

Instructions of the Holy Fathers on Spiritual Life

Part I

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Introduction

This booklet appears as the first in a series of collections, from which we intend to publish the selected instructions of Orthodox ascetic fathers concerning Christian living. In compiling this first collection, the following books were used: Five tome collection of "Philokalia" (edited by Theophan the Recluse); "The Ladder" of Blessed John, Abbot of the Sinai hills; "Spiritually Beneficial Instructions" of Abba Dorotheos; "Unseen War" of St. Nikodemus of the Holy Mount; thoughts of Sylian of Athos; "Otechnik" of Bishop Ignatius Branchaninov, and other various ascetic collections. From these works, we have selected those instructions that apply to people living secular lives, and disregarded those sections that are essentially relevant to a monastic or reclusive environment.

Judging by the large number of pre-revolutionary catalogues of publications, the Lives of Saints and their directives were favorite reading to the spiritually disposed Russian individual. Indeed, it is this literature that contains within itself a power of attraction, because it is not a dry and abstract philosophy but reflects a saintly life in a righteous soul. To read about his life or his instructions is like visiting him and drawing upon his treasury of spiritual experiences.

Who are these venerable men — ascetics and how are they unlike other Christians? While the majority of people were content to lead ordinary lives, these were people since ancient times, in Christ's Church, whom He called "*not of the world*" (John 17:14). These righteous individuals dedicated their lives totally to God by isolating themselves away from worldly cares and falsehood, in wastelands, in deep forests, or in some other way shielded themselves from earthly temptations and the presence of outsiders. These were people thirsting for the truth, pining for higher spiritual values and ablaze with love for God, seeing the Kingdom of Heaven as their only motherland. Some of these righteous individuals attained spiritual heights and experienced blessed enlightenment that a majority of people could never see or imagine.

Saint Gregory the Theologian, who got acquainted with the blessed consciousness of hermitical existence, justified his flight into the wilderness — before his parishioners — in the following way:

"Above all else, as though having locked my feelings, I wanted to remove myself from the flesh and the world, convoke within myself, in the absence of extreme need — shun everything worldly, conversing with myself and God, live above the visible and carry within myself images of God that are always pure and not mixed with earthly and deceiving impressions. I wanted to be and continually develop as a genuinely pure mirror of God and divinity, procure light — to a light that is not as clear in brilliance, to reap now the blessings of the Age to come, cohabit with the Angels and while still being on earth, to leave it and be raised to the pinnacle of heights by the Holy Spirit. Those of you who are familiar with this love will understand what I am saying."

The names of the majority of ascetics that shared St. Gregory's aspirations — and their spiritual experiences — remained unknown to the world. However, from time to time and for the benefit of the faithful, God would reveal to the world some of His chosen. This unexpected meeting with one or another of these ascetics left a serene and salutary effect on that person. Sometimes, this acquaintance became the turning point in that person's life, igniting a desire within him to relocate closer to the holy figure so that he could emulate his righteous living.

In this way, around a solitary ascetic, a gradual gathering of people (brotherhood) ensued, eventually forming a hermitage or monastery. Parallel to this, by placing themselves under the spiritual guidance of an experienced *starets*-teacher, the novices of the monastery, as well as pilgrim-visitors, assisted in the consolidation of "*starchestvo*" — the practice where people sought and received spiritual direction from an old, competent and pious monk. Our native history tells us what the salutary influence was on the Russian people from the numerous monasteries, abbeys and retreats that were strewn across the vast expanses of Holy Russia. The Kievo-Pechersk Monastery, Trinity-Sergius Monastery, Valaam Monastery, Solovets Abbey, Optina Retreat and others were centers of moral rehabilitation.

The *startsi*-ascetics rarely wrote expressive sermons, usually keeping them concise. Although as a rule, their preceptorials were responses to specific questions from visitors, to this day they exude a great spiritual power. Being invariably based on the *starets*' own experience, the teachings shed light on the various difficulties that a person will confront on his journey toward God. Teachings of the more authoritative "*startsi*" were often recorded, so that over the passing of some one and a half thousand years, beginning with Blessed Anthony the Great (mid-fourth century), there is an accumulated abundance of indigenous, ascetic holy literature, which enlightens the many facets of Christian living.

With all the diverse epochs, cultures and circumstances through which the lives of the ascetics passed, their teachings are outstanding in their total similitude. This has occurred for two reasons. Firstly, because all humans have the same nature and their common aim is the Kingdom of Heaven, the temptations that they are obliged to battle remain in essence as unchanged as the moral laws established by our Creator.

Secondly, the same Holy Spirit spoke through the holy Fathers as the one Who spoke through the mouths of Prophets and Apostles, and Who through our Savior's promise, will abide in His Church until the end of time. The holy Fathers proclaim the one and the same good news as the Holy Scripture. The distinctiveness of their teachings is made up in their detailed illumination of the various facets of spiritual life, in specific examples and advice. The Holy Scripture lays the foundation for faith and pious living, while the holy Fathers explain the various aspects of such life, give advice on how to discern and surmount the devil's wiles and how to successfully attain righteousness.

Over all the decades of the Christian Church, this unanimity of spirit in matters of self-denial, unity of direction and witness on the achieved objective — by themselves, appear as the strongest, indisputable confirmations of the authenticity of the Orthodox portrayal of the path to salvation. There is a one and only Spirit that resides in the Holy Scripture and the works of holy Fathers of the Church, and everyone that seeks to lead a genuinely Christian life undoubtedly would feel this.

Incidentally, here it must be remembered that a totally different spirit exists in the writings of Western mystics: Thomas A' Kempis, Ignatius Loyola, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross and others. They preached ascetic practices, which were strictly forbidden by our Orthodox Fathers because they led to self-glorification and self-delusion. Peculiarities of self-glorification are: clouded thoughts, wishful thinking, conceit transcending into pride, accepting demons as the Savior and His Angels, stimulating thrills and subtle indulgences. Self-glorification is a heavy and destructive sickness, which can only be cured through God's specific intervention. The meditations and ascetic practices prescribed by Yogism and Buddhism are equally as dangerous.

The twentieth century is a dawning age of the most extravagant cults and the catastrophic impoverishment of the spiritual. The widespread Christian world is becoming increasingly materialistic: the sectarians are increasingly mutilating Christian Teachings and fashioning it to the needs of the flesh. That is why it is becoming increasingly difficult for an Orthodox Christian to find a spiritual and wise "*starets*." However, there is the comforting fact that the teachings of many "*starsi*" have been saved in print and are available to us.

In our modest booklets, we have collected the patristic teachings and arranged them by author in chronological order. There is a short note on the relevant ascetic at the beginning of each chapter. For ease of reference, we have broken up the teachings into three major headings, on: faith, hope and love.

The section on **faith** contains teachings about the redeeming power of our Lord Jesus Christ, God's love and His concern for people, His saving grace, the attributes of genuine faith, our regard toward God: on veneration, fear of God, prayer, thoughts on God and learning God's will.

In the **hope** section, the collected teachings refer to Christian asceticism: about struggles with passions and of the garnering of good works. In particular, this segment contains teachings on zeal, patience, fortitude and steadfastness, on cleansing the conscience, moderation and self-control,

chastity, dissolution, honesty, meekness, repressing anger, malice, on jealousy and an evil tongue, attitude toward sorrows, illnesses and temptations, combating grief and despondency, on accumulating humility and battling unhealthy thoughts. There are also teachings on higher virtues: vigilance, emotions and lamentations, on purity of heart, spiritual serenity, perspicacity and wisdom, and on spiritual enlightenment.

