

Letter to a prisoner.

Spiritual warfare and experiencing apathy.

A “parable” by Aretha Franklin: “Natural Woman”

Becoming Good ground

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Priest Seraphim Holland, PO 37, McKinney TX 75070; TO: ... Oct 17/30 2019, HOLY PROPHET HOSEA

Dear in Christ ...!

I am replying to a letter that you wrote For some reason, I did not receive it until this past Sunday. I'm kind of in a fix right now. I'm trying to be efficient, but I feel sort of like the sieve trying to hold water. And yet I see your letter shows that you are down. My heart goes out to you. My prayers, poor as they are, go out to you. So, I will try to write something.

Prison ministry is been really hard lately. In my past 4 trips, I have traveled over a thousand miles total, stayed in 5 hotels, and saw exactly 5 people total. In one case, count was so messed up that I did get to see anybody. In another case only one person came, and I was told later in a letter that people were not getting their lay ins. I called the chaplain about that and he is emphatic that they are getting their lay ins. Perhaps it's a mixture of people not getting their lay ins and just blowing things off. I don't blow things off, and I'm sure you wouldn't if I came down to see you. I'm getting demoralized and tired. I actually called off a prison visit two weeks ago. I would've gone to three places. I was just exhausted mentally, just didn't want to go through it again. That is the trip where I drive 550 miles, in two hotels, over the course of 2 ½ days. I'm not proud of the decision, but it is interesting that at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on Thursday, I got very sick and actually had to throw up soon thereafter. I would've been on the road coming back home then. So maybe that was fortuitous. I also called off the visit to ... unit this week, because I did want to see one person or none again. My wife has been telling me I should cut down the visits to once a month, and effectively I think that's what I'm going to do. That will give me time to go other places, and I really do hope to see you and ..., and also a growing number of people that are interested in visits in ...

The thing I am the most down about ... It is a long story that I don't really want to tell in mail, but I'm really tired of so many in the penitentiary treating truth as optional, and not taking responsibility for things. The refreshing thing about you my friend, is you have never done this to me. ... I guess all I can do now is pray. ... With a connection by prayer, how can a bridge be burned?

Enough of my misery. I'm hoping that very soon you will be able to be drinking coffee and having a few sweets and things to eat. I think if you get them, it will be easier to keep the fasts. I'm glad you're writing He is a little rough, and a bit of rogue, but I love him very much, and he's always been honest with me.

You mentioned being engaged in spiritual warfare daily. Of course! We are engaged in it whether we recognize it or not. To be engaged in a war and to be unaware of it, that is certain death. But you and I are aware of it, at least most of the time. We win a few and we lose a few, but God is helping us.

You said in your letter that you're very tired. I am too. I think sometimes we are tired because of physical ailments, but I am quite sure that our thoughts make us more or less tired no matter what our physical condition is. Life is generally,

battling to have good thoughts. I am losing the battle a little bit lately, but I haven't given up. I know you haven't given up either.

It occurs to me that if this is a letter that's trying to cheer you up, I'm really not doing a great job. But you know that you have my prayers and my love. You know that I have your back. You know that there is a future, and I will be part of it. Speaking of that future, if I'm going to go down to a prison and see only one or two people, I rather see people that really want to see me. I'm going to try to figure out a time to go down to The trouble is that I am going to Uganda for 15 days in December, and making another trip for a youth conference after that, and there is travel before that to go to Florida for a family reunion. And there are all the festal services in January for the Nativity and for Theophany. But if I make good on my threat to only go to the prisons I'm going to twice a month, that leaves two weeks open, if I am not traveling during those weeks. So, I'm going to try to figure out a time to come down and see you. I'm sorry that the other priests have not contacted you. I will get on them about that.

You told me you need a pastoral letter. So far, I don't think of them that good a job, but after all I am a pastor even if I am a tired one and a discouraged one. The only solution I know for everything is to pray. So, I pray for a lot of people. That is my primary goal every day. I also pray from the Psalter. I find it extremely comforting. On a good day, I will read three Kathismas, one of them always being Psalm 118. Today is not been a good day so far, because I got started late, but at least I've done my commemorations, and I'm writing you a letter, and will write a few more letters, and do many other things to get ready for the trip to Uganda.

