

National Leadership 100 Sunday

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see Your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On this Sunday (October 17) we give thanks to God for the faithful members of Leadership 100, and we recognize and celebrate the great accomplishments of the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund for the glory of God and the work of His kingdom. Through the generosity of many and through the grants and philanthropic endeavors of Leadership 100, the light of Christ has shone forth throughout our Archdiocese and around the world.

This light of our Lord that illumines our hearts in truth and love has been experienced by men called to the Holy Priesthood through scholarships offered at our beloved Holy Cross School of Theology. It has been seen in the assistance provided to active clergy in relieving the burden of student loans. It has brightened the lives of retired clergy and presbyteres in need of assistance and care. It is a light that has been shared with more and more people through the preparation and publication of quality resources that broaden the work of the parishes and ministries of the Archdiocese. It is a light that has been carried around the world through generous gifts to relief efforts and missions.

For Leadership 100, this ministry of philanthropy reveals the light of Christ because it shines forth from faith and love. The members of Leadership 100 give of their resources in faith, trusting in the power and will of God and believing that great works of grace will be accomplished in the lives of others. In addition, their gifts and service to God through Leadership 100 and through the many other ways in which they contribute to the Church are evidence of their faith, not in the treasures of this world but in the eternal treasure of life in the kingdom of God. This is a witness, a light that shines before us leading us to give glory to God.

The light of Christ is also visible in the love of God and His Church that characterizes the mission of Leadership 100, which was created to assist the ministries of our Holy Archdiocese. Throughout the history of this Endowment Fund, the members of Leadership 100, these faithful stewards of the Church, have labored intensely to offer adequate resources so that the ministries of the Church, which are the ministries of the Gospel of love, are extended. This has shown and continues to show the power of God’s love in their lives and a desire to see the power of this love work in the lives of others.

On this National Leadership 100 Sunday, may we recognize the faithful members of Leadership 100 in our parishes. May we also highlight the accomplishments and mission of the Leadership 100 Endowment Fund and give thanks to God for a witness of light, faith and love that strengthens all of us in our labors for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and the promotion of His Holy Gospel.

With paternal love in Christ,
†DEMETRIOS
Archbishop of America

Religious Ed 101 Filling in a New Slate

The following class session referenced Christ’s parables about abilities and accomplishment, as spoken by the Lord in His own words, in Matthew 25:14 (the servants and the talents) and Luke 12:48 (the faithful and unfaithful stewards).

Fall signals the start of both a new school year and ecclesiastical year. The first religious observation on the Church’s calendar is September 14, which commemorates the discovery and elevation of Christ’s Holy Cross, around the year 325, in Jerusalem by St. Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great (St. Constantine). This marks the beginning of the Church year.

With the start of a new school year, each student is presented with a fresh slate upon which to make his or her mark. But the quality and degree of their achievements will, to a large degree, be determined by how they exercise their free will.

To emphasize the students’ responsibility for their own success, three metaphors are presented. The first – a whiteboard (or chalkboard) on an easel – represents life itself. A clear easel, like life, is like a new day or year, another opportunity to achieve something.

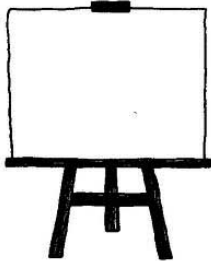
The second metaphor – colored markers – represents individual abilities and talents. The “colors” are in abundant supply, evidenced as each student enumerates his or her own personal strengths.

But the easel and the multitude of colors can accomplish nothing on their own. That is where our third metaphor comes in – brushstrokes, which serve as a metaphor for free will. Without the brushstrokes of free will – throughout life – the easel remains blank and colorless.

As signals in the palette of colors, each of us is capable of creating a lifetime of meaningful images or little or nothing at all. It’s never too late to achieve something, however, as each day presents yet another opportunity to do well.

In short, the goal here is to spark a sense of student vigilance against passiveness and laziness. And, confirmation from the Scriptures certainly helps instill a sobering message to the exercise.

From the 10th grade Sunday religious education curriculum of St. Athanasius Church, Arlington, Massachusetts; instructor George Makredes.