Finally, the third section covering **love** contains selections of teachings about our relationship with God and people, about matters of love: clemency, being non-judgmental, kindness and forgiveness. Sometimes, there are addenda of thoughts by the respective saintly authors in the presentation, dealing with death and the Final Judgement, the wiles of the devil and other concepts.

We trust that the reader will be able to evaluate the spiritual wisdom and experience in the writings of these Orthodox ascetics. Even though the reader may not always realize their advice, he will at least obtain an Orthodox, patristic semblance of thinking, which is so important in this contemporary age, abounding with heretical and anti-Christian teachings. Consequently, it is better to travel a short span on the right course, than to achieve great distance — but in the wrong direction. Apart from that, as Saint Ephraim of Syria taught: "certainly, good thoughts give birth to good deeds."

Instructions of Blessed Anthony the Great

Anthony the Great was born in Egypt in the year 250 (circa) of noble and wealthy parents, who brought him up in the Christian faith. At the age of 18, he lost his parents and was left alone to care for his sister.

Blessed Anthony's withdrawal from the world did not occur suddenly but gradually. Initially, he resided with a pious "*starets*," close to the city, and tried to emulate his lifestyle. He also visited other recluses living on the city outskirts, seeking their advice. Even at this time, because of the voluntary ordeals he undertook, he was celebrated by the people and called "God's friend."

Whereupon he decided to isolate himself further. Having asked the "*starets*" to join him and received a refusal, he bade him farewell and moved into one of the distant caves. Occasionally, one of his friends brought him food. Finally, Saint Anthony moved away completely from inhabited areas, crossed the river Nile and settled in the ruins of a fortification. He brought with him enough bread for 6 months. After this, his friends used to bring him food twice a year, which they passed through the opening in the roof.

It is impossible to imagine what temptations and struggles that this great Saint endured. He suffered from hunger and thirst, cold and heat. However, the most terrifying temptation for the hermit was, by his own admission — in the heart: yearning for the worldly life and distressing thoughts. The enticements and horrors from demons further aggravated these tribulations.

Once, during a fierce struggle with his thoughts, Anthony beseeched: "Lord, I want to be saved but my thoughts are not allowing me this." Suddenly, he beheld a person that looked like him sitting and

working. Then, that person got up and began praying, after which he sat down and continued toiling. "Do this and you will be saved," said the Angel of the Lord.

After Anthony had lived in isolation for 20 years, some of his friends found out his whereabouts and arrived there with the intention of settling near him. After knocking on the door of his cell for some considerable time and unsuccessfully pleading for him to come out from his voluntary isolation, they were ready to force the door open. Suddenly the door opened and Anthony emerged. They were amazed at his physical state — he showed no traces of exhaustion even though he submitted himself to enormous privations. Heavenly tranquillity reigned in his soul, and this was reflected in his face. Serene, reserved, friendly to all, the "*starets*" soon became father and teacher to many. The wilderness became enlivened: dwellings of novices began to appear on the surrounding hills; many people sang, read, fasted, labored and ministered to the poor. Saint Anthony did not give his pupils any specific rules for monastic living. He was concerned only to entrench in them a pious disposition, instill subordination to God's will, rejection of everything earthly and unflagging toil.

Blessed Anthony died at the old age of 106 (in the year 356) and for his deeds of self-denial earned the calling "Great."

Blessed Anthony founded hermitical monasticism. This involved a number of recluses being under the direction of a teacher — "abba," in Jewish meaning "father," and living individually, either in huts or caves, committing themselves to prayer, fasting and labor. When a number of these caves or huts came under the authority of one abba, it was called a cloister.

It must be noted that during the life of Anthony the Great, there was another type of monastic life. The ascetics gathered together into one community, performed compatible tasks according to their individual strength and abilities, shared a common refectory and submitted themselves to the same rules. These communities were called monasteries and the abbots of these congregations became known as archimandrites.

God's Love, Grace, Venerating And Understanding God's Will

1. Through His goodness, God the Father did not spare His Only Son but surrendered Him to deliver us from our sins and iniquities. Because of us, the Son of God humbled Himself, cured us of our spiritual ills and arranged for our salvation from sin. That is why it is essential that we recognize this and constantly bear in mind God's magnificent arrangement — that because of us, God the Word became like us in all respects except in sin. It is worthwhile for everyone to remember this and genuinely endeavor in reality, with God's help, to liberate ourselves from sin.

2. Essentially, the Grace of the Holy Spirit is given to those who enter a commitment of ordeal with all their heart and right from the beginning, have resolved to stand firm and not give in to the enemy in anything. Moreover, in calling them, the Holy Spirit initially makes everything effortless, so as to encourage and comfort those who enter the ordeal of repentance. Later, He shows them all the difficulties of this virtuous path. He teaches them how to bear the difficulties of repentance and ascertains their limits and manner, with respect to both body and soul, until such time as He leads them to complete conversion to God.

3. He who fears God and observes His commandments is a servant of God. But the bondage in which we find ourselves is actually not a bondage, but righteousness that leads to sonship. Our Lord chose the Apostles and entrusted them with preaching the good news of the Gospel. The commandments that they received established a wonderful bondage for us so that we could govern our passions and adorn ourselves with good works. When we get closer to the benediction, our Lord Jesus Christ will tell us just as He said to His disciples: "I already do not call you slaves, but my friends and brothers: because everything that you heard from my Father, I told you."

4. The eye sees the visible while the mind comprehends the invisible. A God-loving mind is the light of the soul. A person who has a God-loving mind has an enlightened heart and can perceive God with the mind.

5. If you approach any task and see there is an absence of God's will, do not attempt it under any circumstances.

Aspiring toward righteousness and assiduity

6. One should not be speaking of the impossibility of leading a virtuous life but of the difficulties involved. It is certainly not attainable for everyone — only those that are pious and have a God-loving mind can enter into a virtuous life. An ordinary mind is a worldly and an inconstant one; it gives birth to good and evil thoughts, it is capricious and prone toward the material while a God-loving mind castigates evil.

7. Those who lead their lives through small and minor ordeals, on the one hand rid themselves of danger, and on the other, have no need for special precautions against it. In conquering the various sinful inclinations, they auspiciously discover the path leading toward God.

8. People who have no congenital disposition toward good should not wring their hands in despair and spurn a God-loving and virtuous life, irrespective of how difficult it may be for them. They should contemplate this and apply their given abilities toward their own welfare — because even though they will not be able to attain the pinnacles of virtue and perfection, they will become either better, or at least not become worse, which by itself is no small benefit for the soul.

Struggles with frailties. Virtues: temperance, meekness and humility.

9. Evil adheres to our nature just as rust does to metal or grime to a body. However, just as a metallurgist did not produce rust nor parents bring about grime on their children, neither did God cause evil. He implanted a conscience and reason into the human being so that he would avoid evil, knowing that it is harmful to him and only leads toward suffering. Be vigilant: in seeing someone successful in power and wealth, do not in any way praise him. But at that moment, imagine death before you and you will never wish for anything bad or earthly.

10. The soul has its own personal passions: pride, hatred, covetousness, anger, despondency and others. When the soul commits itself totally to God, it receives a feeling of genuine contrition and from His generosity, a cleansing of all its passions. At the same time, it is taught not to follow them

as well as to receive the strength to overcome them and conquer its enemies, which unceasingly lay obstacles in its path. If the soul remains firm in its conversion and obedient submission to the Holy Spirit, which teaches repentance, then the merciful Creator would take pity on her because of her labors conducted through hardships and wants — in lengthy fasting, frequent vigilance, in learning God's word and continual prayer, rejection of worldly comforts, in meekness and spiritual humility. If it remains firm in all this, the generous God will deliver her from all temptations and through His mercy, wrest her from the enemies' clutches.

