwhelmed by the oppression of the world's evil, Jesus Christ exclaimed: "*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death*" (Matt. 26:38).

No one can truly comprehend what the pure soul of the God-man experienced in the garden of Gethsemane. You can imagine, however, that all the loathsome sins of mankind were revealed to Him in all their ugliness and that the pure soul of the God-man was shocked and depressed by this terrible sight. Christ knew that His great sufferings and boundless love would be appreciated by only a few, that the majority of the people would turn away from Him with indifference, and that some would reject His teachings and would cruelly persecute those who believed in Him. He foresaw that among His followers there would be many hypocrites who would turn faith into a means for profit and that there would be false teachers and false prophets who would distort His teachings and who, because of pride and greed, would entice the faithful into harmful sects. He foresaw that false pastors would appear, who, because of ambition, would create schisms in the Church. Christ knew not only that many Christians would fail to love God and live righteously but also that they would give themselves to heinous crimes and vices, so that by their sins they would even surpass pagans, and as a result the Christian faith would be scandalized.

In these most trying sufferings, while justice and loyalty to His Father demanded from Christ that He destroy mankind as ungrateful and criminal, the feelings of

pity and sorrow ultimately stirred Him to accept all sufferings and death itself to save us sinners from the power of the devil and from eternal damnation.

While Jesus was still praying, a mob with torches and clubs, along with some soldiers who were sent by the Jewish elders, came into the garden. They bound Him and dragged Him, as they would an evildoer, to the high priest for trial. The Apostles, whom He loved so much and brought so close to Himself, faintheartedly left Him and fled. Then the leaders and all the Sanhedrin quickly assembled at the home of the high priest, where they brought a multitude of the most ridiculous accusations against Christ. None of these, however, was enough to warrant a sentence of death. The high priest demanded that Jesus, while He was under oath, state whether or not He was the promised Messiah, the Son of God. After He affirmed that He was, the Sanhedrin accused Him of blasphemy and sentenced Him to death. After this, the members of the council, unable to hold back their hatred of Jesus any longer, surrounded Him and subjected Him to beatings and all kinds of insults.

The Romans, however, had deprived the Sanhedrin of the power to execute anyone. So, the next morning, on Friday, the day before the Passover, the Jewish leaders brought Jesus Christ to a new trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, hoping that Pilate would affirm their decision. Pilate, realizing that they were accusing Christ out of envy, wanted to let Him go. But the high priests and elders threatened that they would complain about him to the Roman emperor. Not wishing to jeopardize his career, Pilate decided to address the people who had gathered there. Reminding the people of the custom to free some prisoner on the eve of the Passover holiday, Pilate asked them which of the two they would want him to set free: Barabbas or Christ (Barabbas was a robber who had been imprisoned for some crime). While the mob of people were talking among themselves, the Jewish leaders convinced them to ask for Barabbas' release and to demand that Christ be crucified on the cross.

The people forgot the innumerable good deeds of Christ: from how many of them He had exorcised demons, how many He had healed of leprosy, blindness, weakness and other incurable diseases, how many He had turned from debauchery to the path of goodness, and to how many of the despairing He had returned hope.

The Roman soldiers submitted the Lord to scourging and cursing. Finally they placed on Him a purple cloak and on His head a crown of thorns. Pilate then brought out the wounded Christ, hoping the people would feel pity and asks for His release. Instead they began to shout, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" On hearing this, Pilate decided to give up. He halfheartedly washed his hands as a sign of non-participation in the conviction of an innocent man, ordered the release of Barabbas, and handed Christ over to the Jewish leaders for them to dispose of.

The soldiers gave Christ the wooden cross on which He was to be crucified and ordered Him to carry it to the execution site, known as Golgotha (meaning "place of the skull"). There they removed His outer clothing and nailed Him to the cross. Two robbers, one on either side, were crucified with Him. Thus, in the most humiliating circumstances, as if He were a great criminal, they executed the One Who with the divine light dispelled the darkness of fallacies and Who with His boundless love defeated hate! Dear God! How cruel and blind people can be!

But those who hated Christ could not satisfy their hatred. Even on the dying Sufferer they piled more curses and with sneers demanded a miracle. When He asked for water to quench His thirst, they gave Him vinegar. And thus, deserted by all, wounded, bleeding and suffocating, fatigued by an unbearable thirst, He, the one who once breathed life into the first man, died the cruelest of deaths! Even soulless nature recoiled at this crime: the sun darkened and the earth quaked.

For whom, then, did the Savior of the world suffer? He suffered for all mankind, for enemies and tormentors, for those who, having received many benefits from Him, failed to thank Him. He suffered for each and every one of us, stubborn sinners, who daily sadden Him with our indifference, ingratitude, hatred, lies, and wicked deeds, and who, by these innumerable sins, crucify Him again and again.

In order to appreciate more fully the boundless love of Jesus Christ and the extent of His sacrifice, let us remind ourselves how great He is and how insignificant we are. Indeed, Christ is the true God, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit. He resides in an unreachable world, this all-powerful Creator of the universe, this immortal King before whom bow countless hosts of angels. He is the undying fountain of life, the Lord of all that is visible and invisible, the formidable Judge of the living and the dead. This same Jesus suffered for us sinful and worthless creatures. Who can comprehend this mystery of Godly Love?

The Path into the Kingdom of Heaven

The road into the Kingdom of Heaven was made by the Lord Jesus Christ, and He was the first one who travelled it. The Bible teaches that only he who follows Jesus can reach His Kingdom. But how can one follow Him? Hear what our Savior says about this: *Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me* (Mark 8:34).