The congregation? Just the usual crowd of Moni Petraki devotees, exchanging the daily turmoil of Athens for the pungent fragrance of Orthodox piety of a balmy summer evening. Urban clutter prevails only steps from the thousand-year-old monastery – but within its frescoed haven, the Byzantine era is even closer.

Enigmatic saints within vaulted recesses divulge holy mysteries, monastic musicians intricately hymn them – and daily Divine Liturgy invisibly transports their secrets to contrition-filled hearts.

Each dawn brings the same anonymous faces to the Byzantine church of the Heavenly Bodiless Hosts. Unobtrusively melting away with Liturgy’s final blessing, the close of day assures their inevitable return for Vespers, when the afterglow of sunset bids peace to morning’s lost hopes.

On this particular evening in 1989, a hushed excitement electrifies the usually circumspect gathering. A monk from the desert has just traversed the leafy courtyard in long strides, entered the stone church’s portal presided over by luminous mosaic Archangels, and disappeared into the altar to begin the service.

The evening’s chant is even more mesmerizing than usual. The Byzantine monks have met their match, in a group of devout seminarians from Lebanon. Expressive Arabic chant swirls heavenward from the left choir, in holy competition with the ornamental Greek of the intense young monks opposite. Thick clouds of incense carry the praises aloft, together with all earthly care.

The final blessing is given, but no one moves. The guest priest-monk, Geronta Pavlos of Sinai, has been asked to speak. His thoughts are a few simple, yet potentially shattering confessions of faith.

We should make our whole life a continuous glorification of God.

We must thank God for our sorrows, as well as our joys.

And, regarding that person who wronged us – we may not be able to do him any good deed, but we can get down on our knees and pray for him.

A person given to glorifying God continuously will avoid complaint, for he thanks God even for his sorrows. Having no complaint against his neighbor, he can pray for him – imitating the Savior, and His saints.

“Glory to God – for all things!” were St. John Chrysostom’s immortal last words, as the sufferings of cruel persecutions ended his earthly life.

“Actually, sorrowful times are the opportune ones,” said blessed Abbess Philothei of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Evia, Greece. “What does it cost you to show faith when everything is going roses?”

Seeking such opportunities, former Sinai ascetic Geronta Paisios prayed to get the cancer that ended his earthly life, as have many saints. “How would we feel to meet the great martyrs in heaven empty-handed?” he asked.

How does one joyously glorify God in the midst of sorrow? How did the saints – amidst the torments of martyrdom?

With “the good thought,” Geronta Paisios said, as evidenced by the Holy Seven Maccabees of the Old Testament, who underwent a horrific martyrdom rather than dishonor the fast ordained by divine law (commemorated August 1).

The narrative ascribes the saints’ ability to disregard pain and torture to two factors – the right kind of thoughts, centered on God rather than their own logic, and the fact that they had always cultivated reverence in their souls.

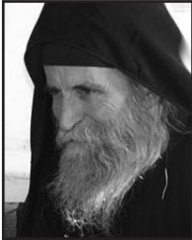
The illuminating account tells us that the “good thoughts” which vanquished the martyrs’ fear and pain are none other than



Photo by Peter G. Angelides

St. John Climacus’ decades in this wilderness Sinai cave led to famous spiritual writings, such as: “A man who asserts that he has the true faith and yet continues to sin is like a man without eyes. And the man who has no faith, but who possibly does good is like someone who draws water, and then pours it into a vessel with holes.”

As St. Catherine’s elected Dikaïos, Geronta Pavlos has been responsible for the spiritual life of the monastery for four decades. He represents the Archbishop during his frequent unavoidable absences, and oversees the daily worship services and large monastery garden. The hesychast geronta, devoted to ceaseless “prayer of the heart,” also responds to the spiritual needs of countless Orthodox pilgrims, both within the monastery and throughout Greece and Cyprus. His insightful spiritual guidance is in constant demand.



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the same good thoughts which conquer sinful passions.

The Maccabee brothers resolved to emulate the devotion of Abraham – and his son Isaac – when the patriarch was called on by God to sacrifice his beloved son. Abraham’s demonstration to all posterity of trust in God’s will was recalled by St. James in the New Testament to show that “Faith without works is dead.”

A secular society, unwilling to turn its gaze inward, reads this passage only as a call to social work. But “works without faith” are also dead, according to St. John Climacus.

