

Letter to a prisoner.

Battling our thoughts – with violence.

Which thoughts does the Evil One love the most?

Sharing others pain always decreases our own pain

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Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney TX 75070 2- 23-2018, Clean Friday

Dear in Christ ...! It is really hard for me to keep track of things lately. I think it's just that this year has had too much going on, and I forget things and sometimes I just sit and stew about things. I'm really behind on my correspondence, and I am replying to your letter which is dated I never forget to pray for you every day, but writing to people seems to be more of our problem. Right now, I am going to 4 prisons, and soon will be going to five. So, I can get that stuff done. I go to the Hughes unit alone on the second and the fourth Wednesday of the month. On the first and the third Wednesday, currently I'm going to the Michael unit then to Powledge then going down to Huntsville and the next day going to Ellis. In March I will also go to the Eastham unit. So, I can figure that stuff out, even though it means a lot of driving. But for some reason I cannot get my letters written.

I hope that you pray for me every day, because, during Great Lent it just seems like the weight of +Daniel's death is heavier on me, and I am moodier, and a little bit slow moving and thinking. I'm currently helping 2 people who've had deaths of sons, while they are inmates in prison. One had a boy commit suicide, at the age of 11. I went down to the prison and met his fiancée and his sister and told him about this literally the day after I buried my son. He is Orthodox. He also is a friend to a person who had his son died in an accident and criminal neglect after that accident. By the way, unfortunately he was transferred to another unit. So, these two men don't have each other anymore, but they have me. The boy would've lived, if those who are taking care of them had taken him to the hospital but they didn't bother with that because they were busy doing stupid sinful things. There has been no judgment upon these people in this world.

This man is not Orthodox but his heart is really opening. He has a broken heart and he knows that I have a heart that is... although I wouldn't call it broken, I would call it wounded. He has somebody that can share his pain with him. There is an important principle in life that I have learned even before my son died, but now I know it even more strongly. And that is, **if we share someone else's pain our own pain always decreases**. That doesn't apply to how complicated our life is. Actually, our life gets more complicated, but it is good to share someone else's pain, because that is exactly what Jesus Christ did when He became incarnate in order to heal us of our infirmities.

I wish I could come out to see you more often. I've only seen you once. I'm not sure what to do about that. Right now, the flexibility of my schedule is not exactly, well... Flexible.

A general theme of your letters to me is that you get demoralized and even cynical. I don't pretend to know what it's like to be in an institution that barely cares about me or doesn't care about me at all, with rules that are always changing and hoops to jump through. I do know something about fighting off thoughts of sadness, being demoralized or being cynical.

It is all about our thoughts my friend! You must fight to have good thoughts. The major way that the Evil One attacks us is with our thoughts. He's most happy if our thoughts cause us to feel pain – whatever that is, depression, despondency, anger, feeling marginalized, hopelessness. This is because he is cruel and likes to see us suffer. He is also happy when our thoughts lead us into sin, but he is most happy when our thoughts lead us to feel miserable.

We were not born to be miserable. You know this. We were born to be united to God and to know Him. We were born to have happiness that is beyond any happiness that is on this earth. This is why the evil one especially attacks our happiness. This is why in my opinion the evil one is very much involved in people feeling a lack of purpose, or significance, or deep depression or despondency or hopelessness. That is why it seems that we as a human race are particularly attracted to sins which end up causing us to have estranged relationships and other problems that lead us to great sadness and depression.

Please fight any thought that is negative. Negative thoughts, such as judgment of others or anger towards others always lead to those other thoughts that make us feel terrible.

This is Great Lent. I hope you are observing it in some way. I hope very much that you are saying the “prayer of St. Ephrem”. It is in your prayer book, but I will include it in this letter. Say it every day, twice a day. Read the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, every day. Pray for everybody, especially anybody that is caused you trouble or sadness. This is the way we fight.

This is a violent fight. It's not violent like the world thinks of violence. The world thinks violence is us trying to assert ourselves over other people, whether it be by words or status in society or by our fists or by weapons. The violence of the Scripture talks about when it says the “Kingdom of Heaven is being taken by violence” is when we are violent against our sins and don't give ourselves excuses and are violent against our thoughts and struggle to have good ones.

I'm not telling you anything that I don't myself try to do. I am praying, reading, trying to help people. I'm fighting my thoughts. If we only try to stop thinking and onto any other fighting against our thoughts we will always lose. Of course, we should try to shut off thoughts that are bad when they are coming into our head. But if we do not do other things, we won't have the strength to shut off those thoughts.

Take a look at Psalm 136, it is called “By the waters of Babylon”, because that’s how it begins. We sing that psalm the last three Sundays preceding great Lent. The end of the Psalm says something that is very violent. It is one of my favorite verses in the Scripture. The reason why is because it reminds me of how much of a battle this life is. The end of that Psalm says **“blessed shall he be who shall dash thy infants upon the rock”**.

