

Letter to a prisoner

August, 2019

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Dear in Christ! (This is a composite of several letters written in August)

Blessed is God, who cares for those whom He loves and teaches them to love! Blessed is God who created us so that we would know life and beauty. Blessed is God who gave us baptism and the guidance of the church and the intercession of his holy ones to help our poor sinful soul find the way to paradise.

We serve as best we can. God gives us what we need.

I will be celebrating one of His Holy Ones today (St Panteleimon). It might be a little bit hard, because I might be doing the matins by myself or be the main choir for matins (note from after the letter was sent: it actually turned out that one of our choir directors stayed the whole service, and it was beautiful, and easy to serve!). It is very hard to serve matins as a priest and also do all of the singing. It's also hard for someone like me, who sings in a mediocre way to sing a full-service. It's even harder if I'm singing in their people that are singing with me in a slightly different way and I get confused. I can sing with a strong singer, but I cannot be the strong singer. I much prefer singing completely by myself or serving and listening to the choir sing, but, as the modern-day prophet Mick Jagger sang: "you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need!"

Of course, Mick Jagger is a representative of extreme secularism and sinful self-indulgence (may he find his true purpose in this life begin to live according to it, and may God save him), but just like Caiaphas, he told the truth, above. I love it when the truth is told even by those who do not know the truth or who oppose the truth. We can see examples of this in daily life.

If we love God, He will give us what we need. Sometimes He will give us what we need when we are doing what we want, and other times we will bend our will towards His to do what He wants, and other times we will be

forced to do what He wants because of our weakness or because of circumstances. No matter what, God will give us what we need if we are Christians who are struggling. As the old saying goes, it can be the “easy way or the hard way”. It is a shame that we pick the hard way so often, but even when we do, God does not abandon us.

I’m writing this letter to you while monster is sleeping. I’m very tired. It must be because of my sins. I shouldn’t be so tired. It was a very long day yesterday, because it was very hot, and I visited 2 prisons, both without air conditioning. The ... unit is the hottest prison I have ever been to. The ... unit is not as hot. They are in the same area but ... is just ridiculously hot. I think the humidity was enough to get rain if we put a little bit of mist in the air. After I came home, I cut the grass, wearing a backpack which has 55 pounds in it. It was not very sensible, but I’m young enough still cannot always be sensible. Someday I will not be able to do those things. Perhaps I’m paying for today, because I’m quite tired. And vigil awaits me, and Father Nicholas and his family are in Houston, so I will be doing it all.

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When serving in the prison you gotta be flexible!

I’m glad you like the new visit format. I think sometimes I allowed my fatigue to just let me try to sit there and just talk to you all. I’m trying not want to have that happen anymore, so I have a plan each time. Most of the time, I think I’m going to serve Vespers, and read the Scripture from last week, preach on them, and give confession and communion. But sometimes perhaps we can serve the Paraklesis, or compline or maybe even get into matins.

The last prison I was in, I decided to sing the hymns from last Sunday, instead of the ones that are appointed for the day that I was there. I might be a little innovative for some, but you don’t get to hear it the hymns that are sung on Sunday, and they are so deeply theological about the resurrection and all the other things that save us. I think in prison ministry services one has to be creative and not follow the typicon slavishly. The typicon is the order for services. It specifies how we should serve every day. Every day there are different hymns to be sung in Vespers and matins, and different troparia for the saints, and different readings from the Scriptures. In a parish environment, where people are living a healthy life and attending more services than just Sunday, they get to see that there is a great variation in the services. This is just like our lives. We cannot have rich food every day, in the services on Saturday and Sunday are very rich. Unfortunately, many people only experience some portion of the Sunday liturgy, and had no idea about the depth of the riches in the faith that they say that they believe in.

You have no choice about how many Orthodox services you can attend (when you do have a choice, may God give you the strength and may you have the dedication and personal integrity to go to everything you possibly can). Therefore, I try to give you as much bang for the buck as I can possibly give you. All the services are wonderful, but there is much more theological depth in the services on Saturday evening and Sunday morning. I also like chanting from previous Sunday epistle and gospel, since I’ve already preached on them, and there always nuances that come out when I look at something multiple times.

Praying for our fallen brothers, rather than just thinking about them.

We must pray for our fallen brothers. I know a lot of them, and when I think of them in a personal way, my head doesn't feel right. I feel depression and sadness, and sometimes even cynicism and hopelessness. This is not the Christian way to think about our fallen brothers. We must, as last Sunday's epistle commands us, "to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves". Since we are also weak, our first action in bearing the infirmities of the weak is to pray. We do not pray enough. We can pray more, but in the midst of learning to pray more, we must at least pray as we are able to pray

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Living for perfection... imperfectly.