Church attendance, alms-giving, even the mandatory fast periods – the Maccabees glorious example notwithstanding – can all be practiced without a grain of faith.

Can anyone thank God for his misfortune though, without true faith?

Geronta, you have said the good thought overcomes not only sin, but sorrow, given that one follows the way of grace offered by the Church: he keeps the commandments, doesn’t miss Liturgy, humbly participates in the Mysteries, honors the fasts – and feasts.

When the bad thought appears to overturn all this, how do we keep it from gaining a foothold?

We will say the Prayer immediately. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. It is the sun of our soul. Whatever darkness descends on us, the Prayer enlightens it. It is a great power.

When do we apply “the good thought” against the negative one, for instance saying “God

will help,” when fearful or anxious thoughts threaten our hope?

Quick as a reflex we say the Prayer, and then think the good thought immediately. The two go together – the person who says the Prayer of Jesus also cultivates the good thought.

Analytically, St. John Climacus says provocation is the initial appearance of the bad thought or image in the mind; engagement, when one begins to converse with the idea; consent is the acceptance of it; and captivity, the abduction of the heart by it. Finally, passion, when the soul gives in to the evil of its own accord.

At the initial provocation, how does one “cut off at a single stroke” all the sinful stages that follow?

Interiorly, we must not accept the idea, we must reject it. Do we want to blaspheme the name of our God? Never. We wish to glorify God.

Or, for instance a carnal thought comes and reminds you of something [improper] you saw. Interiorly you start to accept it, to think about it. That is the beginning of surrender to evil. You are conversing with the thought.

Instead, when we see that the thought is not correct, we reject it instantly, we don’t even open the door to it...

The fathers say that bad thoughts cause turmoil in the heart, whereas thoughts from God bring inner peace and happiness.

Peace of soul is above everything else. Abbas Dorotheos [6th century] says in his spiritual writings, when you take up a

Sweet memory of God, that is, of Jesus...with beneficent contrition, can always annihilate the fascination of thoughts, suggestions, words, dreams, gloomy imaginings – everything, with which the all-destructive enemy arms himself... daringly seeking to devour our souls. Jesus, when invoked, easily burns up all of this.

- St Philotheos of Sinai

good work, for instance, the monastic virtue of obedience, and you see that the effort is costing you your peace of soul – stop the good work.

When a person loses his peace, he loses half of his spiritual life, according to Abbas Dorotheos. How can he replace that – what can he substitute for it?

His advice to blame yourself instead of others is like a nuclear bomb on bad thoughts, as truly, you can usually find yourself at fault for whatever offended you – even if only through your negative thoughts.

And if not, you probably were at fault on some other occasion, and here is the God-given chance to repent for it, he says -“What joy and tranquility that person acquires who reproaches himself!”

Why else does the Church pray constantly for peace – Again and again, in peace let us pray to the Lord...for the peace from on high... We are created to live in the love of God...

LIVES OF
THE
SAINTS

St. Philaretos
the Merciful
December 1

Membership in the exclusive society of saints is restricted to those Christians who have substantially aided the Christian endeavor. While it is true that the vast majority of our saints have been those whose service was a direct contribution to Christianity, one can find the company of the elite band of saints merely by acting as a Christian to an unusual degree in the course of a routine, secular life. A man whose only credentials for sainthood stemmed from his largesse holds out the hope for the average Christian, if not to become a saint, then at least to find favor with God through consideration of those less fortunate than others.

A man distinguished in his lifetime, save for the fact that he was born into a family of means, Philaretos was born in Armenia about the middle of the 8th century, the son of a farmer whose land and stock holdings were extensive and whose Christian piety was genuine. Upon the untimely death of his father, he suddenly found himself sole owner of a sizeable estate, which he vowed to put to good use not for his personal gain, but for the good of the many impoverished whom he saw all about him and for whom he had a great deal of compassion.

The assets of the flourishing estate were directed to the needs of the poor and took form in the shape of philanthropic institutions for which Philaretos was principally responsible. His generosity became legendary in his own time and it was difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff in regards to the numbers who appealed to him for help and to whom he could never say no. In his eagerness to serve his fellow man he lost sight of the fact that he might one day fall victim to a turn in the tide of fortune and indeed the day came when, owing to a number of adversities, he found himself stripped of everything he owned, with the exception of the house in which he lived. He managed to salvage his impressive home with the aid of friends and continued, outwardly at least, to live the lifestyle to which he and his family had been accustomed.