The words *whoever desires* mean that Christ does not compel anyone to follow Him. He has no need of the unwilling ones, but He desires that each person freely follow Him. Consequently, only those who willingly choose the Savior's path reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christian! Your salvation or perdition is entirely in your own hands. In His unspeakable wisdom and love, the Lord has given you freedom to chose what you wish, and He does not force you to do anything against your will. Therefore, if you truly wish to follow Jesus Christ, He will show you the way into the Kingdom of Heaven and will help you along each step. If you do not wish to follow Him, it is your decision. But take care not to disdain the grace of God! Pitying you, Jesus Christ knocks for a long time at the door of your heart, waiting for your decision to save yourself. But woe to you if He, tiring of waiting, turns His face away from you, as a hopeless son or daughter of perdition. Then no one, neither the most powerful and influential person, nor all the angels in heaven, will be able to help you!

That is why it is extremely important to nourish in ourselves the desire and resolve to follow the path of salvation. To make this desire grow in us and strengthen our resolve, we must learn where the path Christ showed us leads and how to follow it. These questions are of such extreme importance we will discuss them in detail.

1. First of all, a Christian must thoroughly study the foundations of the Christian faith. To that end, you must read and reread the Holy Scriptures on a regular basis, especially the books of the New Testament. You must not only learn their contents but also develop an interest in their origin, who wrote them and when, how they were preserved and have been handed down to us, and why they are called Divine and Sacred. You must study the Holy Books with simplicity of heart, without prejudice or excessive inquisitiveness, not trying to discover hidden mysteries but trying to learn that which leads us to self-improvement. Certainly all that is necessary for us to know for our salvation is revealed quite clearly and in detail in the Scriptures.

It is important also to study our God-given faith in detail, since he who is indifferent toward truth is in danger of becoming easy prey for false teachers. It is so sad that many Orthodox Christians perish simply because of their disregard for Christ's teachings. Having access to the light, they wander in the dark.

The studying of the faith should conform to your aptitudes and knowledge. For instance, for the serious student, in addition to studying the Scriptures, it is also useful to become familiar with the works of the Church Fathers and with the historical and theological books written by other Orthodox authors. These books will help you to comprehend your faith more deeply, which in turn will give you an opportunity to strengthen others in the Orthodox faith, to whom these books are unavailable.

2. When you become convinced that our Orthodox faith is based on Holy Scriptures and is not invented by people and that the Holy Scriptures contain the

true word of God, revealed by the Holy Spirit through prophets and apostles — accept it with all your trusting heart. Believe the Holy Scriptures without doubt or philosophizing, pushing aside all heretical explanations. If you humbly accept Christ's truth, then your faith will become strong and will lead you to salvation.

3. Finally, try to nourish a diligence in yourself to follow that which is taught by the Holy Scriptures. But if you do not have such diligence, fall down before the Savior and with a sincere prayer ask Him to send you a zealous wish to live according to His commandments. Then, when the grace of God starts leading you toward salvation, follow it, valiantly repelling the snares of the devil, who will attempt to detract you from Christ's path.

To illustrate what was just said about the path into the Kingdom of Heaven, let's assume that unexpectedly you became the sole heir of a rich relative. This relative, before dying, willed his magnificent mansion on the top of a picturesque mountain to you. Loving solitude, he had not built any roads but reached his mansion by a trail. In order to help you take possession of the property, he left you a map of the mountain, indicating the correct trail on it. The mountain has many other trails, none of which reached the mansion; some lead to a dead end, and others to a steep cliff. Therefore, in order to reach your mansion, you have to take the trail indicated by your loving relative.

Prudence would suggest that, before undertaking such a trip, you should carefully study the map of the mountain, obtaining all the necessary supplies for the climb and being prepared to spend the night on the mountain, if necessary. It would be good to ask a ranger about landmarks on the mountain and how best to avoid losing your way or straying from the correct trail. Certainly, being a person with common sense, you would make all necessary preparations before setting off on this new trail.

Similarly, to reach the Kingdom of Heaven, we should determine which path leads to it, how not to falter, what we must beware of, etc. Our map is the Holy Scriptures and other Orthodox books; the rangers are the pastors of the Church, whose duty it is to help the faithful on their way toward Paradise. The provisions are the Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church, which reinforce our spiritual strength. Sometimes the path leading to Paradise may become narrow, steep and overgrown with bushes, whereas other paths may seem wider and easier to travel. It is very important not to stray from the correct path. The Lord Jesus Christ and His Apostles repeatedly warned that there is but one path that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven, the one given in the Gospel. All others, especially the wide and comfortable ones, lead to perdition.

Let us now examine more closely the path indicated to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. He said: *Whoever desires to come after Me must:*

Deny himself

Take up his cross

Follow Me

Thus, a follower of Christ must begin by denying himself. This means that you must disown all bad habits, free your heart from sinful bonds (like hunger for money, luxury, fame, power over others, etc.), squelch impure thoughts, harbor no lustful desires, distance yourself from situations leading to sin, and, in general, do nothing because of stubbornness or ego but do all for the love of God and with the desire to contribute to the glory of His Holy Name. In other words, to deny yourself is *to be dead indeed to sin but alive to God*, as St. Paul has explained in Rom. 6:11.

Then, it is necessary for a disciple and follower of Christ to take up his cross. The cross means the various difficulties and sorrows associated with a Christian life. Crosses may be external as well as internal. To take up your cross means to tolerate everything without complaining, regardless of how unpleasant things might become. For example, if someone has insulted you or laughed at you or provoked you, bear it all without anger or resentment. Similarly, if you helped someone and he, instead of showing gratitude, made up deceitful tales about you or if you wanted to do something good but were unable to accomplish it, bear it without despondency. Did some misfortune befall you? Did someone in your family become ill, or despite all your efforts and tireless labor did you repeatedly suffer failure? Has some other thing or person oppressed you? Bear all with patience in the name of Jesus Christ. Do not consider yourself punished unjustly, but accept everything as your cross.

