

Letter to a Prisoner.

We are not carrying our cross to nowhere.

Asking the right questions.

From: Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney, TX 75070 TO: ... 10/26/2018 ns

File: http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2018+we-are-not-carrying-our-cross-to-nowhere.pdf

http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2018+we-are-not-carrying-our-cross-to-nowhere.doc

Dear in Christ ...: I'm glad you wrote me, but your letter made me very sad. I came to the unit ..., but only ... people were there. There were all kinds of count problems. That made me very sad also. I do not see you that much anymore. I wish I had a wand, one that I could wave it on you would no longer be so sad or feel so alone. There's another man in prison, who also often feels very alone, and he often does not believe in God. Of course, by that I don't mean that he believes God doesn't exist, he just believes that any good God does will never ever filter down to him.

I received your letter and read it on the 15th. I am Finally writing a response 11 days later. See, I also go through down periods. I am not quite over +Daniel's¹ death. It was actually easier the first year. The second year is even harder. But, I can tell you honestly, I haven't lost any faith. I'm very thankful for that.

After all these years in prison I get confused about custody levels. I don't know if ... custody allows you to go to the chapel or if you want to. I hope you do. I'm not sure what you mean by saying general population was not ready for you. I'm kinda thinking that you don't want to be around people pretty much.

Some of the saddest words I ever read were in your letter, where after mentioning +... 's death, you say that you are carrying your "own cross to nowhere". How can this be ...? The Lord died on the cross in order to give us life. He told us to take up the cross in order for us to have be alive. If we are carrying our cross, we are following His will, and we are NOT going "nowhere". We are going the only place that has life. Of course, being on a cross can be painful. Losing a son can be very painful. Being in prison can be very painful. Talking to people and trying to help them and seeing them crash and burn can be painful. I've experienced these things or of course been around people who have experienced them, and they have imprinted on my soul, but never at any time of I said that I'm "carrying my cross to nowhere". Those are devilish thoughts my friend. I don't think you really believe them.

You also said in your letter that you: "find myself like those millions of millions of victims who have prayed faithfully, fervently, to a God of NO". I guess I find this to be the second saddest thing I've read in a while. I don't believe that, and I've never believed that. I think your despondency is making you say that, but I don't think you really believe that. I don't know what I can tell you to help you to no longer have these feelings. I don't really know how to do anything, except to pray poorly. So, I will continue to do that.

..., God is not some great mind distributed throughout the universe. God is our Father, and He loves us and He wants us to know Him and be united with Him. You feel abandoned, and depressed, and in impersonal God is a little easier for you to take. In impersonal God Who says NO doesn't seem as bad as a personal one that you think says NO. He is not saying NO to you my friend. He's trying to get you to ask the right questions, so that He can teach you to know Him. In your letter you're telling me these pantheistic things, and saying that you're doing research. It would be better if you did research by reading the Psalms and entered into their spirit, and read the Gospel, and prayed for those who are hurting, and for your son – and also my son. Researching worldly things and false religions is not going to give you any relief.

Don't get me wrong, I am glad you are writing a letter to me and you are being perfectly honest with your feelings. I'm being perfectly honest with mine. I think you are living in hell right now. Hell is not prison, or at least not a building with walls

and guards. How is when we feel alone and empty, and feel no purpose, and sadness mixed with rage. You are checking all those boxes.

The truth is, and you know it, but when we are expire, it is not "just like that"! God made us to be eternal, and in that eternal moment we will understand all things, but until then there is much that we will be perplexed by, angered by, shattered by. You keep writing letters that are the groanings of your heart, and I will keep reading, and I will keep praying for you, and I will try to write you things that might comfort you – but I think my poor prayer is more important.

I am sad that you look at your Bible and see nothing, and turn the page to read and feel nothing. I'm sad that your reading is empty. I hope you are comforted somewhat that a poor sinner like me prays for you and cares about your pain.

I don't know what else to tell you my friend. I want very much for you to come to the chapel when I come. I miss seeing you. You and I have a great similarity. The matter what is different between you and I, we both lost a son, and that binds us together. I pray for your son and I expect you to pray for mine.

I think in eternal life, we will be very surprised. Even in this life, sometimes there are surprises. I believe that if you can get out of your deep depression and feeling of despondency and anger, you'll experience some surprises. I will tell you the truth, I smiled when I just said that (I dictate my letters), and I'm not smiling much lately. There is an end to suffering, and there is a purpose to life. I believe it, and that's why do what I do. I learned this letter with a couple of stories. I am sending stories to the man I mentioned above, was very angry because he's in a job that he considers to be too hard, and he thinks that God will save everybody but him and doesn't care about him because he's in a terrible job. He is responding to the stories, and also, he is comforted that he sees me twice a month. I hope you will also. May God bless you and help you in all things. I don't just say that, but I also pray for it.