The magnificent house was mere facade, however and Philaretos and his family experienced the deprivation of those he had assisted and his family bitterly complained that he had been generous to a fault. They complained that if this was to be his reward he would have done better to look after his own welfare. The constant want gnawed at his once proud family and while they wavered in their faith, Philaretos remained unshaken in his and did his utmost to assure his family that God had not forsaken them. He tried to show them that in his own good time he would bring an end to their suffering.

It was in the midst of this prolonged misfortune that word came to the house of Philaretos that the Empress Irene herself was in the area and that she might favor the family with a visit to acknowledge the generosity of the master of the house about whom she had heard so much. When the empress arrived, in the company of her son Constantine, the house was in readiness and great care had been taken not to expose the plight of the family whose pride had insisted that the decline of the family fortune remain a secret from the royal party.

The future Emperor Constantine looked with favor upon a niece of Philaretos who had come to help entertain the honored guests. Then and there, he decided to make her his bride, a decision which met with the approval of the empress and which turned the tide of affairs of the long suffering family. Invited to visit in turn at the Royal Palace in Constantinople, the generous Philaretos found that his reputation as a philanthropist had preceded him and he was enthusiastically greeted by persons in high places who eventually learned of his financial difficulties and saw to it that his estate was restored.

His faith in God thus vindicated, Philaretos and his family took up again the standard that had been snatched from them many years before. His benevolence continued to brighten the lives of the less fortunate and such was the extent of his kindness and true Christian spirit that after he died December 1, 802, he was bestowed the honor of sainthood..

(Reprinted with permission from Orthodox Saints Vol. 4 by Fr. George Poulos.)

DIVINE GRACE PART VI

Royal Treasury of the Soul

By SR. JOANNA

“Illnesses are gifts of God!” gasped a very great saint, wracked by the painful convulsions of a blocked intestine. His spiritual children were used to the phrase – he used it often, during the 365 days a year his love provided refuge to souls in need.

Blindness, and the other ravages of advanced diabetes, had given him the right, but few knew he was graced with the rare gift of foresight. Divine Grace had richly rewarded his martyric faith and humility.

He could tell you not only your name, the sins you came to confess, the names of anyone you referred to, but even the future events of your life – all the while insisting he didn’t have any special “gifts.”

You were forced to play along with the little deception – if you came right out and asked for “insider” information on your future, he’d pretend anger.

“What do you think I am – a medium?!”

A little later, though, he’d unobtrusively slip your answer into the conversation, a mischievous little grin playing across his features.

“Humility and repentance will raise us up to Heaven,” he had engraved on his tombstone.

If one factor can be identified as most responsible for the indifference of our times for things spiritual, could it be the lack of awareness of who the saints of our Church are and how they loved Christ?

Since saints are actually people just like us, St. John Chrysostom urged, let us not only admire but work to imitate their noble virtues – to also share in their glory.

The crowns of martyrdom worn during the Mystery of Marriage proclaim the grace destined all who emulate the humble faith of the saints, on whose blood Christ founded His Church.

The Orthodox fathers say with one voice: “Read from the New Testament every day – and the lives of the saints.”

Especially moving are the accounts of modern Orthodox saints concealed “in full view” of society.

The following story was told by the clairvoyant Geronta above.

“An Athens physician lost his wife to illness. Not long after, his daughter also reposed. One son remained to console his old age. The boy had just finished medical school, when an errant car found him in its path. . . . The doctor sent the following telegram to relatives in Thessaloniki:

“With joy I inform you that my son has traveled to Paradise. Please pray with us at the hour of the funeral.”

“Uncle has gone mad,” the relatives responded.

“Geronta, did the doctor really feel joy?”

The holy confessor reverently nodded.

“He is a true Christian.”

Of course, all are not called to the same level. Does one feel unable to honor the fast periods prescribed by the Orthodox faith? But he can still avoid breaking them in public, which is a small – maybe not so small – denial of faith.

Orthodox prisoners in a Soviet concentration camp were lined up in front of a ditch, opposite a firing squad. “What do you confess?” each one was asked at the front of the line.