11. The more moderate life a person leads, the calmer he becomes, because he does not fret about many things — about servants and accumulation of material things. If we do get attached to these (earthly things), as a consequence, we expose ourselves to tribulations that lead us to grumbling against God. In this way, the desire for these many things fills us with confusion and we wander in the darkness of a sinful life, not even knowing ourselves.

12. In our conversations there should be no harshness, because normally the qualities of modesty and virtue adorn intelligent people more so than they do a maiden. A God-loving mind is a light that illuminates the soul, just like the sun illuminates the body.

Sagaciousness, experience, Fruits of piety and maturity

13. Ordinarily, people are called wise through the incorrect application of the word. Not those that have studied the utterances and writings of ancient sages are wise, but those that can differentiate between good and evil: they avoid everything that is harmful to the soul and with deep gratitude to God, judiciously cherish everything that is good and beneficial. In all truthfulness, they are the only ones that should be called wise.

14. When there is a calm wind, every seaman can have a high opinion of himself and boast. However, only during a sudden turn in the wind will the skill of an experienced navigator show through.

15. A person leading a pious life will not allow evil to enter his soul. When there is no evil in the soul, it is secure and unscathed. Neither evil demons nor mischance have any authority over these people. God delivers them from evil and they live God-like — protected from harm. He will not treat praise seriously and he will neither defend himself against any denouncement nor be annoyed with the perpetrator.

16. He that is without anger is complete and God-like; he is full of joy and God the Holy Spirit. Just as an unattended fire burns down great forests, anger, if allowed into the heart, will destroy your soul, desecrate your body and evoke many foolish and offensive thoughts. It will arouse in you agitation, covetousness, arguments, hatred and likewise ferocious passions that will weigh you down and inflict great sorrows. Consequently, let us attempt to gather the goodness and naiveté of the Saints so that our Lord Jesus Christ received us and each one of us could exclaim joyfully: *"As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, And set me before Your face forever"* (Psalm 41:12).

17. Just like a body that emerges from a womb prematurely cannot survive, neither can a soul that has not acquired knowledge of God through benevolent living be saved or live in communion with God.

18. Like a body (while its soul still resides in it) passes through three periods, specifically: adolescence, mature then old age, so does the soul pass through 3 periods i.e.: beginning of faith, progressing in it and then completeness. In the first period the soul begins to believe — as the Gospel says — it is born in Christ. The Apostle John gives us signs of this new birth, applicable to all three periods: "I write to you, little children...I write to you, fathers...I write to you, young men..." (1 John. 2:12-14). He wrote this not to his physical friends but to the faithful, revealing the three situations passed by those that strive toward the spiritual realm, so as to attain completeness and be worthy of total blessedness.

19. When sin ceases to dominate a person, God appears to the soul and cleanses it together with the body. If sin continues to control the body, that person is incapable of seeing God: because the soul is still located in a sinful body that does not allow the vision of God — Who is light — to enter it. David declares: "In Your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9). What kind of light is it that a person can see light in it? It is that light about which our Lord Jesus Christ mentions in the Gospel, that the whole person should be full of light so that there should not be any dark areas in him (Luke 11:36). Our Lord also said: "and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal to Him" (Mat. 11:27). The Son does not reveal His Father to the sons of darkness, but only to those who dwell in the light and are sons of the light, whose inner eyes have been enlightened by Him with the knowledge of the commandments.

Reflections on death and on demons' traps

20. Death, to people that understand it, is immortality, while to simpletons that do not understand it, is death. One should not be afraid of physical death but the destruction of the soul, which comes about from not seeing God — this is a terrifying thing for the soul! Life is the attachment of soul and body: and death is the rupture in their association and not the disappearance of those aspects of human nature. God preserves all this after their separation. Just like a baby emerges from its mother's womb, so does the soul emerge naked from its body. It happens that one might be clean and bright, another stained with its failings, while another black from its many sins. That is why a clever and God-loving soul, in reminding itself and discoursing about the woes after death, lives piously so as not to be condemned and be inflicted with them. But through their foolhardiness, the non-believers do not realize this and sin; not thinking about what awaits them over there. Just as one having emerged from the womb doesn't remember being there, so the soul leaving the body does not remember being there. Just as having emerged from the womb you become advanced and bigger in body, so will you traverse into Heaven advanced and incorruptible if you emerge pure from your body. Knowing beforehand that death awaits them, mortals should be concerned about their salvation. Because a holy death is the lot that occurs to a blessed soul that dwells in goodness, a soul that becomes evil will meet eternal death. Remember that your youthfulness has passed, your strength has been exhausted while your weaknesses have grown, and the time of your departure is near at hand when you will have to give account of all your deeds. Also know that there, a brother will not be able to redeem his brother or a father deliver his son. Always think of the departure from the body, bearing in mind the eternal condemnation. If you will maintain this frame of mind, you will never sin.

21. What a great number of demons there are and how multitudinous are their traps! Even after we have repented and attempt to avoid evil acts, they do not leave us alone but continue to tempt us with despairing effort, knowing their destiny has been conclusively determined and because of their

extreme wickedness and rejection of God, that their inheritance is hell. May the Lord open your inner eyes so that you may see the many demons' snares and how much evil they inflict upon us daily — may He grant you a bold heart and a judicious spirit so that you may bring yourself as a chaste and living sacrifice to God.

22. Because of his pride, the Devil fell from the heavenly ranks and is attempting with all his might to entice toward destruction — in the same manner as his own fall: i.e. through pride and love for vainglory — all those who whole-heartedly want to serve God. These are the methods used by the demons against us — these and other similar ones in order to separate us from God. Apart from this, knowing that to love your brother is to love God, they implant hatred against one another into our hearts — hatred to such an extent that one is not capable of even looking or saying one word to his brother. Many genuine great ascetics bore the difficulties of a virtuous life, yet through foolhardiness destroyed themselves. This could happen with you if for example you grow cool toward virtuous effort, thinking that you are virtuous. Because here you have already fallen into the devil's illness (self-importance), thinking that you are close to God and are abiding in the light, whereas in reality you are in darkness. What prompted our Jesus Christ to take off His clothes, put a towel about His waist and wash the feet of those lower than Himself, if not to teach us humility? Yes — humility. This He showed by His own example. Indeed, everyone that desires to enter the first ranks cannot do this other than through humility... Consequently, if a person does not have extreme humility, is not humble with all his heart, his mind, his spirit, his body and soul — then he will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

Instructions of Blessed Macarius the Great

Saint Macarius lived in Egypt during the years 301-391. As a youth he tended to flocks of sheep and lived in seclusion. Isolation. At 30 years of age, he withdrew to a distant desert. For his meekness and humility he was ordained as a presbyter. He left behind him works of a moral character that contained important meaning for both the monastics and for all Christians. The contents of his instructions are: The bright condition of the first person at the beginning and the gloomy state after the sinful fall. Our only salvation — is the Lord Jesus Christ. The firm determination to follow Christ. Continuous self-improvement. The state of those who have received the grace of the Holy Spirit. The possibility of achieving Christian completeness on earth. Future conditions after death and resurrection.

Communion with God, Striving toward righteousness, Spiritual zealotness, steadfastness

1. Just as God created heaven and earth for man to inhabit, so did He create Man so that He may reside as in His house in the human body, having a soul created in His image as His magnificent bride. That is why the Apostle Paul states: " but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are..." (Hebrews 3:6).

