



EDIFICATION AND CONSOLATION

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men for edification and exhortation and consolation”
(I Corinthians 14:3)

Simple Catechism From the Experience of the Orthodox Church

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✠ CONTENTS ✠

- **Text 1:** St. Neilos the Kalavros (910-1004)
The Wise Teacher and Pedagogue
- **Text 2:** An extraordinary way of reading the New Testament
The Astonishing Story of an Unknown Saint of our Times
- **Text 3:** Reflections by an Orthodox Christian teacher
Our Joyous Response to God’s Blessings
- **Text 4:** Prayer without patience and love
The Nun Anastasia and the Novice Vera
- **Text 5:** The Therapeutic Method of the Holy Fathers
The jealousy of Grushatka and lack of patience when slandered
- **Text 6:** A Wondrous Revelation
The Careless Word of a Simple-Minded Monk
- **Text 7:**
Let us Prepare Ourselves for the Feast of the Saints
- **Text 8:**
A Little Sensitivity, A Little Kindness...
- **Text 9:**
The Demons Recall Our Unconfessed Sins



St. Neilos the Kalavros (910-1004)

The Wise Teacher and Pedagogue*

“He would apply a poultice corresponding to the passion”

Light and salt: such did St. Neilos endeavor to render not only himself, but also his disciples, hearkening to the words of our Savior: “You are the light of the world” and “the salt of the earth.”

Frequently, that is, when he would find aphorisms, proverbs, or troparia from the Church services regarding the correction of morals, he would call together the Brotherhood and distribute them as a sort of spiritual legacy to be learned by heart.

He would give the difficult ones to those who were capable of them, whereas the simpler brethren would receive easier ones. To each he would apply a didactic poultice corresponding to the passion by which he was overcome.

For example, if someone was gluttonous, the Elder would give him a text regarding self-restraint; if he was lustful, regarding chastity; if he was vainglorious, regarding humility; if he was prone to much talking and arguing, he would be given the Epistle of the Holy Apostle James.

If, however, someone was slow at learning and found it difficult to memorize, the Saint would write the passage on a piece of paper and hang it around his neck or arm until he learned it by heart.

In this way, the thrice-blessed one would make the mute to speak, the deaf to hear, and the blind to see; he transformed the unsophisticated into theologians and former herders of animals into teachers of men.

There were many that he delivered from fierce demons, but even more from unclean passions and improper habits; and the last is greater than the first.

(*) *St. Neilos the Kalavros* [in Greek], 2nd ed. (Ormylia: Hierou Koinoviu Evangelismou tes Theotokou, 2002) p. 359.

■ An extraordinary way of reading the New Testament

The Astonishing Story of an Unknown Saint of Our Times* The Blind Aspasia



In a small town in northern Greece there lived a blind girl named Aspasia.

She was an orphan, destitute, and abandoned by all, which is why she grew up without an opportunity to learn to read.

When she was around 18-20 years old, an itinerant preacher from the Metropolis of Peripheria noticed her, took her with him, and placed her in a school for the blind in Thessalonica, where she was taught braille. When she had learned to read well, the preacher gave her a copy of the New Testament written in braille.

The girl thus began to read it with her fingers, and the more she read, the more she learned who Christ was and what He did for her personally and for the entire world. And the more she learned, the more her turbulent heart grew calm and peaceful.

Not only was the pain of so many years of suffering assuaged by Aspasia's reading of the New Testament, but she also came to be filled with gladness and peace. She was overflowing with happiness. "I have found joy," she would say. "Now that the eyes of my soul have opened, I do not mind that I am lacking bodily vision. With the eyes of my soul, I can see the entire world."

She beheld the Light of God at every Divine Liturgy and rejoiced.

* * *

It so happened, however, that she was struck by a terrible dermatological disease that also affected her hands, with the result that her fingers lost their sense of touch. She could no longer read the Holy Scriptures or any other holy book using her fingers.