“Jesus Christ is my Lord and God and Savior!” proclaimed one after the other, before tumbling executed into the mass grave – and into the ranks of Orthodoxy’s most exalted saints.

The love of the Christian martyrs humbles us who have done nothing more for Christ than absorb His blessings like a sponge.

Brought to contrition of heart by their example, one is empowered to reject bad thoughts – a practice which leads to every virtue. It is not necessary to ask where every virtue leads

Geronta Pavlos, why do we need spiritual life?

Because we are fashioned to live with God, to glorify God – we cannot live far from Him.

One emigrates to America, to Canada, and works hard in order to acquire money to put in the bank. He builds up wealth for his material needs.

In the same sense, he builds up wealth for his spiritual needs by acquiring virtue. Virtue is the spiritual treasury of the soul.

Of course, one pursues spiritual life mainly out of love for God, not from self-interest.

The famous Elder Porphyrios said this is the point where Divine Grace comes – when we just love God, without even thinking about what we need.

Yes. This is the way of perfection. It draws the Grace of God.

But one might ask – why are you speaking about love, when we read in Holy Scripture, in the Old Testament, that *fear of God* is the beginning of wisdom?

Fear of God is introductory. It projects us into the spiritual life. It starts us on our way. Then, as we go closer to God, living according to His will, love takes the place of fear.

Fear puts you into the house of God, but once there, you live the experience of love. That is what the Fathers say.

St. John Climacus describes love as “the banishment of every contrary thought.” Some bad thoughts refuse to be banished though. St. Barsanouphios says this is because we have judged our neighbor. Is judgment of others perhaps more insidious in everyday life than we realize?

Yes. I think it’s Abbas Dorotheos who makes



Photo by Bruce M. White Photography

Dressed in regal robes and surrounded by scenes of her martyrdom in this 13th century icon at Mount Sinai, St Catherine wears the crown of glory destined for those who imitate the lofty virtues of the saints.

As St. Catherine’s elected Dikaio*s*, **Geronta Pavlos** has been responsible for the spiritual life of the monastery for four decades. He represents the Archbishop during his frequent unavoidable absences, and oversees the daily worship services and large monastery garden. The hesychast geronta, devoted to ceaseless “prayer of the heart,” also responds to the spiritual needs of countless Orthodox pilgrims, both within the monastery and throughout Greece and Cyprus. His insightful spiritual guidance is in constant demand.



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“Just as the poor, in seeing royal treasures, realize their poverty even further, so does the soul, who studies the great virtues of the holy fathers, inevitably become more humble in its thoughts.”

– The Ladder of Divine Ascent

the distinction between *judgment* and *slander*. When you say someone lied, you judge him. When you say however, that he is a liar, you slander him – you judge not just his act, but his will. Slander is a heavier sin than judgment – but Christ’s commandment is *to not even judge*. “Don’t judge, in order to not be judged”!

You have just concluded an extended visit to America – the first ever by a Sinai elder. What were your impressions?

I was moved by the simplicity of the people, an important virtue for us monastics – and by their wish to learn. I came to help spiritually, but I myself profited.

How?

I was deeply impressed by what Russian nuns told us about their great Elder Dimitry Egoroff [at Our Lady of Kazan Skete, in Santa Rosa, Calif.]. Imprisoned in Solovki [the brutal Soviet concentration camp] near the Arctic Circle, the saint did not die – God alone knows how he survived. Afterwards, he would never speak of his imprisonment under the communists, saying only, “I was jailed for my sins.”

This example of how he refused to judge others has remained indelible in my memory.

I remember you were visibly astonished at his words. I think you said something like, “Just hearing this alone makes my whole trip to America worthwhile.”

People typically try to justify passing judgment by claiming, “Well, what I say is true, I’m not lying!” But who are you to judge the other?

The Fathers say, don’t judge a person *even when you see him sin with your own eyes*, because you don’t see the struggle he waged before his fall – and you don’t know how God, Who did see that struggle, accounted it to him.

Because a person doesn’t just suddenly do a sin, the evil first attacks him in thought.

The person who is careful not to judge others makes great progress. It is a sure thing that he will progress greatly in the spiritual life.

Not judging others is a boulevard which leads one to humility with his eyes closed!

Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues, which lead to the highest rung on *the Ladder of Divine Ascent* – genuine love. The person who arrives there has arrived at God Himself ...for God is love.

“By the light of Your commandments, we will see Light.”

Feast of St. Basil and the New Year

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

II Corinthians 5:17

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The conclusion of one calendar year and the beginning of another is a time filled with reflection and anticipation. It is a time when we look back over the past year and consider our challenges and joys, our highlights and struggles, and our accomplishments as well as the tasks that are not completed. It is also a time when we look ahead to a new year with a sense of anticipation, contemplating what may come, planning our activities, and hoping for health and happiness.

All of this reflection and anticipation is encouraged by a culture around us that celebrates the passing of the year and of time without a deep spiritual connection to the events and commemorations that reflect genuine hope and assurance. As Orthodox Christians we are blessed at this time of year to celebrate two beautiful and holy feasts of the Church which are filled with both reflection and anticipation. Only a few days have passed since our celebration of the Feast of our Lord's Nativity, a commemoration of the light of truth dispelling the darkness of sin and death and a feast of joy in anticipation of God's blessings.

In a few days we will celebrate the Feast of Theophany, another great occasion filled with light and grace. We will commemorate the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan and the revelation of the Holy Trinity as Christ inaugurated His earthly ministry. On this day we will reflect on the spiritual significance of this miraculous event, and we will anticipate our continuous transformation in the journey of faith unto salvation.

Both of these feasts help us to put the passing of time and the beginning of the new year into a proper and spiritual context. This is not simply a non-religious event marking the changing of a number or turning of the calendar. When joined with our festal commemorations as Orthodox Christians, this beginning of a new year, this time of reflection and anticipation is focused on our spiritual lives and on our ministry of prayer and service. In the Feast of the Nativity we are presented with the One who became man for our salvation, and in the Feast of Theophany we are enlightened by the witness of the One who sanctifies our lives with His presence. In His holy birth we receive the gift that should be offered and proclaimed throughout the world, and in His baptism we see the power of the Holy Spirit who also anoints us to share grace and truth through our lives.

Thus, we begin a new year with our hearts and minds filled with these celebrations and with the grace and calling we share as the children of God. We begin a new year with opportunities for worship and service as we deepen our communion with God and strengthen our witness to others. We begin a new year in the Lord with a commitment to live each moment in the presence of Christ and to use each day to bring Him honor and glory. We begin a new year reflecting on the revelation of God's love, on His forgiveness, on our journey, and we anticipate the blessings of His power and grace in days to come.

It is also our tradition on this Feast of St. Basil and the inception of the New Year to honor a faithful and beautiful ministry of our Holy Archdiocese, St. Basil Academy. During this first month of the year we are led by our Ladies Philoptochos Society in collecting offerings to assist in the witness and service of the staff and directors of St. Basil as they nurture and guide young lives with compassion and faith. This is a ministry of reflection and anticipation. It is a reflection on over sixty-five years of dedicated service and on the numerous lives that have found hope, love, and support at St. Basil. It is also a ministry of anticipation. All children who come and reside at St. Basil Academy have a need for an environment that will give them guidance and encouragement and develop their potential. For all of us, we can only anticipate the great and wondrous things that will be accomplished in and through the lives of the children and youth who are blessed by this ministry.

On this New Year's Day and the Feast of our Father and Teacher, St. Basil the Great, I encourage you to give generously to the work of St. Basil Academy, and to offer your prayers for those who work diligently and faithfully in the service of our youth and of God. May we also share in the joy of this season of light and life, expecting the great and abundant blessings of God in the coming year as we offer our worship and prayers and as we serve one another and all people in the grace and power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

With paternal love in Christ,
†DEMETRIOS
Archbishop of America

DIVINE GRACE PART VII

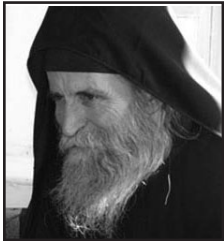
True Freedom: True Choice



Photo by Peter G. Angelides

The double-headed eagle symbolizing Rome and Byzantium, the old and new capitals of the Roman empire, flies over St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai. Embracing a "new" life free of sin restores the radiance of Divine Grace, tarnished by one's "old" inattentive way of life.