To *bear your cross* means not only to accept patiently all difficulties that befall you but also to strive for spiritual perfection, as the Scriptures teach us. For example, we must do good to others: work for the prosperity of your parish, visit the sick and imprisoned, help the needy, collect money for the poor, and assist in spreading spiritual enlightenment. In other words, we must seek out tasks which will lead to the salvation and welfare of those around us and then, with perseverance and meekness, strive in that direction by our actions, words, prayer, and advice.

Should the prideful thought arise that you are better or smarter than others, quickly cast it aside because it will undermine all your good efforts. Blessed is he who carries his cross with prudence and humility, because God will never allow such a person to perish but will guide and strengthen him with His Holy Spirit.

In following Jesus Christ, it is not enough to carry only an outward cross. Indeed, external crosses are borne not only by Christians but by everyone; there exists no

person free from one or more sorrows. He who wishes to become a true disciple of Christ must also carry his own inner cross.

An inner cross comes more readily than an outer one. In a state of repentance, you need only direct your thoughts inward to study your soul, and instantly a multitude of crosses will appear. For instance, reflect on how you were created and what is the purpose of your life. Are you living according to Christ's teaching, are you accomplishing something good, are you growing spiritually? Meditate about this in some depth, and soon you will come to realize that you are failing in many important areas. God created you so that with all your works, life, and being you should contribute to the spreading of good and the strengthening of His Kingdom. You, however, have not only failed in this, but, by your sins, you have rejected and even insulted Christ. Reflect on what awaits you beyond the grave and on what side you will find yourself at the Last Judgment: with the righteous or with the evildoers? And if you seriously reflect on all this, you will naturally become distressed and will regret your many words and deeds — and these painful feelings and the desire for repentance will become your inner cross. If you continue attentively to study yourself, you will find many other inner crosses. For instance, hell, which you have so carelessly avoided considering until now, will suddenly appear to you as a very real threat. Paradise, which the Lord has prepared for you and which has barely crossed your mind, will vividly present itself to you as it really is: a place of eternal and pure joy from which you have deprived yourself by your careless way of life.

If, in spite of the inner turmoil brought about by such reflections, you firmly resolve to repent and amend your ways and, if, instead of consoling yourself with earthly enjoyments, you diligently pray to the Lord to save you and you decide to surrender yourself totally to His will, then the Lord will reveal to you more clearly the state of your soul so that you may be totally healed. Our problem is that the actual condition of our spiritual sickness is hidden from us under a thick mantle of self-love and passions. Only occasionally, thanks to our conscience, do we get a glimpse of our major and most obvious spiritual wounds.

Usually the devil, knowing how good it is for us to recognize our moral illness, uses all his wiles to prevent us from doing so and tells us that all is well and there is no need to worry. But when he sees that we are really serious about becoming true Christians and with God's help are on the way to restoring our spiritual health, then the devil uses craftier means: he presents to us our internal illnesses in such a hopeless condition that we become bewildered and despair of our salvation. If the Lord permitted the devil to use this trick on all of us, few of us would find the strength to continue the struggle. However, the Lord, as a knowledgeable physician, protects us from despair. He heals our spiritual ulcers and encourages us as we heal.

Therefore, as the Lord restores your spiritual sight, you will begin to comprehend more clearly that your heart is corrupt and that your passions obstruct your path to God. You will begin to understand also that the little good you have to your credit so far is damaged by your selfishness and conceit. Then you will certainly grieve, and you will become frightened and saddened: frightened because you are in danger of perishing forever, saddened because you have declined for so long to listen to the gentle voice of God who was calling you to salvation, and saddened because you have accomplished so little good.

Although these inner crosses present themselves as burdensome, do not despair and do not think that the Lord has abandoned you. No! He is always with you and invisibly sustains you, even when you forget Him. He will not burden you with trials beyond your capacity. Fear nothing, but with total humbleness and devotion bear your cross and pray. He is the gentlest of fathers that could be wished for. If on occasion He allows His faithful servants to be tempted, it is only to remind them of their feebleness and to completely cleanse their hearts from pride. In our hearts is where He intends to reside with His Son and His Holy Spirit.

In time of sorrow do not seek comfort from people. Most people are not experienced in affairs of salvation and are poor advisors. Make the Lord your only helpmate, comforter, and tutor, and from Him alone ask help. The man to whom the Lord sends afflictions is blessed a hundredfold, because it is afflictions that cure our souls. In enduring sorrows, a Christian is likened to Jesus Christ, who suffered for us. We should consider sorrows a gift from the Lord and a sign of His care for our salvation.

If you bear your cross with perseverance and seek comfort only from Him, then He, through His mercy, will not abandon you but will touch your heart and will impart to you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is then that you will feel an indescribable delight, a wonderful inner peace and joy such as you have never experienced before, and at the same time you will feel an influx of spiritual strength; prayer will become easier and your faith stronger. Then your heart will be kindled with love of God and all people. All these are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

When the Lord decides to honor you with such gifts, do not consider them as rewards for your labors, and do not think that you have attained perfection. Such thoughts come from pride. The comforts and grace of the Holy Spirit are not rewards but gifts of divine mercy. Occasionally the Lord allows us to get a foretaste of future blessings so that we will put forth a greater effort in seeking His eternal Kingdom.

Finally, a disciple of Christ must *follow Him*. This means that in all deeds and actions we must try to be like our Lord Jesus Christ in His virtues. We must strive to live and act as He lived and acted. For example, Jesus Christ always thanked

His Heavenly Father and constantly prayed to Him. Thus we also should constantly thank God and pray to Him in all circumstances, whether successful or difficult.