Yes, my friend, there is tons of apathy in the world, and probably a greater concentration of it in prison. Workers in prison don't make that much money, and often are not highly trained, and they're dealing with a lot of people that are trying to get one over on them. So, they are jaded and sometimes bored, and I think they have something called "caregiver fatigue". Of course, some are just not good people. But I think that in general good people that don't battle their thoughts become less good. How can someone know how to battle their thoughts if they are not Christian and understand what Christianity is?

If you and I know that God is never apathetic about us. That's why read the Psalter and also the Gospels. They always show me that God cares about me. When it comes down to it, almost any human being will let you down. But God will not. So, concentrate on prayer, the Jesus prayer, the Psalter, commemoration of everybody. That doesn't always comfort me immediately, but I know I am doing what I should as a Christian.

I am having trouble thinking of anything else pastoral to write. I'm a little foggy right now, not that I'm confused or anything, but just feel uninspired. For some reason my last sentence reminds me of the song by Aretha Franklin, I think it's called "Natural Woman". Now, work with me a little bit on this. I have sort of a little hobby. I like to see truth in secular things. Sometimes people tell the truth even when they don't know they're doing it. An example from the Scriptures is when Caiaphas said Christ would die for the people. The truth is so powerful that God will sometimes have those who do not believe it or don't understand it express it, even against their will, or without their knowledge. This is not surprising since he can even make an ass talk. Of course, the song is basically a love song, but let me give you a little insight into my mind, a frightening thing, by quoting the lyrics:

Looking out on the morning rain
I used to feel so uninspired
And when I knew I had to face another day
Lord, it made me feel so tired
Before the day I met you, life was so unkind
But you're the key to my peace of mind

'Cause you make me feel
You make me feel
You make me feel like
A natural woman (woman)

I think we can relate to feeling uninspired. We can relate to feeling tired. We can relate to feeling cold rain. I think that is from our passions. We feel despondent because we don't feel God as we should. We let our environment, the people we meet, the things that happen to us, dictate how we feel. I feel pretty uninspired right now, but also hopeful. Of course, I am using the word hopeful in the Christian sense; it is not that I'm wishing for something. It is that I know something and I am waiting (working) for it to be realized or accomplished.

The rest of the lyric of course, is the love song part. But when we really think about it, who is the only one that can make us feel inspired? Who is the only one that can say to us "cease weeping"? The Lord said this to the widow of Nain, and He could say it because He had the authority to say it because He has the authority to follow through on His command and actually help us to cease weeping.

I spiritualize the last lyric where Aretha sings that her lover makes her feel like a "natural woman". My heart knows that I'm not human unless God completely possesses me. I am ***becoming*** human. I am becoming a "natural man", that is the man that God made me to become. Being made in His image, I am slowly, with many mistakes, attaining His likeness. None of it is happening because of my strength but it is happening because of my effort. God is rewarding my effort. This is what He does. He takes our small effort, and increases it.

Wouldn't it be amazing if we had the depth of love for God so that we would never sin? That's how some of the greatest saints were. They loved God so much that they were never uninspired, and they were guarded from many bad thoughts. Bad thoughts are so useless. I wonder why we engage in them?

The great saints recognized things that we don't even see. Feeling uninspired is a sin. Let's you and I pray that we get some refreshment from God, and use it wisely.

I gave a sermon this past Sunday about the good ground (http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/luke-04_2019+parable-of-the-sower+any-ground-can-become-good-ground_luke8-5-15.mp3 Video: <https://youtu.be/kQGwKe52A4>) The gospel text was about the sower. There are two interpretations about the ground, and really, in my heart I feel only one of them is correct. The static understanding is that there are some people that are the wayside, and the rocky ground, and the weedy ground, and the good ground and they do not change. God knows who will change and who will not, but our perspective is that we are responsible for changing.