I'm glad you wrote me such a forthright letter. I'm very fond of you. I really love it when I see you on my visits. I can tell from your letter that you are a struggler. God will reward that struggle. Of course, in the very definition of struggle is that we will have failures.

It's no big deal about my name day. I celebrate in January, and what better way could there be to celebrate a saint who gave himself up for everyone, then by giving myself to us to a group of people. Someone called me and greeted me on that day, and said that it must be that I serve liturgy that morning. I told him that I did serve, but in a different way, and I suppose it was liturgy, since liturgy means "work of the people", and we were for all pretty much working.

I don't really want to give up the prison ministry. There's just part of me that gets tired. But we have to ignore those parts of us. What would I do with myself if I stopped going to prisons? It would be a terrible sin, and no good would come out of it. We do what we are told to do. If we do not enjoy what we are doing, we must at least enjoy that we are doing it. I hope you understand that and it's not too obtuse. Anytime that I am tired, or cranky, it is because of my sins. It's never because of the circumstances. So, to be honest with you, I don't really complain about stuff, because it is a privilege to do what God tells me to do. Unfortunately, sometimes in the doing of those things, I have my sins also. That is the only problem.

Church politics and controversies

I am not happy about church politics and controversies either, but we are not separated in the heart. God expects us to be kind everyone, and everyone is basically the same. We are all made in the image of God and our purpose is to obtain His likeness. As far as the boundaries that man has placed on the church, God cares nothing about them. But God has placed boundaries for the church. May we always have the wisdom to know the difference.

Son, don't get caught up in controversies. It doesn't really matter what other people do. It matters what you do. I think I showed you with my hands the size of the pile of documents that I once had. I threw it all away. I felt very relieved after I did that. I'm a sinner, and I don't have time to spend on unproductive things. Get back to reading some. Read the Gospel. Read the lives of the saints. I think you can see in one of our brothers how there is a deep temptation because of all this political stuff. Since we cannot change one hair on our heads, why do we think we can change anything by what we think about it? It does not matter what we think about current day affairs - our

thinking will not change much - it only matters what we think about our day-to-day lives, and that we live as Christians.

Darkness, anger, struggle.

You said something ominous in your letter, that the “darkness is strangling me”. There is light inside you, because the Holy Spirit is inside you. Of course, there is darkness also, but go towards the light. I don’t think the darkness is really strangling you. The darkness is waiting for you to fall into the abyss, but God will not let you – not if you pray, and struggle to follow the commandments. The light will become brighter than the darkness, and eventually the darkness will disappear.

Regarding anger, it is one of those hot sins that tries to throw us into the fire. It only comes out by prayer and fasting. You must pray for anybody to you are angry at, even if only a little bit, or for a short time. You must pray in a formal way for people that you are angry at. Doesn’t matter those people are alive or dead, or are Orthodox are not Orthodox. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that you are no longer angry with someone because you don’t think of them. Anger that we do not know about is even more dangerous than the anger we see.

There is a lot of insanity in prison, and you experience it close-up every day. But there is also intelligence and wholeness in prison, and I have experienced it close-up. You have also. People really are not any crazier in prison than outside of prison. It’s just that outside of prison you don’t see their craziness, because it happens behind closed doors. You are in an environment where you see people every day, including the times they are at their worst. If we can remember that each one of those persons is a soul made in the image of God, in order that it would obtain his likeness, some of anger will dissipate. If we can remember that we deserve death for all the things we’ve done, and not only the things we’ve done, but even just the things we thought and continue to think, some of that anger will dissipate. But anger will never dissipate unless we actively engage it. We don’t engage it an intellectual way. We engage it by praying, fasting, following the commandments, repentance.

You say that you think your anger is stemming from judging others. Of course! It is also from self-indulgence, and from spiritual blindness, and all of your passions. We create anger in ourselves, because we do not pursue virtue. A man who is pursuing virtue sees his failures, and does not judge anyone else, because he is concerned only in experiencing the love of God, and that experience makes him to become like God, so that he loves others as God loves.

You wrote that: “all this fighting is putting out the zeal that I have after my baptism. I’ve tried to reignite it but only to my failure”. I have also experienced fighting and other things that made me feel like my zeal was diminished. To be perfectly honest with you, in any man, it is not observing fighting that diminishes his zeal. It is our reaction to the fighting. It is our poor prayer life and our judging of others and our self-indulgence.