2. Just as a bee builds its honeycomb in its hive, unnoticed by people, so does benevolence secretly build its love in the heart of a person, changing bitterness to sweetness and a cruel heart — to a kind one. Just like a master silversmith, in making cuttings in a plate and slowly covering it with patterns, does not show his work in all its beauty until he had finished it.

3. Whoever strives towards God and really wants to become Christ's follower must follow Him, endeavoring to improve himself and become a new person, not retaining anything within oneself that is peculiar to the ancient person — for it is said: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

4. If a soul genuinely loves God and because of its insatiable aspirations toward God, although it may have performed thousands of good deeds, it considers itself as having done nothing. Although it has exhausted its body through fasting and labors, it thinks that it has not yet commenced to acquire virtues; even though it is worthy by having acquired various spiritual gifts, either revelation or the Heavenly Mysteries, because of its great love for God, it considers having obtained nothing....

It is inflicted with love for the Heavenly Spirit. With the help of God's blessing, it continually stimulates within itself a fervent aspiration toward the Heavenly Bridegroom; wishing to fully achieve the mysterious and indescribable communion with Him in the holiness of the Spirit; it looks upon the Heavenly Bridegroom — face to face — with purified spiritual eyes; enters into union with Him in a spiritual and indelible light, in accordance with His death, continually expecting death for Christ with great anticipation; certain in its faith that through the Spirit it will receive complete deliverance from sins and dark desires, so that having been cleansed by the Spirit, enlightened spiritually and physically, become worthy as a pure receptacle for accepting into itself the heavenly world and as a dwelling for the heavenly and true King Christ. Only then it becomes worthy of a heavenly life, having become a pure dwelling for the Holy Spirit here on earth.

5. There are very few people that have combined a righteous beginning with a righteous end. Rejecting everything without stumbling, they reached their aim in loving the one God. Initially, many enter a state of magnanimity; many become worthy of heavenly grace and become inspired with heavenly love.

6. Just as a person conceived in a mother's womb does not take on human form immediately but gradually, and is not born as an adult but grows and develops over a period of many years, until he reaches maturity....and just as the seeds of barley or wheat do not send out roots as soon as they are planted but after a period of cold and winds, and after a given period of time, sprout shoots....so it happens with spiritual life, where so much wisdom and experience is demanded — a person grows gradually until he reaches completeness, taking on the likeness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

7. A person by nature is inconstant. That is why, just as a person who fell into the depths of iniquity and is enslaved by sin can turn toward good, so is that person who is sealed with the Holy Spirit and filled with heavenly gifts free to return to evil. Some, having savored God's grace and becoming communicants of the Holy Spirit, lose their alertness and vigilance, and spiritually extinguished, become worse than what they were formerly. This happens not because God changes or that the grace of the Holy Spirit wanes, but because the persons themselves lose that grace, deviate and fall into a multitude of sins.

Struggle with passions, humility, circumspection

8. After a person had turned away from God's commandments and became subject to His condemnation, sin had enslaved him and like a narrow and deep abyss of bitterness, having pervaded inside, captured the soul to its very deepest recesses. Likewise, we can compare the sin within us as a large and leafy tree, whose roots stretch deep into the soil. Thus having entered our soul, sin had overwhelmed it to its deepest recesses, becoming a habit that begins in our childhood and with the years, grows ever stronger leads us toward the vile.

9. Sometimes, good intentions are performed for the sake of self-glorification and public acclaim. But before God it is as same as a lie, a theft and similar sins, as it is said: "For God has scattered the bones of him who encamps against you" (Psalm 53:5). The sly one seeks a gain for himself even in our good deeds. He is very inventive in order to deceive us with worldly desires. When a person becomes attached to someone through physical love, the sin then snares him, binding him with shackles and dragging him down with his heavy burden, not allowing him to gather his strength to return to God. Whatever a person loves in this world is what burdens his mind and will not give him an opportunity to gather his strength and return to God. The level of our physical attachment determines the strength of the passion that wars with us. This is how the whole human race is tested... When a person is caught by his own self-willfulness and begins to love something, this love shackles him and he is incapable of striving totally toward God. Thus, for example, one might love his house, another — wealth, another — highly complex earthly scholarship to secure public acclaim; another loves power while another — fame; another loves entertaining parties, another to spend his time in "wool gathering" and pleasures; another deludes himself with idle thoughts; another, because of ambition seeks to sermonize; another takes pleasure in laziness and idleness while another is attached to elegant apparel; another gives in to earthly concerns; another loves to sleep, or joke, or swear. Whatever attaches a person to the worldly, large or small, it restrains him and does not allow him to collect his strength.

10. If you see someone exalting himself and is arrogant about his abilities, know that even if he created great signs and resurrected the dead... he is being robbed by an evil spirit without realizing it. Even if he performs miracles — do not believe him because the sign of a Christian is to hide from others any gifts that God have deemed him worthy to receive. Having the riches of a king, the Christian hides them as though to say: "These are not my riches, someone else put them there." If someone says " What I have acquired is sufficient for me, I don't need any more," — he is already not a Christian but is in a state of delusion and has become an instrument of the devil. Because rapture in God is insatiable, the extent of one's savoring it and partaking of spiritual blessings is the measure by which the hunger for it is increased. Such people have a fervent and unstoppable love for God. The more they succeed and acquire, the more they acknowledge themselves as beggars.

11. Like traders sailing on a ship during fair winds and a calm sea fear that sudden strong winds and turbulent waters may place their ship in danger before they reach port, so do Christians, even though they feel benevolent winnowing of the Holy Spirit, , fear that an ill-wind may arouse a turbulence of passions. Consequently, it is essential to take great care in order to reach the tranquil port of eternal life and eternal joy — the cities of Saints, Heavenly Jerusalem and the Churches of the firstborn. (Hebr. 12:23).

Love toward God

12. You say: " I love God and have the Holy Spirit." But examine this closely, is this really so? Are you faithful to God day and night? If you have this uninterrupted love, then you are pure. However, think about this. When earthly cares or various defiled and sly thoughts arise, are you then truly

against them and does your soul want to love God and be wholly attached to Him? After all, in distracting the mind with worldly and corruptible matters, earthly thoughts impede a person's love for God and the continuous thinking about Him. It happens that a simple person enters into prayer, bends his knee — and his mind attains tranquillity. And the degree of his undermining the opposing wall of evil and the extent of his burrowing under it is the measure of its destruction, so that the person gradually attains spiritual direction and wisdom. However, this level is not attained by the powerful of this world, nor the educated, nor writers.

Demon's snares

13. Evil spirits bind a fallen soul with shackles of darkness. That's why it is not in a position to love God as much as it wants, nor have faith, nor pray as much as it would like. After all, since the fall of the first person, resistance against good has become deep-seated in us both openly and clandestinely.

Instructions of Blessed Mark the Ascetic

Saint Mark, called the Ascetic, is the most famous of all the Egyptian holy fathers even though there is little information about him. It is known that he was of extremely quiet and meek nature, knew the Old and the New Testaments by heart and attained a high level of spiritual completeness. He lived for the more than 100 years and reposed at the beginning of the 5th century. He was famous for his gift of teaching, although few of his teachings had been preserved: an Epistle to monk Nicholas; a Collection of instructions; two hundred chapters on spiritual rules and two hundred twenty-six chapters to those who are thinking of justifying themselves through their deeds.