Jesus Christ revered His Mother and submitted to lawful authority. Thus we also should revere our parents and educators; we too should respect those in positions of responsibility — provided their requests are not in conflict with God's commandments.

Jesus Christ fervently and with love performed the task for which His Father sent Him. We should also conscientiously and zealously perform the duties which are laid upon us by God and civil authorities.

Jesus Christ loved everyone and did good to all. So should we love our neighbor and do good to as many people as possible. Jesus Christ did everything possible for the salvation of mankind. So must we do good to others, not sparing our own well-being and time.

Jesus Christ voluntarily suffered and died for us. Therefore we too must not grumble when some unpleasantness befalls us but be ready to make sacrifices with humility and devotion to God. Jesus Christ not only forgave His enemies their ingratitude and animosity but wished them well. So we also must forgive our enemies, repaying them with good for their evil while blessing those who revile us.

Jesus Christ, the king of heaven and earth, lived in poverty and obtained His daily necessities through His own labor. So we also must be industrious and content with what God has given us and not be consumed with desire for riches for their own sake. In the words of the Savior: *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God* (Matt. 19:24).

Jesus Christ, being meek and humble of heart, never strove for adulation but directed all toward the glory of His Father. We also must not parade ourselves or seek recognition. For instance, do you help your neighbors, do you give alms, do you live more piously than those around you, are you wiser than your friends, or are you in some way above others? Do not brag about it. Remember that all your praiseworthy attributes are not yours but gifts of God. Yours are the weaknesses, mistakes and sins.

***Following* Jesus Christ means accepting with faith and submitting to all that Christ taught without question and with simplicity of heart. He who accepts Jesus Christ's words becomes His disciple, but he who fulfills His commandments with complete devotion becomes His true and devoted follower.**

This is the meaning of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus Christ. This is the only straight path into the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ walked

this path and calls us to follow Him. There never was and never will be any other path to salvation but this one, shown to us by Jesus! To the beginner this path may seem too narrow and steep. But it seems this way only because our understanding of divine blessings and happiness has become distorted. Many of us regard the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter. However, as we come closer to God, much of what seemed difficult or bitter before will become easy or sweet, and what seemed to please before will come to seem boring and harmful.

Of course, there will be trying periods in our life when the path of ascension toward God will seem exceptionally difficult. Then we should think that for every step taken there are a thousand rewards being prepared. Sufferings along this path are momentary, but the rewards are eternal. Therefore, do not fear the path of Christ, for a smooth and wide path ends in hell, but a thorny and narrow one leads to Heaven.

Why did God not make the path to the Kingdom of Heaven light and pleasant? Only God knows. Who would question His divine wisdom? He saw that the narrow path is what we need! We who are below see only bits and pieces, but He, Who is above all creation, sees our lives from the standpoint of eternity. However, though not completely understanding the plans of our Creator, let us consider the following:

1. The Kingdom of Heaven is the highest beatitude and inexhaustible wealth. If great efforts are necessary to obtain meager and temporary earthly advantages, then how can it be possible to obtain such a great and eternal treasure without any effort?

2. The Kingdom of Heaven is the most coveted reward. Where else are rewards given freely and for nothing? If we struggle to get temporary benefits, so much more should we struggle to obtain the eternal reward.

3. We must bear our cross because we want to be with Christ and to participate in His glory. If Jesus Christ, our Master and Teacher, gained heavenly glory through suffering, would it not be shameful for us to share His glory when we faintheartedly shun any trials or sorrows?

4. Besides, lifelong crosses are not the lot of Christians alone. Everyone carries their own cross, both Christians and non-Christians, believers and pagans. The difference is that for some, their crosses serve as a means of attaining the Kingdom of Heaven, while for the others they bring no such value. For the Christian, the cross gradually becomes lighter and more joyful, while for the nonbeliever it becomes heavier and more burdensome. Why is this so? Because where the one carries their cross with faith and devotion to God, the other carries it with grumbling and anger.

Therefore, Christian, do not shun your lifelong cross, but, on the contrary, thank Jesus Christ that He honored you to follow and imitate Him. If Christ had not suffered and died, then none of us, no matter how much we suffered and struggled, would enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for then we would have had to suffer as slaves, and slaves deserve no rewards. Now, however, we suffer as sons for our own salvation. O merciful Lord! How great is Thy love for us. How great are Thy benefits to us. Thou bendest evil itself for our benefit and salvation!

Christian! Gratitude alone to Jesus Christ, your benefactor, obliges you to follow Him. Christ came down to earth for you. Can it be possible that you would prefer some worldly thing to Him? For you Jesus drank the cup full of suffering; can it be that you would refuse to suffer a little for Him?

5. Jesus Christ redeemed us by His death, and, therefore, by the right of redemption we belong to Him and must do all that He wills. Christ wills only one thing: that we should attain eternal bliss.

6. Finally, we cannot avoid the narrow path into the Kingdom of Heaven, since every man has sins and sin in itself is an ulcer that cannot be cured without strong medicine. Suffering is the medicine with which God cures our souls. When somebody is ill, then, regardless of his surroundings — even though he is in the most magnificent of palaces — he will still suffer. Such is the fate of every sinner; no matter where he settles, even in Paradise itself, he will suffer because the elements of hell reside within him. Similarly, a righteous person can be as happy in a shack as in a palace. When our heart is filled with the Holy Spirit, wherever we may find ourselves, there we will always feel joy, since Paradise is within us.

And so, brethren, if you wish to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, you cannot bypass the path taken by Jesus Christ. Indeed, all the prophets, the Apostles, the martyrs, the saints and countless other righteous ones walked along this path. There is no other.