Her grief and pain were indescribable. She wept night and day. She had lost the ability to receive strength and joy from the Holy Bible. What did remain to her, however, was the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

She prayed a great deal that our Lord Jesus Christ might grant a solution.

And God answered....

One day, Aspasia took up the New Testament with great devotion and brought it to her mouth to kiss the words which transmit to us the wisdom of God, redemption, and salvation.

That was when she discovered something extraordinary: she could read the braille with her lips! Aspasia's life once again filled with joy from reading the word of God. And by means of this remarkable way of reading, there followed glorification, thanksgiving, and fervent prayer!

She would read and then pray with tears for all those who had physical disabilities and illnesses, and especially for those who were blind in soul from sin.

By means of prayer, she beheld the Throne of God, and beseeched Him and supplicated on behalf of the poor, the orphans, the unemployed, the homeless, and all of the infirm. For the good and for the bad, for the simple and for the deceitful, for the just and for the wronged, but also for all those who wrong others, for the rulers and those who are ruled, she prayed that they be enlightened and that they all might see the true Light, Christ, the Savior of the world!

* * *

At one point, Aspasia fell gravely ill. She confessed a final time and communed of the Immaculate Mysteries. She asked for the New Testament and told them to hold it open for her so that she could touch it with her lips.

Aspasia stretched out her hands and held the book firmly, despite her exhaustion. By Divine Providence, those close to her had opened it to the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John.

Repeating again and again the words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," Aspasia gave up the spirit and her soul flew to Heaven, as the room filled with an inefably sweet fragrance!



She is counted among the unknown Saints!

(*) Protopresbyter Stephen K. Anagnosopoulos, *Steps in the Christian Journey* [in Greek] (Piraeus: 2011), pp. 68-69.

Our Joyous Response to God's Blessings*

Reflections on thanksgiving
by an Orthodox Christian
teacher in the USA



As a high school teacher, I have been very blessed to develop trusting relationships with some students.

One of my students, a devout Christian who is very open about her faith, once asked me, “how do you keep God in your everyday life?”

I thought about the times in which I was most aware of Him and found that it was when I was simply saying “thank you.”

Thanking God for the simple things reminded me of a book I was lead to read, *The Ascetic of Love*, which emphasized the importance of thanksgiving as a sense of joy in the Lord:

“When we become truly conscious of the gifts of God, we no longer have the time to ask for anything. We keep going and saying Thank You... Thank You... Thank You... We see a person... Thank You... We see a flower... Thank You... We see a glass of milk... Thank You... Thank You... for everything! And such a joy enters into our life that many, even of those that are close to us, cannot understand what this all is. When I lived in England sometimes people asked: ‘What’s up? Why are you so happy?’ ‘Because I am alive and I see you!’”

Likewise, Matushka Juliana Schmemmann said something similar in her lecture “A Joy to Serve,” posted on Ancient Faith Radio:

“Empty yourselves and be grateful just for being alive, for a morning, a day, or sunshine for solitude. One can always find something to be grateful for, even troubles, tribulations and suffering because they teach you to be strong, forgiving and full of light.”

When we take the time to give thanks, we become aware that nothing comes from us.

* * *

My student’s question led me to further reflection on a period in my life when I was very “me focused.”

I have always been a busy person, occupying myself with all things that interested me, from teaching to taking college master courses, to coaching extracurricular activities, to

working with youth outside of school through church, through having a husband, etc. There was a point in my life when I was doing all these things and I became so worked up about things when they did not go my way or there was trouble along the way. I did not realize it at the time, but I wasn’t giving God credit for anything. I was constantly relying on myself, which brought about a great deal of anxiety and worry.

It wasn’t until a quiet drive home from a day of teaching that God let me know that something was missing in my life and I realized it was Him. Yes, I went to church and yes, I said my prayers, but I realized that amidst my actions, I wasn’t allowing Him to actually work in my life. I realized my egotistical ways and my sin of pride.