That is an incredibly violent image! The infants are thoughts – which begin small. They get bigger very fast unless we dash them against the rock. This is our major battle in life. To recognize when our thoughts need to be dashed against the rock. Of course, the rock is Christ. I hope you know the Scriptures that talk about that. St. Paul talks about that in one of his epistles.

I’ll try to reply to your letter little bit. It is about a case where you got (a certain punishment from prison administration). You know and I know that in prison “stuff happens”. I guess there is a bumper sticker that says something like that isn’t there? :-) I hope you will find fair treatment always, but in the world, we don’t have fair treatment always, and I would hazard a guess that in prison the percentage of times we get fair treatment is somewhat less than in regular society.

I’m really sorry that you are not able to be in.... I know that is a great loss for you. This gives you a little more time I would think. Try to use it wisely. You’ll be able to get back in....

It is hard for me, my friend, when I hear words such as; “all I feel is empty and exhausted. Well, frustrated too. Just, ‘why bother’.”

These things make me very sad. I am telling you to fight. I don’t mean fighting the prison administration. You can certainly engage them in channels, and as the saying goes “you win some and you lose some”, and in prison, I guess the saying should be “you win a very few and you lose a very lot”. Absolutely, if the prison gives you any way to redress your grievances use it, but that’s not the kind of fighting I’m talking about. **I’m talking about fighting your thoughts, and fighting to be kind to others, and fighting to pray.**

There is purpose in your life I’m afraid that sometimes you forget that, or your anger or your exhaustion puts it a little bit more in the back of your mind.

You were born for happiness my friend. All of us are born for happiness. There is no happiness except in Christ. No prison, or any institution of man can take that away from you if you hold onto it – with “violence”.

You wrote that you wish that God would “fix whatever is broken in me”. I would argue with you that He is fixing what is broken in you. Despite my sins I had a big part in that fixing, because I had the privilege of baptizing you.

I hope you can go home too. I hope this doesn't make you mad, but my major hope for you for you is not that you get out of prison. It is that you, when you die, will be in paradise.

You're able to quote the Scripture saying that God will not give you a burden you will not bear but then you go ahead and say that you don't believe it by saying that you are broken under the weight. You are not really broken. You are not broken if you decide you not broken, and if you fight. I fight every day. I fight for you. Will you fight with me?

You ask some more questions in your letter: "Comfort? Rest? Where?" Really? You think that I should really tell you? Or do you already know? The source of all these things is all I ever talk about.

My friend, don't say stuff like: "Yes, I talk to God. More and more though, I wonder if he's tired of listening to me."

God is more patient than me and I'm not tired of listening to you when you say things like this, but my heart hurts when I hear you in such pain. God is never tired of listening to us. He will try to correct us when we say things that are not correct. What you are saying is often not correct. You might want to check to see if anything's come in the commissary.

Okay, that's probably enough for now. I'll just include the prayer of St. Ephrem, along with my command to you that you say it! Please write me another letter and tell me how you are doing – not just the things that are going wrong, but how you are praying what you been reading lately. Maybe you can even come up with something that makes you smile and it'll make me smile.

...

Prayer of St. Ephrem.

The prayer is said two times, one time in parts, and the last time in full. After each part, or the entire prayer, a prostration is made. In between the two "O God cleanse me a sinner" is said twelve times, with a bow each time. This is easy to remember after doing it a few times. Two prayers, four prostrations, twelve bows (and 100 calories burned).

"O Lord and Master of my life, a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talking give me not."

Prostrationⁱ.

"But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience, and love bestow upon me Thy servant."

Prostration.

“Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my failings and not condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen. “

Prostration.

Then, twelve repetitions of:

“O God, cleanse me a sinner.”

Bow.

And then repeat the entire prayer all at once:

“O Lord and Master of my life, a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talking give me not. But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience, and love bestow upon me Thy servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my failings and not condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

Prostration.

A Prostration is a full bow to the ground with the knees touching the ground, and the head touching or near the ground, then immediately standing back up. As the bow to the ground is begun, the sign of the cross is made. Some people touch their knees to the ground first and then bend their upper body down, and the more athletic or coordinated essentially “fall” forward to the ground with their knees and hands touching at essentially the same time. This is very similar to the familiar gym class “burpee”.

A Bow, also known as a “reverence” or “Poklon” is when the sign of the cross is made, while simultaneously bowing the head by bending at the waist. Some bow deeply and touch the ground with their right hand, and other make very shallow bows. It really does not matter as long as the movement is done with attention.

This document is available at <http://www.orthodox.net/greatlent/o-lord-and-master-of-my-life-prayer-of-st-ephrem-01.html>. It is also in [DOC](#) or [PDF format](#)