Some might object, saying, how can we who are sinful and weak be like Jesus Christ or the saints! We live in the secular world and have families and many responsibilities. Oh, brethren! This is a cunning excuse and an insult to our Creator. To justify our carelessness by such reasoning means to accuse our Maker of being unable to create us properly. After all, the saints, like us, were not sinless at first but participated in worldly affairs, labored and had various obligations and families to care about. Surely they were not perfect in everything. They had their share of temptations and low moments. Notwithstanding this, living in circumstances similar to ours and having their ups and downs, they steered toward the main objective of their life: the Kingdom of Heaven. Undoubtedly, we also, if we truly desire to, can be good citizens, faithful spouses, loving parents, and simultaneously good Christians. Our faith will not be an obstacle but, on the

contrary, will aid all our good undertakings. The essence of Christianity is pure and selfless love, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, brethren, if you wish to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, follow the path which Jesus Christ took, and He, the all-merciful one, will help you every step of the way.

How Jesus Christ Helps Us

While walking the path of Christ, you should not rely only on yourself. If Jesus Christ, our Great Benefactor, had not given us help every step of the way, no one could have reached salvation. Even the Apostles, when left to themselves, were unable to follow Jesus and faintheartedly dispersed. But when on Pentecost they received help from above, they joyfully followed His path, and then neither dangers nor difficulties nor death itself could discourage them.

What is this help given by Jesus Christ to Christians? This help is the Grace of the Holy Spirit. God's grace surrounds us, and with it the Lord draws us to Himself. All who wish can receive this help and become filled with it.

The Holy Spirit, being God, equal to the Father and the Son, is the source of life and strength. He gives to believers wisdom, inner peace and inspiration, not according to their merits but for Jesus Christ's sake. How the Holy Spirit helps us, what are His gifts, and how one should attract His Grace will now be explained in accordance with the Holy Scriptures.

1. When descending upon a Christian, the Holy Spirit gives him *faith* and *light*. No one can have a true living faith without the Holy Spirit. Even a person most learned in Scriptures is totally blind without His enlightenment. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit can make even the lowest simpleton wise and disclose God's mysteries to them.

2. Descending upon a Christian, the Holy Spirit brings *true love* which warms his heart. This love inspires a person to do good deeds, so that for him there is nothing impossible or terrifying anymore. God's commandments, which appeared to be difficult before, now become easy. Faith and love, gifts from the Holy Spirit, are such powerful means that the person possessing them can easily and joyfully follow the path of Jesus Christ.

3. The Holy Spirit *corrects a worldly outlook and attitude*, so that a Christian is no longer overwhelmed by the temptations of this passing world. Gratefully using what God has bestowed, a true Christian does not become attached to anything temporary but considers himself a stranger in this world and wishes most of all to be in contact with God. On the other hand, a person without the grace of the Holy Spirit, despite all his learning and capabilities, always remains a worshiper of the world and a slave of the flesh.

4. The Holy Spirit gives a Christian *wisdom*. This is illustrated very obviously in the case of the Holy Apostles. Because of their low social position, they were the most simple and unlearned of men. However, after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them on the day of Pentecost, they received such wisdom and power of speech that even philosophers and orators could not stand up to them. The Holy Spirit always teaches Christians what they must do, and when and how they should act. Thus guided by the Holy Spirit, they will always find the time and the means for the salvation of their soul. Amid all the turmoils of the world and in spite of being busy, they will be able to collect their inner self to be with and pray to God. A non-spiritual person, on the other hand, cannot focus or pray sincerely, even in church.

5. The Holy Spirit gives Christians true *joy* and undisturbable *peace*. They feel this peace and joy even during external difficulties and in times of trial. People, on the other hand, who do not have the Holy Spirit, can never truly rejoice or attain inner peace. When they enjoy themselves, they find their joy is transient, frivolous and pitiful, and on occasion even sinful. After their revelry, a boredom greater than ever before fills their heart. Similarly, when a non-spiritual person feels tranquility, this is not a true spiritual peace but a sort of dozing or apathy. Woe to the people who do not awaken in time and do not start being concerned with the salvation of their soul! They will remain spiritually dead even while alive physically.

6. The Holy Spirit gives true *humility*. Even the most intelligent people, if they do not possess the Holy Spirit, cannot know themselves well enough, because their internal illness and spiritual poverty are hidden from them. When they do something good or act honestly, they become haughty, look down on others, and even judge those who in their opinion are inferior to them. Through their own blindness, many self-satisfied falsely righteous ones did not ask the Holy Spirit for guidance and strengthening, and consequently, perished. The Holy Spirit always comes to those who ask for enlightenment and help. As a bright ray of sun penetrates the darkness, enhancing the smallest details found within, so does the Holy Spirit, having descended upon people, disclose to them all the weakness and wretchedness of their soul. Enlightened by the Heavenly light, Christians can no longer boast about their good works, because they realize their soul needs healing and complete renewal. This realization makes them more humble, and they begin to repent and decide to live more carefully. They stop relying on themselves and ask God for guidance and help.

7. The Holy Spirit grants true *fervent prayer*. Until they receive the Holy Spirit, people cannot pray in a manner truly pleasing to God because they cannot control their scattered thoughts and feelings. Christians in whom the Holy Spirit resides, however, vividly feel the presence of God; their prayer flows evenly, and they

know how and for what to ask God. In this inspired state, they can beseech God for anything, even the seemingly impossible.