I realized that I needed to hand things over to God and not do things for myself anymore. Without giving thanks for all things we end up trapped in a spirit of pride and we forget where all things come from, good and bad.

I started to take baby steps, praying before and after tasks, thanking God for allowing me opportunities and abilities. I began to recognize that I am nothing and that God is everything. He does not need me, but I need Him.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza says:

“One who prays unceasingly, even if he is capable of achieving something, knows with Whose strength he achieves it. Therefore, he cannot become prideful or attribute it to his own strength, but attributes to God every achievement, always thanking and beseeching Him...” (Instruction 2:38).

* * *

“I’m not so good at this, but I believe it is when I thank Him for even the little things life brings,” was my reply to the student. So you see, even my student asking that question was not an accident! It helped me to realize the meaningfulness of thanksgiving – to put together these moments in my life to find the deeper meaning – that in order to truly experience a sense of joy in our Lord, to praise God and be (re-)united with God; we need to give thanks for everything and to always give everything up to Him!



(*) wonder.oca.org/2012/11/21/our-joyous-response-to-gods-blessings-2/. Publication layout ours.

Prayer without patience and love

The Virtuous Nun Anastasia
and the Foibles of the Novice Vera*

Abbess Seraphima loved Anastasia (1809-1874). She respected her for her ascetic life and for the help in prayer she gave to those who turned to her in need. Thus, she willingly granted her a cell-attendant, the novice Vera, who was hunch-

backed.

It turned out, however, that Vera was very self-willed and obstinate. She tried to do things not as they should be done or as Anastasia asked her. Sometimes she acted in a way that was completely shameless.

Anastasia herself, who was experienced in surpassing the difficulties of solitary life and in escaping the snares of the invisible enemies, frequently fell into temptation.

Her lips uttered a bitter prayer to God against the stubborn Vera. She asked the Lord to enlighten Vera and to free her from her impudence and brazenness. She even asked Him to deliver her from this novice.

As Anastasia was a newcomer at the convent, she did not have the boldness to ask the Abbess to send Vera away from her or even to make a complaint against her.

* * *

Once, when she was praying about this matter, the Archangel Michael appeared before her. He held a fiery sword and said to her in a threatening tone:

"Is this the way people pray to the God of love and peace?" Anastasia, seized by agita-

tion and fright, could only utter with great difficulty:

"Batiushka, Archangel Michael, I will not do it again. Have mercy!"

Then she saw him going away from her, chanting:

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...."

Anastasia fell unconscious and became so gravely ill that it seemed very difficult for her to recover.

As soon as Parasceva Kotova found out that Anastasia was sick, she ran to her side.

Arriving in the evening, she stopped in the doorway of her cell. From where she was standing, she could clearly see the ailing nun.

Nuns were surrounding her, including the Abbess. When Anastasia saw Parasceva, she motioned her to approach and, at her request, Parasceva spent the night at her side.

When they were alone in the cell, Anastasia told her about her sinful prayer and the apparition of the Archangel Michael. Vera's last misdeed, which caused her to make such a prayer, was the following:



The Staretz, however, had said those words to test her humility.

"Look, finally someone has come to visit me, isn't that what you said? But now I will tell you something about her, and then you won't call her 'someone' and you won't be glad when she comes!"

And Grushatka began telling him: "Once, on a Feast Day, I was at the Danislov Monastery. There were a lot of people there, but I saw your 'someone' receiving Holy Communion in the main Church, while I went to the side chapel. So I saw how she went in and took Holy Communion both



Vera had entered the cell holding a wooden basin. She wanted to wash her clothes under the Icon corner, where Anastasia usually prayed. That was the cause of her distress.

Only Parasceva and Schema-nun Maria were aware of this event. The novice Vera, through whom Anastasia had almost been deprived of God's favor, was taken away by Parasceva to the province of Tomsk.