There is a skill that a Christian needs. It is a difficult skill, because it is not one that requires or even allows us to put blinders on. If we were living on a desert island and never thought of people and never saw the things they did, then we would not judge them, but this is not a virtue. In the world, and you basically are in the world “on steroids”, we see many things that are not Christian. We should not pretend that they do not exist. The skill comes in when we do not judge those who do things that are sinful, but our heart is soft regarding them, and we pray for Them. We also must be able to see ourselves in the sins of others. If we see ourselves in the sins of others, even if

we have not committed those particular sins, then we will be humble, and God will be in our heart. Then there will be peace in our heart even if there is not peace in our surroundings.

You also mentioned that it is been a long time since you have communion, and indeed you say things about it that are theologically precise and correct: “The partaking of the “holy mysteries” is so important to our salvation. It keeps the fire of zeal for the Lord lit. It provides the assurances of our salvation. It is the energy to fight the fight and to struggle in purifying one’s own heart. I know that after I partake of the ministries the darkness that covers this institution is lifted and I can see light and hope”. All of what you say is true, but it must also be accompanied by our struggle to not judge, and to pray, and to struggle in following the commandments. The Holy Mysteries in and of themselves do not purify us. God could purify us merely by speaking a word, but He does not do this. He purifies us when we cooperate with His grace.

I want very much for you to be able to partake of the holy mysteries regularly, however not being able to partake of them does not immediately plunge us into darkness. St. Mary of Egypt did not partake of them for 47 years, and she lived as an angel. They are necessary for us in normal circumstances, when we are able to partake of them. They are not as necessary when we are unable to partake of them, as long as our inability to partake of them is not because of our sins. You are an exceptional situation, and I want very much for you to be able to have the ministries regularly, but God will provide for you.

There are not enough hours in the day!

By the way, I have a small confession for you. I started this letter yesterday, but now it is in the afternoon, on the feast day of St. Panteleimon. I was not able to finish the letter while I was taking care of monster man, and they were too many things to do in the evening such as the vigil, and hearing confessions. I would very much like to be like the saints, and sleep one hour a night, but unfortunately that is not the only way in which I am unlike them. It is 6:06 PM right now, and my other small grandson is sleeping, and I have a little bit of time.

I am very frustrated because there are so many things that I want to do, and I can only do a small portion of them. This frustration stems from sinfulness. All I can do is what I can do. The most important thing that I can do is pray. This praying is in the home, and in the services. And it is every other time. And it must be for those that are suffering, especially those whom I know. For instance, every single one of you that I see in prison, I pray for every day. I don’t pretend that my prayers are good, but they are necessary. They are necessary because they have been commanded. So, I must follow the command. It does not matter if I am doing a good job or not; it matters that I obey. The more I pray, the less frustrated I am. And the more I pray, the better praying I do, not because of me, but because of grace.

As we think, so we are.

You made a reference in your letter to someone who said something stupid, and correctly said that “his whole way of thinking was in error”. I’m very much convinced that all of our problems – all of our problems – stem from thinking that is in error. We can see the error in others because sometimes it’s extremely obvious, but we cannot see the error in our thinking. May God enlighten us.

You told me about someone are angry with. I don't dispute your account, but we should always dispute a right to be angry about anything. Everybody is having a hard time. You are having a hard time, and I am having a hard time, and the person you are angry with us having a hard time. It's really that simple! I'm not trying to be trite. Everybody's having a hard time, so since we want to be helped by God even though we have sins, we should extend that desire to everyone else. How peaceful we would be if we never judge anyone! This is possible.

You mentioned that before you are incarcerated you could do something that would get your head on straight. That is a healthy activity, but we must learn the skill of getting our "head on straight" by praying with our heart. That is not an easy thing. I've learned very little about it, but what I have learned has taught me that it is the best way. All that being said, we should try as best we can to follow the example of Jesus Christ, who went away by Himself many times during His ministry. You cannot physically go away from people, but you can get up early, or stay out of the day room. There are possibilities. Of course, it's hard! I think I would go postal because of the noise. But after a while, if I was praying, God would make the noise less of a problem for me. We can be alone with God in a room full of people – even in a prison day room – or we can be without God even if we are in our closet, trying to pray because we are thinking bad thoughts. This is possible.

You asked me to pray for specific things and indeed I will do that. I'll be honest with you, for the most part I just ask the Lord Jesus Christ to have mercy on you. He knows all the things you want, and even if I think I know the things you want, he knows them truly. I am a human being, and with more empathy than the average bear however, so I can feel your pain. Your pain is my pain. We will pray together.

In Christ, Unworthy priest, Seraphim Holland

[St. Joseph the All-Comely Texas Orthodox Christians Prison Ministry](http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.html)

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