This is a short list of the most needed gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In summary, it is impossible to enter the Kingdom of Heaven or even come close to it without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we should implore the Holy Spirit with all earnestness to come dwell in us and help us, just as He helped the Holy Apostles. In order for the Holy Spirit to be kind toward us, to descend and reside within us, it is important to know what draws Him to us and what pushes Him away.

Jesus Christ said that the Holy Spirit *blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes* (Jn. 3:8). This means that a person cannot force the Holy Spirit to come to him or predict the time when He may decide to do so. You can only feel His touch when this happens. Indeed, the book of Acts states that when the Holy Apostles and other Christians received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it was always unexpectedly. He seldom descends immediately on those beseeching Him but does so when it suits Him, as God, to do so. No one should attempt to foretell when or what gifts, if any, he will receive or to consider himself worthy of His descent! The Grace of the Holy Spirit is a gift of His endless mercy. And gifts by definition are given when it suits the giver, and only those deemed suitable by the giver.

It is the Holy Spirit Himself Who established within the Church the means of distributing His blessings to the faithful: the Holy Mysteries and other liturgical services. Non-Orthodox Christians are sadly mistaken when they assert that they can always, whenever it suits them, receive the Holy Spirit through well-known means (which are unfortunately also used during spiritual seances and pagan mysteries). Those who dare to orchestrate these means will not only remain empty of the divine gifts but also commit a terrible sin against the Holy Spirit.

Anyone who considers asking the Holy Spirit for beneficial gifts must know that these gifts are meant only for those who possess true faith. Indeed, the Lord first of all enlightened the Apostles with the true doctrine and then bestowed upon them the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the Apostles did not bestow beneficial gifts upon newly baptized Christians immediately, but only after a certain period of testing and affirmation in the true faith. That is why the Lord called the Holy Spirit *the Spirit of Truth*, and His Church, the beatified community of the faithful, is called in Scripture *the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim. 3:15).

Therefore, when a Christian, humbly and obediently, has accepted Christ's faith in all its purity, without any corrections or misinterpretations, then the following are the requirements to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Purity of heart and chastity

Humility

Listening to the voice of God

Prayer

Self-denial

Reading the Holy Scriptures

Sacraments of the Church, especially Holy Communion

To receive gifts from the Holy Spirit, you must, first of all, cleanse your heart of sin, self-love, and pride. The Holy Spirit always surrounds us and wishes to fill us, but the evil nesting within us, like a wall, impedes His path. Any sin keeps the Holy Spirit away from us, but carnal impurity and pride are especially offensive to Him. So, if we do not want the Holy Spirit, Whom we received in Baptism, to depart from us, or if we have pushed Him away through our sinful life and now want Him to return, here is what we must do:

1. *Cleanse yourself with repentance and sincere confession.* Then shun all sinful thoughts and wishes. In view of the terrible lewdness of contemporary society, a Christian must protect himself from all that may pollute his soul and keep his flesh from lustfulness. Indeed, our body was designed to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. When a person is clean internally and externally, the Holy Spirit settles within him. In the presence of chastity, the only obstacle for the Holy Spirit is your pride in your righteousness and your regard of His gifts as your just reward. If you have unfortunately defiled yourself, then stop sinning and repent. With a contrite heart regret that you have offended God, your most loving Father, and strive to live with greater vigilance. Then even you will be able to receive the Holy Spirit.

2. One of the surest ways of attracting the Holy Spirit is by *humility*. Even if you are an honest, just, good, and merciful man, in a word, even though you may have achieved much goodness, keep considering yourself as an unworthy servant of God. Indeed, if we examine our good works more closely, we will see that none of them are completely beyond reproach. For example, if we give alms or help someone, how often do we add conceited, regretful, self-interested, judgmental, or other such unkind thoughts to our alms or help. Of course, every good deed always remains good, even when it is imperfect. It can be likened to gold which has value even before it is purified. But as gold becomes more precious when an experienced craftsman purifies and works it, so let us entrust our good deeds to the Heavenly Master that He will make them even more valuable.

Thus, if you wish your good deeds to please God, do not boast about them. You are not the master but only an apprentice. As craftsmanship gives value to gold, so a pure and unselfish Christian love, which stems from the Holy Spirit, gives value to our good deeds. Everything that is done without Christian love, i.e., without the Holy Spirit, is not yet a fully valued good deed. Without the Holy Spirit a person remains poor and pitiful.

But humility consists not only of realizing your unworthiness but also of bearing the various sorrows and adversities of life with *patience* and without grumbling, considering them as sent or allowed by God for our benefit. Do not say, "How unfortunate I am!" But say, "I deserve a still greater punishment for my sins!" And ask God not so much to deliver you from adversities as to give you patience and courage to bear them.

3. The Holy Spirit can also be received by listening attentively to *the voice of God*. God speaks to us by means of the internal voice of our conscience and through external circumstances. It is very important to develop sensitivity in order to hear more clearly what God suggests to us. He, as a most loving Father, cares for you. Daily He calls you to Himself, warns you and enlightens you. For instance, are you unhappy, has someone offended you, has misfortune befallen you, or are you ill? In these you can hear the voice of God, calling you to repent and improve. In time of sorrow, instead of seeking help from others or consoling yourself by frivolous distractions and amusements, turn to God and seek guidance and help from Him alone.

Or suppose that you are prospering and living well and that everything flows smoothly. Consider this also to be the voice of God. Here God teaches you to be as merciful to those in need as He is merciful to you. It is dangerous and sinful to ignore the voice of God, to remain unrepentant and unimproved during times of hardship, to fail to thank God, or not to help others when you have plenty. Even more ruinous is to do the opposite of that to which God is leading us: to grumble and become embittered in difficult circumstances or to forget God and live only for pleasure in fortunate surroundings. What might then result is that God, after repeated teachings, will turn away from you as from a stubborn child and will abandon you to your own desires. Then passions will easily overcome you, your intellect and conscience will become dulled, and you might reach a point at which you will justify even your vilest crimes as natural and common human weakness. In order to avoid such a fall, it is necessary to become sensitive to the voice of God in the Holy Spirit and to follow His admonitions.

