

Letter to a prisoner

What do you do when someone will not forgive you?

What do you do when you still feel bad about past sins?

St John of Karpathos

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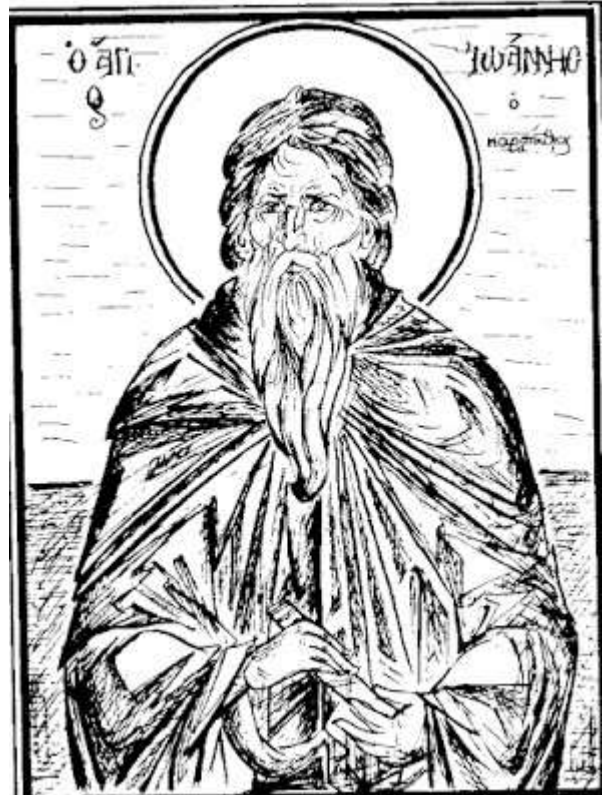
Jan 26/Feb 13, 2017 HOLY MARTYRS HERMYLOS AND STRATONICOS

Dear brother in Christ:

I went to the unit yesterday, and was disappointed that I did not see you (and many others too).

Things happen. Please write me, and let me know how you are doing. I have been gone a bit, and was itching to get back and see you. I celebrated liturgy, and received communion for the first time. I am frustrated, because I marked down everybody who was not present, and then I misplaced the notebook! Maybe I will just send this to all of you.

For some reason, I was tired on the way down, and got some coffee, and took it like medicine so that I would make it to the unit. Yesterday was a two-coffee day – a rare occurrence, but I was super drowsy on the way home. Part of the problem is that I am trying to eat a ketogenic diet – very high in fat (about 70-90%) and the rest protein, and only trace amounts of carbs. I would like to lose a little weight and get a little stronger. The body prefers carbs for fuel, but will burn fat when that is all it gets. This helps you lose weight, and makes you sharper mentally, and energetic. I feel sharper, but I am still tired, as my body adjusts to having only trace amounts of carbs.



Even if I do not see you on a given day, or cannot come to the unit for some reason (prison/weather/services at the parish/travel induced), I think of you every day and pray for you every day, because you are in my diptychs (list of names).

The season is changing quickly. We are just past Nativity and Theophany (birth of Christ and baptism of Christ, when the Holy Trinity was revealed by the voice of the Father from heaven, and the Holy Spirit appearing as a dove, after Christ's baptism). Because Pascha is early this year, this coming weekend is Zacchaeus Sunday. This is the first of 5 Sundays before Great Lent begins (Zacchaeus, Sunday of the publican and Pharisee, of the prodigal son, of the last judgment (also called "Meatfare", because we stop meat after this day) and The Sunday of forgiveness (also called "Cheesefare").

The following day, Monday, will be the first day of Great Lent. We call it "Clean Monday" – not because we are clean, but because we want to get clean. The entire first week of Great Lent is called "Clean Week". In our parish, in in most others (I hope, although sometimes people get lazy), we have services every night, and the first 4 nights we sing the Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete – a long and beautiful service. We also serve Presanctified liturgy twice. I will also serve it in the prison. I have written to you about all this stuff, and will doubtless write to you again.

For right now, I want to focus on a really important question asked, which, if we are honest about ourselves, applies to all of us. Basically, it goes like this (paraphrasing him).

“Ok, baptism forgives all your sins up to the point, but why do I feel bad about the stuff I did, esp. when family members or others keep throwing it in my face”?

That is a tough question. We win our salvation by patience. God forgives easily, but people are slower to forgive. Patience is the hardest part of Christianity, I think. I do not mean learning to be patient when waiting in a long line, or being held up at the house for no good reason, although this is an important virtue, and if we are fortunate to possess it, we go through our day less agitated, or irritable. There is another form of patience that is even more important, and, indeed, we cannot be saved without it. “In your patience win ye your souls” (do you know where this is in the bible? Look it up!). This patience is borne out of effort, and experience.

Remember what I stress to you. Christianity is EXPERIENCING God. We are not ready for the full experience because of our sins, and ignorance (you could also call this KNOWLEDGE, since you it is absolutely necessary to experience someone to know them).

Many have lost their way in this life because of impatience. In prison, I have lost more than a dozen. In parish life, the toll is much higher. I think rough similes for this word are “lack of faith”, and laziness. Both of these sins are fed by pride. We must do our work. God will save us, but He does not do it by waving a magic wand.

Our sins have consequences. God freely forgives them, but we are not easily freed from their effects. One of those effects is the stubbornness of those around us to not forgive us, or not trust us, because they remember the “old man”. You must be patient, and not be angry with them. You must convince yourself every day that you must labor to earn their trust.