* * *

Anastasia recovered; however, she felt great contrition for her sin. For this reason, according to Parasceva's testimony, she increased her prayers and fasting. She began to pray especially to the Queen of Heaven, the Most Holy Mother of God. From her early childhood, she had been accustomed to turn to Her at every difficult occasion. And now she entreated and besought Her to grant her, through a divine sign, the assurance of the remission of her sin.

Her humble and fervent prayer was heard. During an All-Night Vigil, she suddenly saw before her an unusual light. Looking up, she saw the Mother of God standing in the air, in a prayerful position. Her hands were outstretched, as She is depicted in the Icon of the Protection, but she was not holding an omophorion.



here and there. Yes, it is so! She communed in the main Church and in both the side chapels on the right and on the left! So you see, that's the kind of person she is!"

"Why are you saying such preposterous things,

Grushatka? What's got into you? Don't you understand that everything you are saying is untrue?" asked the insulted visitor, looking at the Elder and expecting him to chastise Grushatka.

The Staretz, however, remained silent. Finally,

"Oh, Matushka, Queen of Heaven!" Anastasia cried out spontaneously, in the simplicity of her heart.



"What is it, Matushka?"

the nuns asked, running up to her.

"It is nothing. I dozed off," she replied.

The vision ended, and after this Anastasia was at peace. She recounted the vision only to Parasceva and earnestly begged her not to reveal it to anyone.

Parasceva only agreed to tell it to me when I explained to her that after Anastasia's repose this pledge was no longer in force. After someone's death one may reveal what God deemed that person worthy to see, since this serves for the glory of God.



A daguerreotype of Anastasia from the time that she was living in Siberia.

(* Translated from the Greek. See also "Blessed Athanasia" (as she was renamed in the Great Schema), by Father Alexander Priklonsky (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood: 1980), pp. 50-52.

Grushatka went into the kitchen and then the Staretz spoke:

"Now then, what kind of a spiritual child are you of mine? You could not put up with even one small slander and you had to begin justifying yourself? Grushatka is coming back from the kitchen. Make a prostration before her and ask her forgiveness."

The slandered woman immediately did as the Staretz instructed her.

(* Staretz Zacharias [in Greek], 2nd ed. (Ormylia: Hierou Koinoviu Evangelismou tes Theotokou, 2002), pp. 134-135.

The Therapeutic Method
of the Holy Fathers*The jealousy of Grushatka and
lack of patience when slandered

Once, the spiritual daughter of Staretz Zacharias (1850-1936), who wrote his biography, arrived at the house where he was living.

"Look," exclaimed the Staretz with pleasure, "finally someone has come to visit me!"

These words irritated his cell attendant, Grushatka: "What are you saying, Father? Do you mean that all of us here are not 'someone'?"

■ A wondrous revelation

**The Careless Word of a Simple-Minded Monk Who Received Pedagogical Punishment from God*
Hell and Paradise**



In the infirmary for elderly monks at the Athonite Monastery of St. Paul, there was a certain attendant named Father Gregorios, who was rather simple-

minded, but very good-hearted.

Around forty years ago, he himself told me how, when he was working there, a brother once gave him a cluster of grapes as a blessing. In his kindness, Father Gregorios did not eat them himself, but rather divided them into small bunches, which he distributed to the elderly monks. One thoughtful old monk kept thanking him by wishing him “May the Lord grant you Paradise!” since it was the first grapes he tasted that season, the ones on the vines not having ripened yet.

The attendant monk, in his simplicity, responded jokingly:

“Eat up, blessed one! Paradise and hell are here and now.”

Even though he did not actually believe that [there is no future life] — he meant it as a joke and could be excused owing to his simple-mindedness — what happened next?

That night he had a terrifying dream, though he felt that he was awake. He found himself in front of a sea of fire, on the other side of which was a beautiful gulf with crystal palaces. On the shore of the splendid gulf stood a venerable Elder, who was altogether radiant; even his beard looked like silk. Father Gregorios also recognized one of the monastery’s brothers there, who had reposed three years earlier, and he asked him what the palaces were, since they were so striking, and who the venerable Elder was.