God's care for people, Faith in God, prayer

1. If you will always remember in accordance with the Gospel that " His judgements are in all the earth' (Psalm 105:7), then every occasion will be a teacher to you in acquiring knowledge of God.
2. Whatever works God is in agreement with, all creatures concur with them, and the ones that He turns away from, all creatures oppose them.
3. Every good comes providentially from God. However, it quietly leaves those who are ungrateful, unfeeling and idle.
4. Every person baptized into the Orthodox faith mysteriously receives total grace. His feelings are confirmed in her (feeling her effects) through the measure of his fulfillment of the commandments.
5. He who doesn't know the truth cannot believe genuinely because guidance by human nature obstructs faith.
6. Do not deny yourself study even if you are very wise, because God's arrangement is more beneficial than our wisdom.

7. He who voluntarily does not accept labors as good works (in their defense) will be punished with involuntary far more burdensome ones.

8. While you remember God, increase your prayers so that He will remember you when you have forgotten Him.

9. Pray so that temptations will not come to you, and when it does, recognize it as your own and not someone else's.

10. A person praying physically and not yet having spiritual intellect, can be likened to the blind individual who cried out (to Christ): "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Striving toward righteousness, Essentiality of self-denial, patience and fortitude

11. In being fond of knowledge, be also industrious because bare knowledge makes a person arrogant.

12. Often the knowledge of a deed becomes obscure through its neglect, because whatever works are left completely in neglect, even the memory of them will slowly disappear.

13. Render good works that you remember: then others will be revealed that you had forgotten; and do not give way to foolish thoughts about your forgetfulness.

14. Evil obtains its strength from one another in the same way good increases (strengthens) one from the other.

15. When from your desire to please yourself your heart shifts from its position of self-denial, then like a very heavy stone that has shifted from its position on a slippery slope, it will roll unrestrained.

16. He who accepts denigration and dishonor for the sake of truth, walks in the path of the Apostles, having taken up the cross and just as though being bound with shackles. However, he who does not do this but undertakes to follow his heart is seduced by his mind and falls into temptation and the devil's snares.

17. If Christ died for us and we "should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:15), — then clearly, we are obliged to serve Him till our death. How can we regard sonship (to God) as a due reward?

18. He who does good and seeks rewards does not labor for God, but for his own gratification.

19. A person that wants to sense the Holy Spirit within himself without first fulfilling the commandments, is like a slave who wants to be set free as soon as soon as the purchase money had been paid for him.

20. Do not ask how a poor person can surrender to enjoyments when he has no means, because to surrender mentally to the love of enjoyments is more bitter than the actual deed.

21. During the departure of the soul, a sensual heart (seeking everything pleasurable) becomes its dungeon and shackles, while an industrious heart (inconveniencing itself for God's sake), is an open door into another life.

Sinful habits, sorrows, temptations, humility

22. The devil presents minor sins as insignificant in our eyes, because otherwise he would not be able lead us into major ones.

23. Having allowed sin to enter into you (accepting the thought), don't say: it will not conquer me, because the extent that you have permitted it in is the degree to which it has conquered you.

24. Don't say: "What should I do? I don't want to, but it (forgetfulness) still comes." — This is because you neglected your responsibilities when you knew of them.

25. When the mind, having been fortified in the Lord, diverts the soul away from prolonged bad habits, the heart is subjected to the executioner-like punishment of passions that drag it from one place to another.

26. He, who overindulged in requisite physical pleasures, will pay for this excess a hundred times over in a variety of torments.

27. A willful sinner finds it difficult to repent, knowing it is impossible to hide from God's truth.

28. If anyone sins openly and does not repent — having suffered no grief up to the day of his departure (from this life) — then know that the judgement over him will be merciless.

29. A person that genuinely repents is subject to denigration by the foolish. But this should be a sign to him that his penitence is pleasing to God.

30. If a person falls into some type of sin and does not lament about this to the same depth as the measure of his crime, he will again fall into the enemy's snare.

31. Don't think that you have acquired virtue without sorrows; such virtue is unreliable (not experienced) by reason of its ease in acquiring it.

32. Having fulfilled a commandment, expect temptations; because love toward Christ is tested by difficulties.

33. If you want to free yourself of future sorrows, then endure present ones with willingness — for in this way, you will mentally change one for the other, and through these small sorrows, avoid great sufferings.

34. Do not seek perfection (of the Law) in human virtues, because there is no perfection in them: its perfection is secreted in Christ's cross.

35. People's denouncements inflict pain on the heart, but sometimes are the reason for its cleansing who bears them.
36. Because of many heartfelt sorrows, Christ's commandments, if fulfilled conscientiously, bestow solace. Moreover, one and the other come in their own time.
37. When, as a consequence of some insult you become irritated, do not grieve because it has mentally activated the concealed evil within you. Vanquish these thoughts that have sprung up in the knowledge that as they are destroyed when they arise, the evil underlying them that leads them toward action is also destroyed. If these thoughts are allowed to linger and appear often, then evil usually becomes stronger.
38. If you see someone praising you hypocritically, then expect rebuke from him at another time.
39. Having some type of spiritual gift, and commiserating with one who doesn't have it preserves such a gift. A haughty individual will lose this gift, having been stricken with conceited thoughts.
40. The lips of a humble individual speak the truth, while those that contradict them are like the servant that struck Christ on the cheek.
41. Do not exalt yourself because of your knowledge (borrowing) of the Gospel so as not to fall into blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
42. Do not attempt to solve dark and entangled deeds through the means of an argument, but through prayer and unshakeable hope.
43. Know beforehand that when you notice that your idea promises public acclaim, it undoubtedly is preparing you for humiliation.
44. If you want your sins to be absolved by Christ, then don't speak out before people about any virtue that you may have, because God will treat our sins the same way we treat our virtues.
45. If you notice that someone is extremely sick at heart, caused through dishonor, know that he is vain and is now unpleasantly reaping the harvest from the seeds that he himself had planted in his heart.

Spiritual peace and judiciousness

46. Peace (spiritual) is the liberation from passions, which is impossible to discover without the counteraction of the Holy Spirit.
47. He who is meek in God is the wisest of the wise, and he who has a humble heart is the strongest of the strong inasmuch as they carry Christ's yoke sensibly.
48. Do not think or do anything if the goal does not lead toward God, because aimless endeavors are wasted efforts.

Love for your neighbor

49. There are accusations (against your neighbor) that emanate from anger and a vengeful feeling, and there are others: from fear of God and (love for) the truth.

50. Do not further accuse those that have ceased sinning and are repentant. If you say you want to accuse him in God's name, then reveal your own sins to him beforehand.

51. It is better to say a well-intentioned prayer for your neighbor than to accuse him in all types of sin.

52. Do not aspire to hear about the deceitfulness of strangers, because the features of those deceptions will also be engraved in us.

53. The listener of evil news sometimes becomes the bearer of them.

The gift of teaching

54. If your destiny from God is to teach others and you are treated inattentively, then do not become annoyed openly, but lament about it mentally. Thus, because of your lamentation, you will not be condemned together with those that did not listen to you, and you will not be tempted to become angry (have feelings of animosity).

55. What is said in general to the many, is usually beneficial to all: with that, direction will be given by every individual conscience.

56. If from the first word a person will not listen to you, do not compel him to do so with an argument; it is better to draw to yourself that benefit, which the other rejected — because your goodness is more beneficial to you than his reformation.

57. A person speaking rightly must himself thank God for being given from Him that about which he speaks, because truth is not the work of the speaker but that of an active God.

58. Do not attempt to remedy through accusation a person that boasts of his good deeds, because the one and same person cannot be an exhibitionist and a lover of truth.