4. The Holy Spirit can be received through *prayer*. Prayer is the simplest, surest, and most available means to receive the Holy Spirit. Because we are composed of body and soul, they both should participate in prayer. The primary elements of prayer are *concentration and sincerity*, which are attained by inner effort.

Nevertheless, the body should not remain uninvolved; it can and must assist the soul in prayer by standing in reverence, making prostrations, making the sign of the cross, raising the hands, and reading the prayers aloud. Other favorable external conditions also help in prayer: solitude, silence, icons with burning lampadas before them, incense, and when in church, church art and architecture along with soft and harmonious singing, beautiful ceremonies, etc.

But to achieve concentration and warmth during prayer is not easy. Here, first of all, it is important to establish a regular time for prayer (for instance, mornings and evenings), and to develop stability and patience. You should constantly overcome haste, distraction, indifference and insincerity. In addition, you must strive to warm your heart with love for God. Only a sincere prayer brings comfort and peace to the heart. Much effort is necessary in order to learn to pray properly, and, as we well know, all the righteous ones strove throughout their lives to learn the art of prayer. Nevertheless, your personal effort is not enough. It is the Holy Spirit who makes our prayer to be fervent and to come from the bottom of our heart. This was well known to the saints who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, stood day and night in prayer in sweet rapture, failing the while to notice the time fleeting away.

Pray even though at first your prayer may be weak and imperfect because of your sinfulness and estrangement from God. Pray with diligence and fervor; train yourself to be sincere in your conversation with God. Thus, little by little you will learn to pray and will start to feel a sweet comfort. The Holy Spirit will have mercy on you and will come and reside in you if you show faithfulness in your efforts at prayer.

The Holy Scripture teaches: *Pray without ceasing* (1 Thess. 5:17). How is this possible for people living in a secular world? If you are to pray all the time, how then are you to perform your other duties? The advice of perpetual prayer is directed not toward outward but toward inner prayer. If desired, you can turn to God internally whether you are alone or with others. Only he who does not want to pray will not find time for prayer.

5. Fasting and works of mercy aid prayer. The Fathers of the Church recommend: *If you want your prayer to fly up to God, then give it two wings, fasting and almsgiving.*

What is fasting and why is it necessary? *Fasting* is a voluntary self-restriction in food, drink, and pleasure. The purpose of fasting is to quiet or calm and lighten the body and to make it obedient to the soul. Overfilled flesh demands comfort and rest, disposing us to laziness, which hinders prayer and meditation. In the manner of an unbridled servant, the well-fed body rises up against its master, the soul, and wants to rule over it. While fasting, you should limit not only the type of

food (dairy and meat products) but also its amount, restricting yourself to the minimal needs of the body. Then your fasting will become useful.

While fasting outwardly you should also fast *internally*, restraining your tongue from sinful, idle chatter and moderating your desires and your anger while driving off unkind thoughts and impure fantasies. Experience shows that there is nothing harder than to stop the wandering of thoughts and to direct your mind to thoughts of God and prayer. This may be likened to the taming of wild horses who have long been stubborn and unruly.

Non-spiritual people do not even suspect how difficult it is to control the wandering of thoughts. Being occupied with worldly affairs, they consider their thoughts to be busy with worthwhile concerns. Only when they begin to strive toward a spiritual life and try to reflect on spiritual topics, do they begin to notice that their thoughts are murky. This is somewhat like the waters of a shallow lake. As long as its surface remains undisturbed, it looks clear; but when it is stirred, the silt from its bottom darkens the water, making it appear murky. Likewise, in the depths of our heart there lay various passions. Like silt, they rise and darken the soul when a Christian attempts to expose and struggle with them. As the Holy Fathers have explained, when people turn to God, the devil strives to darken their soul with bad thoughts and feelings in order to confuse them and distract them from their good intentions. But do not yield to his snares, and do not stray from the path of salvation. Remember that no one can simultaneously think about two subjects. If you occupy your mind with good thoughts (reading spiritual books or studying some worthwhile subject), the bad ones will not be able to linger in your mind.

Love reveals itself in *works of mercy*. Among such works are to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit and help the sick and the imprisoned, to give refuge to the homeless, and to be concerned about orphans. All this should be done with sincere and unselfish love, without any boasting or expectations of gratitude. The Savior teaches regarding this: *Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly* (Matt. 6:3-4).

6. The Holy Spirit may be received by piously *reading and listening to the Holy Scriptures*. Being the Word of God, they hold a great treasury of spiritual enlightenment and wisdom. The Holy Scriptures are one of God's greatest blessings, which can be used by anyone wishing to do so. In them, the divine wisdom is presented in such an easy, approachable manner that even the simplest and most uneducated person can understand it. Many cases are recorded throughout Church history and in the lives of the saints, in which the simplest of people, while studying Holy Scripture, were enlightened, became pious, and

received abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit even while some scholars and intelligentsia read the Holy Scripture and became confused and fell into heresy. The difference was that while the first read it with simplicity of heart, seeking in it spiritual direction, the second approached it with criticism, attempting to uncover inconsistencies. Considering themselves wise and all-knowing, these last succumbed to pride and even became false teachers. Be aware that our small and imperfect intellect cannot encompass God's wisdom. God enlightens those who with a pure and kind heart turn to Him in search of enlightenment. Therefore, in reading the Holy Scriptures, lay aside all worldly wisdom and inquisitiveness. Submit to the word and the will of Him who speaks to you through Holy Scripture, and beseech Jesus Christ to enlighten you and show you the path to salvation.