The brother replied: “He is Father Abraham, and this beautiful gulf [“kolpos” in Greek] is the ‘bosom [also “kolpos” in Greek] of Abraham,’ where the souls of the righteous rest.

As the brother was saying this, the Righteous Abraham turned with a stern gaze on Father Gregorios and said:

“As for you, leave at once! You have no place here!”

At the rebuke of the Patriarch Abraham, as Father Gregorios turned around quickly to leave, he felt the flame of the fiery sea take hold of him, and he woke up from the pain of it.

And what do you think he saw! The leg which had been burned was covered with blisters and burns and hurt for twenty days, until his wounds were healed with balms and medicinal herbs.

He sincerely repented of his careless joke and was very careful how he expressed himself after that.

(*) Elder Paisios the Athonite, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters* (Souroti, Thessalonica: Hesychasterion of St. John the Theologian, 1998), pp. 124-125. • Translated here from the original Greek.

Let us Prepare Ourselves for the Feast of the Saints*

The Gospel reading today says: “Go and compel them to come in, that My house may be filled,” that they take their places in Heaven.

New Saints will continually appear, and we must attach ourselves to them, that we might attain a better place in Heaven.

The Fathers of the Church tell us something very important. God provides to man, says Maximos the Confessor, the power “**to transfer all the Saints to himself,**” that is, **the ability to bear all the Saints of the Church upon himself.**

We are able, then, to take upon ourselves all of the Saints. But how?

By imitating their way of life. Whatever they did, let us also do.

Let us prepare ourselves for the feast of the Saints. No one here should be excluded. Each one of us, as we say again and again, can have a place there on high.

But Elder, you will tell me, times have changed. No, times have not changed; life has always been like that. We must simply have the mem-



■ “My conscience gave me no peace...”

A Little Sensitivity, A Little Kindness...*

At a long-distance bus station in Greece

“Lady, I’m hungry. Give me something to eat!”

Arete looked him up and down. Standing before her was a young boy with a clean face.

“Where do you live, my boy?” she asked him. “Why aren’t you at school this time of day?”

“I snuck out of school with some friends, but then they ditched me,” he said glumly.

The woman was not satisfied with the answer and continued:

“Where are your parents? Do you have parents?”

“Yes, I do. They’re both out of work. We’re hungry. Will you buy me something?”

Arete stopped short. She often gave alms and donated substantial sums of money to her parish’s charity, but she was not in the habit of giving handouts on the street. But somehow this boy caught her interest; his gaze was so sincere.

She searched her pockets—she usually had some small change on her. Finding a 2 euro coin, she offered it to him.

“Here, take this, it’s all I have just now.”

“I don’t want money,” said the boy, pulling back. “Could you buy me something to eat?”

She agreed and they went together to a kiosk.

“What would you like? Go ahead and choose,” she told him.

He took a sandwich with the two euros, thanked her, and walked off.

Arete boarded the bus for her journey. Before she had even settled in her seat, she suddenly saw a hand stretched out in front of her. It was the hand of a stranger, who spoke to her shyly.

“Please, ma’am, take this.”

It was someone offering her two euros!

She was bewildered....

“I saw you give that boy something to eat,” he timidly began explaining. “He had asked me for something before approaching you, and I didn’t give him anything. But then my conscience gave me no peace. So I was glad when I saw you give him something. Please take this, then, so that I can participate in your good deed.”

Arete was at a loss. She started to mumble something about the sandwich only costing two euros—that they could at least split the cost. In her haste to set down her things, though, and faced with the other’s insistence, she mechanically put out her hand and took the two euros. She didn’t even understand herself what she was doing.

She turned around to take a look at the person, but it was too late. He had already left the bus, which at that moment began moving.

Who was that person?

She did not know. She only knew that her soul filled with joy. Joy, because there is such sensitivity hidden around us, such courtesy, such humaneness.



(*) “Towards Victory,” [a Greek-language magazine] No. 767 (January 2014), pp. 8-9.

ory of Christ and of the Saints alive in our hearts.

