

Letter to a prisoner

Addiction

Philosophy

Papal infallibility

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Dear _____,

I am trying really hard to catch up! I have a big pile of letters, and am taking them in no particular order, because my secretary does not have a plan for me. So, you are first up. I will see you this week, hopefully. I will serve liturgy.

A little news. I will just include now a post I made to Social Media. I have a Facebook page, and also send emails out. The reason is because sometimes I have something to say, and I always need money, and maybe networking will bring more harvesters to the field that is "white for harvest". This has already happened. A priest is going regularly to the Luther unit at my urging. He knew about my ministry, and after a little chatting him up, and now I think he goes twice a week (he lives close).

Here is the little advertisement. I wrote to the guy who builds the "Chapels of Hope" in some TDCJ prisons and he will send me a picture of the baptismal font, to include in the post. I do not have the picture yet.

...

There are rumors about "consolidation". Some people may get shipped. Every time somebody gets shipped, it feels like a death in the family. I am still connected through daily prayer, or else the pain would be more than I can bear.

Prison ministry is a trip. It is often hard to "see the forest for the trees". The trees are all the hoops the men and I go through, the difficulty visiting regularly, prison lockdowns, guys having trouble getting out of their pods on time to see me, the letters I never seem to be caught up with, the noise and distraction, and so LITTLE TIME together.

The consolidation rumor has made me see that in the Forest I need to take care of one of the "trees" asap.

I am planning to expedite a baptism of one of the men. In a "perfect" world, I would take more time, but time is not a common commodity in prison ministry. This week, one more crack at teaching, then the baptism either my regularly scheduled first wed of the month, or maybe the last Wed of Nov, which is a "fifth Wednesday" - a day I am not normally scheduled to go to a prison.

I go to 3 prisons, 2 times each, a month.

On the 1st and 3rd Wed, I go to the Michael unit, then the Powledge unit. The 1st Wednesday I celebrate liturgy at the Michael unit, the 3rd, at the Powledge unit.

On the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays, /I go to the Hughes unit, celebrating liturgy on the 2nd Wednesday. The non-liturgy days are for teaching, confession, and usually, just talking to each other about whatever comes up.

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I will try to touch on some stuff in your letter, as best I can. I cannot guarantee it will be inspiring.

ADDICTION

You talked about **addiction**. Our fallen nature is highly attracted to addictive behavior. It all starts with thought. If we have bad thoughts, we feel bad, and can do bad things. It all begins with thought! Sometimes our thoughts are discrete things, but I think most often they are things like attitudes and feelings, which are just sort of “there”. We must fight to have good thoughts. This is where grace most works in a man – God helps him to have good thoughts – to see the image of God in others, to love, to not judge, to resist lust, jealousy, crushing feelings of inadequacy, etc., etc. We cannot stop bad thoughts without replacing them. The way we replace them is to fully realize the words of the Apostle Paul, which we just happened to read this past Sunday (and I preached on a little bit):

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. “Gal 2:20

This is not easy, of course, but it is the path to perfection and happiness. I think ALL addictions – drugs, alcohol, sex, video games – whatever – are our poor way of coping with unhappiness.

I think we are unhappy (using broad strokes here), because we do not see and accept things as they really are. We are laboring under delusions – and the only cure for these delusions is the truth of the Gospel. That is why I read it every day, and also why I pray, in my poor way. I want to think better, and then I will be better.

God communicates with the soul in an intimate way, and all is well when we hear Him, but we cannot hear Him when we make noise. Passionate thoughts and their resulting loud thoughts and actions make it impossible to hear God. A dear friend of mine, who, unfortunately did not win the battle to control his thoughts (he killed himself) once told me something that has always reverberated with me and illustrates perfectly the point I am trying to make: **“You cannot carry on a conversation with someone when there is a railroad train rolling through your head”**. They are LOUD! Sometimes when on lunch at a place I once worked, I would walk the tracks, and when a train came by, stand near the tracks, maybe 20 feet away, to hear the train go by. I am not sure why, because I hate noise – but I always thought of the expression of my friend. BTW, I learned to come up near the train AFTER the engineer passed me, otherwise, I scared him TO DEATH!

I am trying to learn to be quieter in my thoughts. I am making a little progress. This is the only way to be able to hear God. A good story to illustrate this is when Elias heard God while in the cave, but not in the rushing win, or earthquake or fire, but in the “still small voice”. He had to be quiet to hear it.

19:(9) And he entered there into a cave, and rested there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said, What doest thou here, Eliu? (10) And Eliu said, I have been very jealous for the Lord Almighty, because the children of Israel have forsaken thee: they have digged down thine altars, and have slain thy prophets with the sword; and I only am left alone, and they seek my life to take it. (11) And he said, Thou shalt go forth to-morrow, and shalt stand before the Lord in the mount; behold, the Lord will pass by. And, behold, a great and strong wind rending the mountains, and crushing the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: (12) and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire the voice of a gentle breeze. (13) And it came to pass when Eliu heard, that he wrapt his face in his mantle, and went forth and stood in the cave: and, behold, a voice came to him and said, What doest thou here, Eliu? (1 Kings 19:9-13 Brenton)

PHILOSOPHY

You mention studying philosophies. The church considers the highest knowledge to be that of knowing God. All philosophy pursues “truth” – but as an idea. Truth is not an idea – He is a person. The only TRUE philosophy is the experience of God. He comes to those He chooses. We must be prepared and ready to receive Him. If we have loud thoughts and passions, we are not ready. Thank God that He reveals Himself to us increasingly as we are becoming ready

to fully know Him. Even the smallest change in our heart brings us to an increasing knowledge of Him. I think you have come to this conclusion already, but we forget sometimes, don't we?

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

Papal infallibility is largely the result of the church becoming powerful, worldly, and political. The Latins, long before this invented doctrine, which is under 200 years old, abandoned the apostolic model for authority, and presented the Pope as a sort of super bishop, much like an emperor. To this day, they believe that the Pope is in authority OVER all bishops. This was not the Apostolic model. All apostles were of equal authority, and when a church was established by one of them, the others did not try to usurp their governing authority in that region. In more modern times, papal infallibility was just an attempt to support the authority of the Pope as being over all Christians. It is not an apostolic doctrine, and therefore, it is a heresy.

I underlined your words in your letter where you said: "A lot of people think that eternal life is some future event, but it's not – it is here and now and always, not just after death.

Preach it brother!

I am with you 100%. Since we have a relationship with God, who is our Father, and the Spirit abides in us, how can it be otherwise that "the kingdom of heaven is within (you)"!

Also, God makes us alive, Where He chooses to abide, there is no death. Therefore, "God is the God of the living, not the dead", and we live after death, even as those who are dead in the body await reintegration with perfected human bodies.

We experience the kingdom of heaven by experiencing God. This idea that salvation is just forgiveness is a new, novel and COLD doctrine. Salvation is to know God, and it is being attained right now!

I am happy that your family is close to you. My heart also grieves concerning the many that have been abandoned by their families. I think you and I are responsible in some way to comfort those who do not have what we enjoy and have enjoyed. We can at least pray for those whom God instills in our hearts, and be kind in any other way that is feasible and presents itself.

Well that's it! I only took almost 2 months to write it. Life just goes too fast. I will see you in a couple days.

Priest Seraphim Holland 2016 This and other Orthodox materials are available in from: [St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas, http://www.orthodox.net](http://www.orthodox.net)
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