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Grace abides in us from the time of our holy Baptism; but through our inattention, vanity and the wrong life we lead, it is stifled or buried.

When a man resolves to lead a righteous life and is zealous for salvation, the fruit of his labor is the restoration of this gift of grace...

In so far as a man succeeds in following the commandments, this gift becomes more radiant and brilliant.

– St. Gregory of Sinai

Let us commit ourselves, and one another, and our whole life to Christ our God.

– Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

"Out of our own free will," we choose the path of sin or virtue, says St. John Chrysostom, emphasizing that whichever we choose, right or wrong, is passed on to our children – and then on to theirs ...

Sharing episodes from his own youth, Geronta Pavlos clarifies how the resolve "to lead a righteous life" brings freedom of choice – by the grace of God – to any age.

Geronta, what about the teenage years?

The holy Chrysostomos says, "Youth is a most difficult thing." The young person has a very strong love, placed in him by God for the profit of his soul. However, instead of using this enthusiasm for good, to love his brother, to the glory of God, he often uses it unlawfully, to love sin.

Why?

More and more, children are pressured by parents to excel in school in order to become a doctor, or to succeed in some socio-economically rewarding profession they are not drawn to. Children however, need to

be raised in an environment of freedom and encouraged to discover their own strengths and follow their own dreams.

Do they need to consider possibilities though?

Yes, of course there will be an element of realism. But they must pursue something they care about, even against the odds. When I was 21 years old, doing my military service, I began gathering the necessary documentation to enroll in the gymnasium, as I'd had to leave school ...

When?

After the 6th grade. People reacted negatively, "What is he doing, starting school at this age?" But I had chosen to study, wishing to use my education for God – and I wouldn't give up my goal.

So, I was serving as a soldier during the day, and getting leave in the evening to attend night school. I began English lessons too, as I was interested in serving someday as a missionary, but I had to give them up, it was more than I could handle [while working full-

time].

You arrived in St. Catherine's Monastery 12 years later, with your Theology degree in hand from the University of Athens – having passed the entrance exams 10th out of all applicants. Also, it is known that after the army, you worked construction sites to support your dream, carrying sacks of cement up to the tops of high-rises under construction in central Athens.

After graduating from the gymnasium, which back then was 7 years, I thought, "What do I have to lose?" I took the University entrance exams, thinking I didn't have a chance, competing against tutored graduates of regular day schools. I was very moved when I saw the test results - I didn't expect to come out 10th ...

Didn't you also have to provide a dowry for your sister?

That's why I was working construction, to send my salary home ...

Obviously, during your youth in war-torn Greece, opportunities were lacking. Nonetheless, you knew what you wanted, and pursued it.

What are the obstacles that deprive young people today of the freedom to make similar positive choices – influencing them to submit to negative pressures instead?

The first, the greatest obstacle is egotism. Of all the evils that cast Divine Grace away from us, egotism is the greatest. And secondly, lack of love – if a young person doesn't have compassion in him, how will he see things clearly? Without love, darkness clouds the understanding.

So, egotism is a lack of love?

No – egotism is one thing and lack of love another. When you don't have love, you don't have compassion on the other, your brother, and you don't want to help him.

How do we recognize egotism?

The person with egotism won't lower himself to seek another's opinion, he doesn't accept advice. His confidence is in himself. "I'm right," he says, "there's nothing to discuss." Egotism is a spiritual disaster.

A humble person gives his opinion, but adds, "I could be wrong ... Forgive me, but this is my opinion." We can fight egotism by not having trust in ourselves, by making it a habit to seek another's opinion.

Those are the main obstacles, but there are others as well, for instance when a young person doesn't habitually pray. This sets him at a disadvantage.

What prayer should a young person say?

The same one we ourselves say – *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me* – what [prayer] is greater than that?

Geronta Porphyrios said children should learn to pray with humility while little. But will a teenager remember?

Yes, yes, indeed, he has roots – like the tree which has put down roots deep into the soil, and the soil holds it, the wind doesn't blow it over.

So, in order to enjoy real freedom of choice, one simply needs to choose spiritual life first - which God has given youth special gifts for. How refreshingly simple – and empowering.

My heartfelt wish is that these things be to the benefit of all ...

Geronta Porphyrios' verbal counsels "On the upbringing of children," have been published in English under the title "Wounded by Love."