Therefore, you and I can change our ground. There might be ground in us that is trodden down, and that is shallow, and it is full of weeds, and because we are Christians there must be some good ground. It is not easy to change bad ground into good ground, but it is not complicated. God provides the grace for us to do it. That grace is the rain, and the nutrients in the ground. He provides all of this. Of course, ground is trodden down will not receive the rain. And ground that is shallow will not hold enough rain, and ground that is full of weeds will use the rain in a profligate way. So, we must supply the labor, and we must dig up the ground, and remove the rocks, and the weeds, and add amendments to it. Those amendments are our effort, and following the commandments and loving our neighbor. If we cannot do one, we can certainly do the latter. We can pray for our neighbor, we can be kind, we can struggle against our bad thoughts against our neighbor. And in so doing, with the grace of God, our ground is transformed. Of course, this ground is our soul.

I reference two other texts in the sermon. The epistle was from St. Paul, and the end of it was where he said that he "gloried in his infirmities". This is one of the keys to becoming good ground. We remember our infirmities, and we

remember that God is help us through many of them, and he will help us through the rest of them. We do not wallow in our infirmities and say we are terrible, unredeemable people because of the things we did, and even the things we continue to do. We remember them, and they humble us. I think this is what glorying in our infirmities means.

The other reading was from the great high priestly prayer of Jesus Christ in the 17th chapter of St. John. Of course, there are great theological teachings in this prayer, but there is a subtext to all of it. Jesus Christ is a pastor, who was praying for His flock. He loves His flock, and will never abandon them. No matter what happens to his flock he will be there to protect them. If we combine these two things together, that we are unworthy, and we have done terrible things and may even do more terrible things, but that God loves us and will help us to become good ground, then there is nothing to stop us from becoming good ground. I say that's pretty inspiring, don't you? I suppose it would've been very hard to put this into the same musical cadence in the song that Aretha Franklin said. Besides, most people that we hear the song wouldn't understand it. Only those who experience God can understand His love. We experience Him in the midst of our infirmities.

I hope this helped a little. It helped me. Basically, all my sermons are advice I'm giving to myself. May God help you in all things. You certainly have my prayers, poor as they are. You have my love, and you have my future, as God allows it.

There was a young man named Onesiphorus who was appointed sexton in the church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki. His main task was to take care of the candles. But he started stealing candles, taking them home and then reselling them. St. Demetrius himself appeared to him and spoke to him: "Brother Onesiphorus, I am not happy that you are stealing the candles. By doing this, you are hurting others and especially yourself. Stop it and repent!" Onesiphorus was frightened, ashamed and for a time, he stopped stealing candles.

But after a while, he forgot and started stealing again. One morning a prominent man came and brought some large candles to the tomb of St. Demetrius, lit them, prayed and then left. Then Onesiphorus approached the candles and reached out his hand with the intention of taking them. At that very moment a thunderous voice was heard: "Are you doing it again?" As if struck by lightning, Onesiphorus fell to the ground and remained unconscious.

Later a pilgrim came to church and found him there, lifted him up from the ground and when he slowly recovered his senses, the young man told him all that had happened to him. Everyone was amazed and glorified God. By St. Nicholas Velimirovic

St Nectarios and the coffee

St. Nectarios in the ordinance of the monastery had designated the nuns to drink a cup of coffee in the morning and one in the afternoon. But in 1941 - 1945 there was no sugar in the market, no coffee.

The Abbess ordered the sisters to drink coffee only in the morning, not in the afternoon, so as not to use it up quickly. But that night the saint appeared to the Abbess and said strictly: "Why are you breaking my orders and not giving the sisters coffee this afternoon?"

"But, my dear, there is nowhere to buy it and it's in order not to use up quickly."

"This is my job how it will be found. I want my orders to be fulfilled," he told her.

That very night he was traveling in a boat with coffee and sugar. The captain looks at the saint in his sleep and he says to him: "In the morning send a sack of sugar and a sack of coffee to Aegina to my home."

In the morning, when he woke up, he asked his crew if anyone was from Aegina. And indeed, there were some. He told them his dream. They then understood immediately that it was St. Nectarios.

"Do you have a picture of him?" he asked them.

They showed him one. The captain recognized this man, when he saw him in his dream. He embraced it.

The next day he got in a car and informed the sisters to go to the beach to pick up food. The sisters went down and amazingly received the coffee and sugar!

From the book "St. Nectarios" by Archim. Haralambos Vasilopoulos translated by Orthodox Parables and Stories