59. Do not accuse a powerful individual with vanity, for it is better to point out to him the future dishonor that awaits him, because through this method it is easier for a sensible person to accept the censure.

Instructions of Blessed Evagrius the Monk

Blessed Evagrius was born around the middle of the 4th century near the Black Sea. He was ordained as deacon by Gregory of Nyssa in Constantinople. Later, the Saint traveled to Egypt where he persevered in caves, followed by a stay in an abbey as a monk. He died in the desert aged 54,

leaving behind his works of one hundred prayers and three books written about effectual lessons and about the battle against demons and passions.

Prayer, God's justice, temperance

1. Sometimes because of his anger, a person sometimes involuntarily takes on the load of his neighbor. This is how it happens: he who deprives his neighbor of something, himself receives the temptations of the deprived person; also the slanderer — temptations of the slandered; the fraudster — one defrauded by him, the fatiguer — the fatigued, the denouncer — that of the denounced; the despiser — that of the despised. So as not to enumerate all of them separately, I will state briefly: everyone that offends his neighbor accepts the temptations of the offended in proportion to the inflicted hurt. The Gospel bears witness to this when it states: "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein; and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him" (Proverbs 26:27).

2. Don't give your body excessive food and you will not visualize any harmful wishes in your dream; because just as water extinguishes fire, so does hunger destroy indecent thoughts.

3. Eat bread in moderation and drink in measure, and the spirit of lasciviousness will flee from you.

4. Prolonged sleep hardens the heart while vigilance sharpens the mind.

Non-judgementalness and forgiveness of transgressions

5. Do not listen to talks against your spiritual father and do not arouse against him those that do not respect him so that your actions do not anger God and have your name deleted from the book of life.

6. If your neighbor offends you, invite him to your house and do not refuse to visit him and partake of food with him. These actions will rid you of any agitation and you will not have any impediments during prayer.

Demons' snares

7. Demons do not know what is in our hearts, as some people imagine. There is only One to Whom all hearts are open — God, Who knows the human mind as He created Man (Psalm 33:15).

However, partly through our words and partly through our actions, the demons guess our heart's intentions. For example, when we are having a quarrel with someone because of their slander, the demons can conclude from our angry words that our relationship is unfriendly. Consequently, having realized our weakness they implant hostile thoughts. Having embraced that thought, we fall under the demon's tyranny of ill will, which from this point further inflames our feelings of vengeance against the offender. Evil demons watch our every move with interest and do not leave anything that which may be utilized against us unnoticed: neither standing, nor sitting, nor actions,

nor words, nor looks — they are all noted attentively. Daily, they devise against us various temptations, so that during prayer they will confuse our submissive mind and extinguish the blessed light within us.

Instructions of Blessed John the Carpathian

Saint John the Carpathian lived in the 5th century on the island of Carpathia, which is located between Rhodes and Crete. Nothing is known of the location where he performed his deeds of self-denial or anything about his life. From India, he wrote to monks some comforting words — consisting of 100 instructions — where he calls upon them to bear sorrows and temptations with fortitude.

Fear of God, Prayer, temptation

1. Nothing upsets a good frame of mind more than laughter, jokes and idle chatter. Likewise, nothing rejuvenates a decaying soul more and prepares it to come closer to God than the fear of God, conscientious attention, and the continuous study of God's Word and prayer.
2. Just like metal that comes into contact with fire becomes unapproachable, so do frequent prayers strengthen the mind for battle against the enemy. That is why the demons, in knowing that prayers can conquer them, apply all their strength to weaken our endeavors toward them.
3. Another time, a teacher may be subjected to temptations and dishonor because he had been beneficial to others in imparting spiritual wisdom. That is why the Apostle writes: "You are distinguished, but we are dishonored" (1 Cor. 4:10).
4. The Apostle Peter is first charged with the keys (of the Heavenly Kingdom) before being allowed to renounce Jesus Christ, so that his fall may purify his opinion of himself. Likewise if you, having received the keys to guidance and perception, succumb to various temptations, do not be surprised but praise our wisest Lord for curbing your self-opinion through your fall. This is because temptation is a bridle — God's providence — that curbs self-opinion of people.
5. The devil sets boldly and threateningly upon a soul that has newly emerged from its body, presenting him as the bitter and terrifying accuser of its downfall. However, you can also see how a soul that loves God and is true to Him — although it formerly was ulcerated with sin for a short period — is not afraid of his attacks and threats, but becomes increasingly stronger in the Lord as it is exhilarated with joy, invigorated with wisdom as it sees the accompanying heavenly forces: as if protected by an illuminated wall of faith and with great boldness calls out against the evil spirit: "What is it between you and us, alien to God? What is it between you and us, insidious servant that has been cast down from Heaven? You have no authority over us. Only Christ, the Son of God, has authority over us and everyone on earth; we have sinned against Him and to Him we will have to answer, having a warranty of His clemency toward us and salvation in His pure Cross. And you get away from us — cursed one!"

Instructions of Blessed Diogaras Bishop of Photica

Blessed Diogaras lived in the second half of the 5th century and was the Bishop of Photica in the Illyrian Epirus. Details of his life are not known. He was renowned for his pious life and wisdom. His writings — in Greek — are well known: "Ascetic Word," "Teachings on the Ascension of the Lord," "Against Arians" and "One Hundred Aphorisms" on spiritual life, temperance (vigilance) and a benevolent life. He met a martyr's death.

Baptism's grace, Faith, fear of God

1. Some think that grace and sin — True Spirit and evil spirit — dwell together in the soul of the baptized. In thinking this, they teach that while the good Spirit inclines the mind toward good, the evil spirit — toward the opposite. Through the Gospel and from my own experiences, I have come to understand that before baptism, the soul is guided toward good by a grace from without, while satan nestles in its very profound depths, attempting to impede the mind from righteous intentions. However, at the moment of christening, through the mystery of baptism, the grace settles inside the person and takes control from within, while the demon launches his attacks from without. In this manner, if self-exaltation ruled the soul before its christening, then righteousness replaced it after baptism. Even after baptism, satan attacks the soul — sometimes more ferociously than before its baptism. However, this is not because evil co-exists with good in the human soul. Heaven forbid! But through the body's lethargy and base pleasures, satan releases some kind of smoke (figuratively speaking) before the mind, trying to becloud it. All this occurs through God's permission, so that a person can achieve spiritual joy through none other than storm, fire and temptation. That is why it is stated in the Gospel: "We went through fire and through water; but you brought us out to rich fulfillment."

2. From the very first moment of baptism, grace inhabits invisibly in the depth of the soul, hiding its presence from the senses of the newly christened. When he begins to love God with all his heart, then through the senses of the mind, this grace begins to converse with the soul in a mysterious way, uniting him partially with some of its blessings. That is why when a person decides to retain this acquisition forever, he gladly renounces all earthly blessings so that he may fully secure that field in which he found the hidden treasure of life (Mat. 13:44). That is why a person discovers the location of God's grace only after he had disavowed himself of all earthly blessings. Later, according to the measure of a person's success in performing good deeds, God's gift of grace reveals its benevolence in his soul. However, God also allows the demons to increase their disturbances of the soul in order to teach it to distinguish sagaciously good from evil, and to make it humble.

3. A person that researches the depths of faith is beset with waves of disparate thoughts, while he that views the subjects of faith with an innocuous spirit will enjoy internal tranquillity.

4. Fasting, as a means that leads toward virtue, has value, but not before God. That is why a pious ascetic should not be proud of his fasting exploit, but only have faith in God to reach his goal. After all, masters in various fields verify their excellence not through the quality of their instruments but through the patient completion of their work, which is a witness as to their masterly skills.