There is another thing that you must do. Do not OWN their opinion of you. You were that guy, and they may still think you are that guy, but their opinion is not God’s opinion. He loves you, and will help you. You must be patient, and not feel that you have not changed because some say you have not changed. It is up to you to cooperate with God’s grace. Nobody’s opinion can send you to Hell, except your own – if you lose patience and give up.

I was recently gifted a little book with the writings of St John of Karpathos ((c. 7th century), from the Philokalia. He wrote an instructive treatise “For the Encouragement of the Monks in India who had Written to Him”, and it encourages me too. I hope the following passages will encourage you too. They apply to our subject.

Reading the Philokalia (the word means “love of beauty) is difficult because it is a book written by holy men, for men and women who are striving for perfection and have made substantial progress. Some of the things written may seem to us to be as understandable as advanced mathematics equations, when we only understand arithmetic and some algebra! The only things that will cause a person to fully understand the Philokalia are 1. A strong knowledge of the scriptures 2. Holiness! Nonetheless, we can read the Philokalia if we do it humbly and patiently.

The first passage:

8. If someone is figuratively speaking an abortion, misshapen by sin, it is said that half his flesh is devoured in this life and half in the life to come (cf. Num. 12:12). For each of us will certainly experience the consequences of his own actions.

A good knowledge of scripture is needed to understand this passage well. The reference in Numbers is about Aaron, and especially Miriam, when they spoke against Moses, and because of their disobedience, Miriam became a leper for a week. Observe:

Here is their sin:

“And Mariam and Aaron spoke against Moses, because of the Ethiopian woman whom Moses took; for he had taken an Ethiopian woman. (2) And they said, Has the Lord spoken to Moses only? has he not also spoken to us? and the Lord heard it.” (Numbers 12:1-2 Brenton)

That may seem to be a little thing to us. After all, his siblings merely criticized him. God did not see it that way. We learn from his response how sinful and awful public criticism of someone can sometimes be.

“And the man Moses was very meek beyond all the men that were upon the earth. (4) And the Lord said immediately to Moses and Aaron and Mariam, Come forth all three of you to the tabernacle of witness. (5) And the three came forth to the tabernacle of witness; and the Lord descended in a pillar of a cloud, and stood at the door of the tabernacle of witness; and Aaron and Mariam were called; and both came forth. (6) And he said to them, Hear my words: If there should be of you a prophet to the Lord, I will be made known to him in a vision, and in sleep will I speak to him. (7) My servant Moses is not so; he is faithful in all my house. (8) I will speak to him mouth to mouth apparently, and not in dark speeches; and he has seen the glory of the Lord; and why were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? (9) And the great anger of the Lord was upon them, and he departed.” (Numbers 12:3-9 Brenton)

It is not a smart idea to slander a holy man! Moses was different than all the other prophets. He alone, on Mt Sinai, saw the glory of the Lord, and as the scripture says, spoke to God face to face. (Exo_33:11 - Look it up!)

God brought a punishment upon Miriam, and it lasted a full week:

(10) And the cloud departed from the tabernacle; and, behold, Mariam was leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Mariam, and, behold, she was leprous. (11) And Aaron said to Moses, I beseech thee, my lord, do not lay sin upon us, for we were ignorant wherein we sinned. (12) **Let her not be as it were like death, as an abortion coming out of his mother's womb, when the disease devours the half of the flesh.** (13) And Moses cried to the Lord, saying, O God, I beseech thee, heal her. (14) And the Lord said to Moses, If her father had only spit in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days? let her be set apart seven days without the camp, and afterwards she shall come in. (15) And Mariam was separated without the camp seven days; and the people moved not forward till Mariam was cleansed. (Numbers 12:10-15 Brenton)



Leprosy is a disease which causes the wasting of human flesh. In time, a person loses their fingers, toes, nose, and other parts of their body, and has sores all over their body. This is why the scripture says it “devours half the flesh”.

Leprosy is a sign of sin. We have it too, but it does not kill in this life. We are like the man left by the side of the road in the parable of the good Samaritan – he was attacked by robbers (the demons, who are only have power over us because of our passions and sins) and left “half dead”.

We can be forgiven our sins, but the underlying causes of that sin may still live within us – this is like having a disease which “devours the half of the flesh”. There are

consequences to our actions. We must be humble enough and patient enough to accept this. This is hard, but with God all things are possible.

Remember – the point of Christianity is NOT forgiveness! It is perfection! With perfection comes the knowledge of God, and union with Him and the fulfilling of our purpose. Forgiveness is just a part of this process. We must always struggle. We must develop gratitude towards God because of His great mercy towards us – and this gratitude will foster within us patience, and all the virtues.

Here is another passage from St John. I think it is very encouraging, because we are weak, and make many mistakes, and many times, the task seems to be too big for us.

15. The Scriptures testify that if a man still under the sway of the passions believes humbly yet with all his heart, he will receive the gift of dispassion. For it is said: 'Today you shall be with Me in paradise' (Luke 23:43), and: 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Luke 7:50) - the peace, that is, of blessed dispassion. Other texts express the same idea - for example: 'The grapes shall ripen at seedtime' (Amos 9:13. LXX), and: 'According to your faith so be it done to you' (Matt. 9: 29).

It is all going to happen for you. Be patient, struggle, do not forget to get up when you fall down. Struggle to love God and your brother, and to keep all the commandments. Read the Gospels, fast as much as you are able. Be humble, be kind, be patient.

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ...” (Philippians 1:6)

I think that is enough for now. If I keep writing, I will never send the letter.

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