There are many other books besides Holy Scripture that are beneficial for reading: the works of the Holy Fathers, the lives of the saints, inspirational stories, sermons, and other praiseworthy writings of Orthodox authors. From the books available to you, read those that are based on Holy Scripture and are in accord with the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Beware of those poisoned by heresies and non-Christian ideas.

7. Communion is another source for receiving the Holy Spirit. Regarding it, Jesus Christ said: *He who eats my flesh and drinks My blood, abides in Me, and I in him. (He) has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (Jn. 6:54-56).* When Christians partake of Holy Communion they unite inexplicably with Jesus Christ and start partaking of His divine life. Therefore, you must go to Communion with faith, having cleansed your soul by repentance, with a realization of your unworthiness, and with the hope of God's mercy. Since God is one and indivisible, when Christians accept Jesus Christ into their heart, they accept the Holy Spirit and the Heavenly Father at the same time and thus become a living temple of God.

As witnessed in the Acts of the Apostles and other ancient Christian writings, the faithful of the first centuries took Communion every Sunday, which then was called the Lord's day. Undoubtedly, because of this constant communion with Jesus Christ, they were as "*of one heart and one soul*" (Acts 4:32). My God, what a difference there is between them and us. How many among us seldom partake of Holy Communion, sometimes avoiding it for years!

Those who neglect to take Holy Communion do not love Jesus Christ and will not receive the Holy Spirit, and consequently will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. So, for the sake of your salvation, partake of Communion as often as possible. The Body and Blood of Christ is a true cure for many spiritual and bodily infirmities. And who among us is perfectly healthy? Who would not want to receive helpful relief? The Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is the nourishment which sustains us on the path to the Kingdom of Heaven. Is it possible to complete a

long and difficult journey without sustenance? The Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is the holiness bestowed on us by Jesus Christ Himself for our sanctification. Who would refuse to be a partaker of such holiness? Therefore, do not be lazy in stepping up to the Chalice of Life, but approach it with faith and fear of God.

In summary, these are the means of receiving the Holy Spirit: purity of heart, chastity, humility, listening to the voice of God, prayer accompanied by fasting and charity, reading Holy Scripture, meditation, and partaking of Holy Communion. Of course, each of these individually is effective for receiving the Holy Spirit, but it is best to resort to all of them for our salvation.

To this it is necessary to add that if we somehow fall into sin and thereby distance ourselves from the Holy Spirit, we should not despair and think that we have irrevocably lost all blessings, but let us quickly prostrate ourselves before God with deep repentance and prayer, and the All-merciful Holy Spirit will again return to us.

Conclusion

Without faith in Jesus Christ no one can return to God and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. No one, even though he believe in Jesus Christ, can regard himself to be His disciple and share His glory in Heaven if he does not act as Jesus Christ did. And no one is able to follow Jesus Christ if he does not receive help from the Holy Spirit.

To receive the Holy Spirit, we must use the means granted us by God.

We should remember that the path into the Kingdom of Heaven that has been opened to us by Jesus Christ is the only one, and there never was and never will be another path that leads to salvation. At times this path may appear difficult, but, again, you should remind yourself that this is the only one that leads toward your objective. At other times the Christian will encounter such consolations and delights on this path as cannot be found in any worldly thing. The Lord Jesus Christ assists us on this path. He gives us the Holy Spirit, He sends His angel to protect us, He provides instructors and leaders, and even He Himself takes us by the hand and leads us to salvation.

If the path into the Kingdom of Heaven seems difficult, then consider how incomparably more dreadful are the eternal torments in fiery Gehenna. If the path toward heavenly bliss seems difficult, compare it with the path toward earthly happiness, and you will see that the path toward earthly happiness is not really easier at all. Just observe how much people toil to amass earthly things, how many disappointments, fights, sleepless nights and deprivations they bear. Or remind yourself of how much effort and expenses it takes to achieve some

meaningless and fleeting pleasure! And for what? Instead of the expected happiness, you are left with disappointment and weariness. When you carefully examine the heart of the matter, it becomes evident that people stay away from the Heavenly Kingdom not because the path to it is more difficult than the other paths of this world, but because it appears that way to them. Besides, the devil, an experienced and crafty deceiver, misleads people into believing that the path to salvation is difficult and the paths to perdition are easy, and he often succeeds in this.

So, my brethren, in order to avoid eternal perdition, let us definitely concern ourselves with our future. We know that beyond the grave there awaits one of the following two outcomes: either the Heavenly Kingdom or everlasting perdition in hell. There is no middle state, only everlasting bliss or everlasting torment. As there exist only two conditions past the grave, so there exist only two paths in this life. The one that seems wide and easy is taken by the majority. The other that seems narrow and thorny is taken by few. Those who follow the narrow path will be a hundredfold more happy than those who do not.

Brethren, if any of you who walk the wide path should suddenly die, what will happen to you? To whom shall you turn? To the Lord? You refuse to listen to Him now, so you must expect He will refuse to listen to you then. Now He is your merciful Father; then He will be your righteous judge. Who will defend you against His righteous rage? Ah! How frightful it is to fall into the hands of the living God! Therefore, concern yourselves now with the salvation of your soul while you still have time!

Work for your salvation while it is still daylight, for the night will come in which there will be no chance to change anything. Strive for the Heavenly Kingdom while you can still walk. Walk even a little bit, even if by crawling, but do it in the right direction. Then in eternity you will truly rejoice for every step you have taken!

May the All-merciful Lord help us all in this! Glory and thanksgiving be to Him throughout the ages of ages. Amen.