5. No one can love God with all his heart if he first has not stimulated a fear of God in his heart — because the soul enters into an active love only after it is cleansed and is softened by the fear of God.

6. We are all created in God's image. However, God's likeness is accessible only to those who, through their great love, conquered themselves for Him. Because the more we reject ourselves, the more we take on His likeness, Who by His great love reconciled us with Him. Nobody can attain this state without first convincing himself not to be occupied with the allures of a selfish life.

Steadfastness, abstinence verbosity, despondency

7. To people that have just begun to love piety, the path toward virtue appears tough and frightening — and this is not because by its nature it is so, but because people from their childhood get accustomed to live expansively and pleasurably. However, for him that has led a definitive part of his life in piety, the path toward virtue is good and joyous. This is because as we crush wicked aspirations with good habits, our passionate attachment to carnal pleasures disappears. After this our soul goes willingly along the pious path. That is why in calling upon us to begin our salvation, the Lord states that the path toward life is narrow and difficult, and there are few that follow it (Mat. 7:14). To those who zealously wish to live according to His holy commandments, He says: "For My yoke is easy, and My burden — light" (Mat. 11:30). It is desirable that at the beginning of our efforts of self-denial, we should compel ourselves to fulfill the holy commandments. In seeing our good intentions and our efforts, the Lord will give us the readiness and free will to gladly submit to His holy will for the rest of our lives.

8. Just as a stamp applied to cold and unsoftened wax will not imprint clearly, so will a person not be able to produce within himself the stamp of God's benevolence, until he has been tested with labors and infirmities. One should bear with gratitude the various temptations that are sent to us through God's will and providence — then just like the ailments, the struggle with thoughts instilled into us by the demons will be taken as a second martyrdom. Because formerly, the enemy of mankind spoke through the mouths of his iniquitous commanders to the holy martyrs: "Renounce Christ and embrace the glory of this world," and today he speaks similarly to God's servants. After all, in the past he tortured the righteous and through heretics, vilified the true teachers of the Church, and today, through vilification and humiliation inflicts various sufferings to the confessors of piety — especially at a time when they, for the glory of God, assist with great endeavors the persecuted and the poor. For this reason, it is necessary for us to erect carefully and with patience the following witness of our conscience before the face of the Lord: "I trusted firmly in the Lord and He inclined His ear to me and heard my cry."

9. Just as our body becomes sluggish and clumsy from overeating, so does excessive abstinence make that part of the soul that contemplates depressed and incapable of reasoning. That is why it is essential to proportion the quantity of food with the condition of our physical strength. Therefore, when our body is healthy, through measured necessity it is essential to subdue it, and when it is weakened — somewhat relax the abstinence. An ascetic should not succumb to debility but save his strength that is so essential to his deed, so that he may cleanse his soul through his physical labors.

10. Just as the often opening door of a steam-bath releases its internal warmth, so does a person lose his spiritual arrangement through the door of excessive talking, even though all he says is beneficial.

This denies his powers of reasoning purity of thought and through an inflow of confused thoughts, begins to carry a confused conversation. In this condition, the person does not have the Holy Spirit that kept his thoughts arranged because the blessed Spirit, shunning every type of disorder and fantasy retreats from verbosity.

11. When the soul ceases to wish for deceitful earthly benefits, a certain spirit of despondency creeps into it and precludes it to willingly labor in the service of the spoken word and curbs her desire for future blessings. The evil spirit presents the soul's temporary life as being completely useless and devoid of worthy good works as is known to everyone, demeaning her achieved spiritual lifestyle as being ineffectual. We can avoid this tepid and debilitating passion if we keep our thoughts in the narrow confines of remembering God, because only in this manner will our spirit, having returned to its natural spiritual fervency, will be able to overcome this.

Love toward God and your neighbor

12. He who loves himself cannot fully love God, but only he who does not love himself because of his strong love for God, truly loves God. That person would never wish glory for himself but only to God...For a God-loving soul, filled with feelings of God, it is natural to seek glory only for God, as for itself — rejoice in humility. Glory is fitting to God because of His greatness, while to the human — humility.

13. When a person begins to sense a strong love toward God, he then begins to love his neighbor, and having begun — doesn't stop. This is precisely what the Holy Scripture teaches. At the time when carnal love evaporates because of the slightest reason, spiritual love — remains. In a God-loving soul that is situated under God's influence, the union of love is not interrupted even when someone exacerbates her. This is because a God-loving soul, although it sustained some type of grief from her neighbor, is warmed by its love toward God and quickly returns to her former benevolent disposition and readily reinstates its feelings toward the neighbor. The bitterness of discord in her is completely overwhelmed by God's sweetness.

14. A novice once asked a "starets": "Father, who can fulfil all the commandments when there are so many of them?" The "starets" replied: "He who emulates our Lord Jesus Christ and follows Him step by step." — "But who can emulate the Lord?" reiterated the perplexed novitiate, "After all, the Lord was God, although He did become a human, while I am a sinful human, enslaved by countless passions. How can I emulate Christ?" The "starets" explained, "From all the people that are hostage to earthly cares, none can emulate the Lord. Only those that can say with the Apostles: 'We have left all and follow You' (Mat. 19:27) receive the strength to emulate the Lord and walk along His commandments." Then the novitiate exclaimed: "But father, the Lord's commandments are many and who can remember them all, let alone fulfil them, especially such a feeble individual as I? I would like to hear a brief directive from you, so that I may be saved in following it." The "starets" responded: "While there are many commandments, they all fit into one: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself' (Luke 10:27). In trying to fulfil this specific commandment, that person fulfils all the others. However, he who doesn't free himself fully from material attachments is unable to really love God and his neighbor. Consequently, don't worry about the physical only, but according to your strength undertake the task of focusing your mind totally on your inner self, "For

— according to the Apostle — bodily exercise profits a little, but Godliness is profitable for all things."

Demons' snares

15. When the soul begins to enjoy the blessed tranquillity of the Holy Spirit, during nightly sleep or daily slumber, satan endeavors to implant into it his imaginary peace in the form of a pleasant feeling. If during this time the mind has preserved the warm memory of Lord Christ's name, and takes advantage of this holy and glorious name as a weapon against the enemies' enticements, then the sly deceiver would leave immediately. However, having suffered defeat, he consequently takes up arms against the God-loving person openly (not only in his thoughts). Thus the mind, in discerning the sly traps of the deceiver, progressively increases its comprehension of spiritual subjects.

Instructions of Presbyter Elias

Information about Blessed Elias is extremely scant. It is known that he was outstanding in his spiritual wisdom and that his words were expressive and forceful. Because his instructions are composed from the teachings of various ancient fathers, they are called "collection of flowers."

Prayer, fortitude Sinful habits, repentance. Humility, sapience

1. If the words of a prayer do not penetrate into the soul, then even tears will not cleanse it outwardly.
2. A Christian who is a genuine believer in God must not yield to careless indifference, but must always be ready for temptations and be ready to meet them; and when they do come, not be agitated and annoyed but endure the sorrow gratefully.
3. Do not burden yourself with even a small sin, and then a large one will not vanquish you, because it does not happen that a large sin evolves before a small one.
4. People that are not predisposed toward repentance sin more frequently, while those who sin against their will, repent easier. Moreover, they have less need for this.
5. Do not get angry with the person that through his accusation exposed a covert evil within you — but seeing the ejected impurity, condemn yourself and thank God for arranging this so providentially.
6. Censure stimulates the soul's energy while praise weakens it and makes it sluggish toward good deeds.
7. Neither sinner nor righteous are free from sorrow; however, the former laments that he is not completely free from sin, while the latter, that he has not yet mastered all the virtues.