...

A Father forgives the murderer of his son, and makes his daughter glad!

I remember confession in the monastery Grigoriou. Then (in 1981) hegumen George, who is still alive, told me a story.

He happened to take a confession from a dying priest in a small town in Greece. The priest had two children with a very large age difference - the eldest son and a younger daughter. The son went to Athens to study, and with him a tragedy occurred - he died. The body of the young man was found in a deserted place. It was clear that he was beaten to death. Although the son was very religious and led a pious life, the cross was not found on him. And this absence of the cross was very hard for the soul of the unfortunate father. The murderers were not found then, the crime remained undisclosed.

Time had passed. The priest's daughter grew up and she had a groom. The young man was older than her, went to their house and was well received. The priest, who was already widowed by that time, liked him. But he somehow did not dare to make an offer. After a while, when it was already obvious that they loved each other, the groom asked the priest for confession. He agreed, and the young man admitted that he loved his daughter and their family, but he must say that he is not worthy of them, because he is a murderer. At one time, quite a long time ago, he was in a bad company, they were taking a walk, and late at night they came to a young man-and that was in Athens. He began to provoke them, to appeal to their conscience, that they were even more embittered, they began to beat him and beat him to death. Then the groom, the youngest of that company, for some reason, tore off the young man a gold cross, which he still carries with him. With these words, he showed the priest the cross which he recognized the missing baptismal cross of his son. At that moment, it seemed to the priest that the floor was collapsing from under his feet, he himself almost fell. He prayed that God would give him strength. And the young man went on: "You see, such a man rejected by God, like me, cannot be your daughter's husband. Excuse me".

The priest replied: "How can I not accept you into my family, if God Himself accepts your repentance?" They had the wedding, and all photos of the priest's son were removed far away, so that the daughter never guessed that the groom was the murderer of her brother. So, nobody knew this secret. The priest told this only to Father George, in his death confession.

Alexander Dvorkin (Athos stories)²

.....

What is grace? An answer to a child.

Once, after the Divine liturgy, I drank tea with a bun. Suddenly, a father came up to the table with a son of about five years old. The boy's face didn't seem bright to me. It seemed to be one of those children who are only interested in "Mars" and "Snickers" and how to get them from their parents. But suddenly the boy looked anxiously at his parent and asked: "Dad, tell me, what is grace?"

From such a surprise, I almost choked on tea, urgently stopped chewing the loaf and froze, so as not to miss a word. Let me explain why. First: I myself was not clear what grace is. Second: I was wondering how to explain this to another. And third: it was completely incomprehensible to me how to explain this to a five-year-old child. That's why I froze, waiting for how his dad will respond. He twisted his eyes in a funny way and said to his son: "I better not tell you, but I will show you what grace is." And they went to our playground. And I follow them.

"Jump to the high crossbar," said the dad. It became clear to me that the boy would not jump to it in any way. And for sure: he jumped and he was convinced of this. "And now you jump, and I will add grace," said the parent. The boy jumped, his father's hands caught him, and in a moment he ... WAS STANDING on the crossbar. The boy squealed with delight and told the father that he did not want to live without grace anymore.

And me too. Thank God! (Priest George Klyagin)³

1 <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel> +DANIEL (an Orthodox Christian) reposed on the Sunday of All Saints, June 11, 2017 (ns), while trying to swim across the Spree river near the Ebertbrücke, 10117 Berlin. He was on a college trip, studying abroad. Daniel had time, and cared for anyone who crossed his path. He was always very kind. Daniel was our son (Priest Seraphim & Marina), brother, uncle, friend. This page is in his memory. Until the resurrection, Son!

2 https://www.facebook.com/Orthodox-Parables-and-Stories-328957564248490/?_tn=%2CdkCH-R-R&eid=ARB6Gok3vofS1Hp3PKFFllvkbIKvj0AMJMXy-gOqZuHCxHii8ro7eQsU7e1OhAVMJ1IQM8x6F45aN0Ai&hc_ref=ARQW7C:Wsg4-pYndTQGGNLOjIHE0n0YGUp6DiPjmeS88XaO9faiFZMbQECuVzIQxiF0&fref=hf&hc_location=group

3 https://www.facebook.com/Orthodox-Parables-and-Stories-328957564248490/?_tn=%2CdkCH-R-R&eid=ARBpdVXadGmJqmGeUEdcVeqTwcMgymAy7J1cLpJ3Dmsb3tsyix78rk9PLAUB5S1BArfB2oLM6QmoCoxn&hc_ref=ARQBKZnxqW8Gf0Pi1LIDbi2h3AS3RffYyJbhfuZFyvp5AT9ICywoW6iyRRq8noUOvcQ&fref=hf&hc_location=group