* * *

Once, Elder Philotheos Zervakos of Paros, a holy man, told me with tears in his eyes about a vision he had been granted.

He was in anguish because something was happening in Greek society, and he would say: “How has society come to such ruin? It is all over; society is perishing...”

In despair, he raised his eyes, and what did he see? Innumerable hosts of Saints, whole legions of them—there was no beginning or end to them—with the Panagia in the lead, her hands raised in supplication to Christ, as she said:

“These here are mine. I beseech You, save those who are below.”

Christ then said to her: “But they are living in sin.”

The Panagia replied: “Yes, they are sinning, but insofar as they have Your mercy and they have me, their Mother, it is not possible for You to allow them to be lost.”

“Very well, Mother, I will save them too.”

And the Elder beheld in a mystical manner the sinners increasing in number and new Saints coming forth.

Let us prepare ourselves, my brothers and sisters. We are made worthy to the extent that we increase our efforts, endure afflictions, and prepare ourselves to be worthy to be counted among the multitudes of the Saints at the Second Coming of Christ.

(*) Transcription of a sermon by Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, *Mystagogical Sermons on the Feasts* [in Greek], (Athens: Indiktos, 2014), pp. 339-340.

The Demons Recall Our Unconfessed Sins*

What happened to Barba-Theodoros and the power of frank confession



Barba-Theodoros [“Barbas” is an endearing term for an elderly man or one who is widely respected—*Trans.*] lived in a village of the Xiromeros municipality in western Greece.

He was around fifty-two years old when this story takes place, and had never been to confession. He did go to Church, however, and was a well-intentioned man.

Once, when he was in the town of Astakos on an errand, he went to the Church of St. Nicholas, found the parish Priest, Father Hierotheos, and asked to see him for confession.

He only made a perfunctory confession, however, leaving out the serious sins. In order to help lead him to repentance, the Priest suggested that he visit the Monastery of St. Gerasimos on the island of Kefallonia, which monastery celebrates its Feast Day on August 16.

Indeed, the ever-memorable Barba-Theodoros went with other pilgrims to the Monastery of St. Gerasimos on August 15.

That afternoon, it is the custom to transfer the reliquary of St. Gerasimos to the large Church for the festal services. At this time, the reliquary, accompanied by the local Hierarch and a multitude of Priests from the island, is passed over the heads of the sick, and especially of those possessed by demons.

So then, Barba-Theodoros was nearby, like Zacchaeus, watching the ceremony of the transfer of the reliquary of the Saint.

Suddenly, a possessed man jumped out and

began to say: “Theodoros, what did *you* come for? Theodoros has come to Kapsali!” (“Kapsali,” or “the one who burns,” is what the demons call St. Gerasimos, since he burns them by Divine Grace.)

Calling out to another possessed man, he said: “Thomas, did you hear? Theodoros came to Kapsali! Let him have it!”

They then began to shout out the deadly sins that Theodoros had committed and not confessed, to his great mortification.

Hearing all of this, Barba-Theodoros ran in terror before the reliquary and, addressing the ever-memorable Bishop Hierotheos, said: “I’m going out of my mind! I want to confess to a Priest right away!”

The Bishop halted the procession, received Barba-Theodoros with affection, and instructed one of the Priests to hear his confession privately in the small chapel, while the procession continued.

After that, the possessed men could say nothing more to him, since his sins had been wiped away by a good confession.

* * *

The above was narrated by Barba-Theodoros himself, who thenceforth radically changed his way of life, living in constant repentance and keeping the commandments of Christ with fear of God. He reached the age of ninety-five and reposed in peace and repentance on April 23, 2000.



May his memory be eternal! Amen!

(*) *Ascetics in the World, Vol. I, The Holy Mountain* [in Greek] (Hierou Hesychasteriou Ioannes o Prodromos: *Metamorphose*, Chalkidike, 2008), pp. 328-329.

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