8. Just as a self-opinionated person does not notice his failings, thus the wisely humble not his good qualities. The failings of the first hide an ignorance that is evil, while the ignorance of the second is agreeable to God.

9. Just as a merchant without money is not a merchant, even though he was very capable in his trade: so a person committed to a path without humility will not see any favorable fruits of virtue, even though he relied heavily on his intellect.

10. It is not only essential that a good deed be performed with a worthy disposition, but that the person accomplishes it properly, ie. he consider the time and its scope.

Instructions of Some Ancient Ascetics

Faith, prayer and reading the word of God

1. Faith is a gift, which induces us toward creating good. It gives birth to a fear of God within us and this fear teaches us to observe the commandments and live benevolently. From a benevolent life comes a desired dispassionate state and from this — love that is the fullness of all the commandments, which it unites. (Blessed Theodore of Edessa).

2. Faith and hope are not simple or accidental spiritual states, because faith demands spiritual strength while hope — proper morals and a proper heart. Apart from this, how can a person freely believe in the unseen without the collaboration of grace? And how could he unwaveringly rely on the unseen and the future, if beforehand he had not accumulated a certain amount of personal experience in God's gifts, assuring him of the future as they do the present? Therefore, these two virtues demand our willpower and simultaneously, God's collaboration and His assistance without which, all our efforts would be useless. (Blessed Theodore of Edessa).

3. He who wants his entreaties to be heard by God quickly, above all other prayers, let him first pray for his enemies and because of this act, God will accept his prayer (Abba Xenon).

4. By its nature, water is soft while a stone is hard. However, when it runs along a watercourse and drips on a stone, it slowly but surely makes a hole in it. Likewise the word of God is soft while our hearts are tough. However, if a person frequently listens to the Word of God, his heart softens and becomes capable to accept the fear of God (Abba Pimen).

5. A tree is recognized by its fruit and the arrangement of the mind — by its thoughts, which dwell in it (Abba Isaiah).

Diligence, continence, habits. Chastity, humility, unchaste thoughts

6. A pupil once said to his "*starets*": "My thoughts tell me that I am good." To which the "*starets*" replied: "A person that cannot see his own sins always acknowledges himself as being good. However, the one who sees his sins cannot think that he is good, because he acknowledges himself

as he sees himself — a sinner. Each one must labor a great deal in order to truly see himself. Carelessness, ignorance and enfeeblement dim the eyes of the heart (unknown *starets*).

7. Destroy temptation and struggle with thoughts — and there wouldn't be one saint. The one who runs away from temptation is also running away from eternal life. One of the Saints states: "Who provided the holy martyrs with their crowns — if not their own torturers? Who granted the first martyr, Stephen, such great glory if not those that stoned him to death?" With this, he also quoted pronouncements of another Saint: "I do not blame those that denounce me but quite the opposite, I regard and call them my benefactors; and I do not reject the Physician of souls that has given my vain soul some medicine of piety, because I fear that He may say to it what was said before: "We ministered to Babylon, but it would not be cured" (Abba Zosima).

8. The more we indulged in a vice, the more its remembrances will disturb our soul. When these recollections of our passions are effaced from our hearts to such an extent that they cannot come near us — this is a sign that that our sins have been forgiven. Because while the soul regards something sinful with passion, it is an indication that the sin still has mastery over it (Theodore of Edessa).

9. Abba Daniel states: "The fatter the body, the weaker the soul, while the leaner the body, the stronger it becomes....The more a body slims, the more a soul becomes lean, and the leaner it is, the more ardent it becomes" (Abba Daniel).

10. The body seeks to enjoy sensory pleasures, and the more it indulges, the more it thirsts for them. These pursuits are opposite to those of the soul. That is why we should firstly take steps to curb our feelings so as not to wallow in physical pleasures. Because as the body becomes stronger, the more it strives for its own, and the more successful it is in achieving this, the more uncontrollable it becomes. Therefore, the soul must try and deaden the flesh through fasting, vigilance, standing, sleeping on bare ground and other similar deprivations, so that having weakened its desires, make the flesh meek and submissive to the soul. However, the easier it is to wish for this, the harder it is to achieve it. That's why we are wisely offered the medicine of prayers and tears (Theodore of Edessa).

11. A novice asked Abba Agathonos how to struggle with carnal lust. The "*starets*" replied: "Go and prostrate your strength before God (humble yourself utterly before Him) — and you will find appeasement (Abba Agathonos).

12. Abba Pimen has this to say about carnal thoughts: "If a trunk packed with goods, stands for a long period without its contents being disturbed for a long period, with time they will decay. So it is with corrupt thoughts, which the devil inserts into our minds: if we do not put them into action, then with time they will decay and disappear" (Abba Pimen).

13. A humble person doesn't even have the tongue to say that someone else is careless or neglectful in matters of salvation. He doesn't have eyes to see the faults of others. He doesn't have ears to hear detrimental conversations. He doesn't concern himself with anything temporal, but is concerned solely about his sins (Abba Isaiah).

14. When you see a youth living according to his will and boldly elevating himself toward the heavens, grab his legs and drag him down to earth, because that type of ascendancy would be ruinous to him (unknown "*starets*").

15. To be conquered and be humble is preferable to be victorious and be proud (unknown "*starets*").
16. The spiritual accomplishments of a person are measured by his humility. How much he immerses into humility is how much he will advance in benevolence (unknown "*starets*").
17. I prefer a person that sins and repents to one who has not sinned and regards himself as righteous (unknown "*starets*").
18. Reject blasphemous thoughts by not paying attention to them and they will depart from you. They disturb only those that are afraid of them (Abba Isaiah).

Love toward your neighbor. Non-judgementalness and forgiveness

19. Once, Abba Isaiah saw someone committing a grave sin. The "*starets*" did not accuse him but said to himself: "If God, Who created him, sees this and is merciful toward him, then who am I to accuse him" (Abba Isaiah).
20. "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends (John 15:13). If one overhears hurtful words and instead of replying with similar spite, restrains himself and remains silent, or, having been deceived bears it and doesn't retaliate — through this he has laid down his soul for his friend (Abba Pimen).

Reflections on death. Demon's snares, gift of teaching

21. Truly, many virtuous people incorporate within themselves deep reflections on death. Reflections on death lead to abstinence, assist prayers, create tears, protect the heart and assist introspection. In turn, these virtues give birth to a deep fear of God and the heart is cleansed of passionate thoughts (Blessed Philotheos of Sinai).
22. What inexpressible solace is experienced, when the soul separates from the body — shedding it like clothing — assured in its salvation. Because, as though already commanding future blessings, it leaves the body without sorrow, going with peace to its Angel that descends toward it with joy. Together, they pass heavenly expanses unimpeded, not subjected to any attacks from the demons but ascending in joy with boldness and cries of gratitude, arriving to worship the Creator and receive its determination to be placed in the assembly of souls — similar to it in virtuousness — until the General Resurrection (Blessed Theognostos).
23. Just as satan wars against God through us, by inciting us to violate God's commandments and thereby impeding the realization of His will; so does God destroy the sly one's ruinous plans by assisting us to fulfil His holy will, expressed in His Divine and life-giving commandments. Thus, through human infirmity God suppresses thoughts of theomachy from the enemy (Blessed Philotheos of Sinai).

24. It is dangerous to attempt prematurely to teach your neighbor so as not to fall into that, which you are trying to warn him of. He who sins cannot teach others how not to sin (Abba Isaiah).

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