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# DIVINE EROS IN THE COUNSELS OF SAINT PORPHYRIOS THE NEW

The traditional patristic description of the Christian spiritual path as a progressive participation in Divine Beauty, Goodness, and Truth is clearly expressed in the inspired teachings of the newly canonized St. Porphyrios (Bairaktaris) the Kapsokalyvite (Feast Dec. 2). Many English-speaking Orthodox have found burdensome and pietistic worldviews overturned like money-changers' tables through the 20th-century saint's counsels in *Wounded by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*.

## God has His Secrets

We shouldn't blackmail God with our prayers. We shouldn't ask God to release us from something, from an illness, for example, or to solve our problems, but we should ask for strength and support from Him to bear what we have to bear. Just as He knocks discreetly at the door of our soul, so we should ask discreetly for what we desire and if the Lord does not respond, we should cease to ask. When God does not give us something that we ask for insistently, then He has His reasons. God, too, has His 'secrets'. Since we believe in His good providence, we believe that He knows everything about our lives and that He always desires what is good, why should we not trust

*Opposite: St Porphyrios as a young monk.*

Him? Let us pray naturally and gently, without forcing ourself and without passion. We know that past, present, and future are all known, 'open and laid bare' before God. As Saint Paul says, Before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to His eyes. We should not insist; such persistence does harm instead of good. We shouldn't continue relentlessly in order to acquire what we want; rather we should leave things to the will of God. Because the more we pursue something, the more it runs away from us. So what is required is patience, faith and composure. And if we forget it, the Lord never forgets; and if it is for our good, He will give us what we require when we require it.

In our prayer we should ask only for the salvation of our soul. Didn't the Lord say, Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you? Easily, without the slightest difficulty, Christ can give us what we want. And remember the secret. The secret is not to think about asking for the specific thing at all. The secret is to ask for your union with Christ with utter selflessness, without saying, 'give me this' or 'give me that'. It suffices to say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' God has no need to be informed by us about our various needs. He knows them all incomparably better than we do and He gives us His love. What is important is for us to respond to this love with prayer and with the keeping of His commandments. We should ask for the will of God to be done. That is what is in our best interest and the safest thing for us and for those for whom we pray. Christ will give us everything abundantly. When there is even a trace of egotism, nothing happens.... When we have a relationship of absolute trust with Christ, we are happy and joyful. We possess the joy of Paradise. This is the secret.

### He Himself Will Free You

God has placed a power in man's soul. But it is up to him how he channels it – for good or for evil. If we imagine the good as a garden full of flowers, trees, and plants and the evil as weeds and thorns and the power as water, then what can happen is as follows: when the water is directed towards the flower-garden, then all the plants grow, blossom, and bear fruit; and at the same time, the weeds and thorns, because they are not being watered, wither and die. And the opposite, of course, can also happen.

It is not necessary, therefore, to concern yourselves with the weeds. Don't occupy yourself with rooting out evil. Christ does not wish us to occupy ourselves with the passions, but with the opposite. Channel the water, that is, all

the strength of your soul, to the flowers and you will enjoy their beauty, their fragrance, and their freshness.

You won't become saints by hounding after evil. Ignore evil. Look towards Christ and He will save you. Instead of standing outside the door shooving the evil one away, treat him with disdain. If evil approaches from one direction, then calmly turn in the opposite direction. If evil comes to assault you, turn all your inner strength to good, to Christ. Pray, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' He knows how and in what way to have mercy on you. And when you have filled yourself with good, don't turn any more towards evil. In this way you become good on your own, with the grace of God. Where can evil then find a foothold? It disappears.

All things are possible with Christ. Where is the pain and effort for you to become good? Things are simple. You will invoke God and He will transform things into good. If you give your heart to Him, there will be no room for the other things. When you 'put on' Christ, you will not need any effort to attain virtue. He will give it to you. Are you engulfed by fear and disenchantment? Turn to Christ. Love Him simply and humbly, without any demand, and He Himself will free you. Turn to Christ and say with humility and hope like Saint Paul, Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? Turn towards Christ, therefore, and He will come immediately. His grace will act at once.

### The Easy Path of Love

Our religion is perfectly and profoundly conceived. What is simple is also what is most precious. Accordingly, in your spiritual life engage in your daily contests simply, easily and without force. The soul is sanctified through the study of the words of the Fathers, through the memorization of the psalms and of portions of Scripture, through the singing of hymns and through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer.

Devote your efforts, therefore, to these spiritual things and ignore all the other things. We can attain to the worship of God easily and bloodlessly. There are two paths that lead to God: the hard and debilitating path with fierce assaults against evil and the easy path with love. There are many who choose the hard path and 'shed blood in order to receive the Spirit',<sup>1</sup> until they attained great virtue. I find that the shorter and safer route is the path with love. This is the path that you, too, should follow.

That is, you can make a different kind of effort: to study and pray and have as your aim to advance in the love of God and of the Church. Do not fight



to expel the darkness from the chamber of your soul. Open a tiny aperture for light to enter, and the darkness will disappear. The same holds for our passions and our weaknesses. Do not fight them, but transform them into strengths by showing disdain for evil. Occupy yourself with hymns of praise, with the poetic canons, with the worship of God and with divine eros. All the holy books of our Church – the Book of the Eight Tones, the Book of the Hours, the Psalter, the books with the Offices for the Feasts and Saint-day Commemorations – contain holy, loving words addressed to Christ. Read them with joy and love and exaltation. When you devote yourself to this effort with intense desire, your soul will be sanctified in a gentle and mystical way without your even being aware of it. The lives of the saints... made a profound impression on me. All day long one can meditate on and take delight in their achievements and imitate their way of life. The saints gave themselves entirely to Christ.

By reading these books you will gradually acquire meekness, humility, and love, and your soul will be made good. Do not choose negative methods to correct yourselves. There is no need to fear the devil, hell or anything else. These things provoke a negative reaction. I, myself, have some little experience in these matters. The object is not to sit and afflict and constrict yourself in order to improve. The object is to live, to study, to pray and to advance in love – in love for Christ and for the Church.

### Done Without Force

You don't become holy by fighting evil. Let evil be. Look towards Christ and that will save you. What makes a person saintly is love – the adoration of Christ which cannot be expressed, which is beyond expression, which is beyond... And such a person attempts to undertake ascetic exercises and to do things to cause himself to suffer for the love of Christ... No one can ascend to spirituality without exercising himself. These things must be done. Ascetic exercises are such things as prostrations, vigils and so on, but done without force. All are done with joy. What is important is not the prostrations we will make or the prayers, but the act of self-giving, the passionate love for Christ and for spiritual things.

*Opposite: St. Porphyrios with icon of the Mother of God.*

## They Gave Their Hearts

What is holy and beautiful and what gladdens the heart and frees the soul from every evil is the effort to unite yourself to Christ, to love Christ, to crave for Christ and to live in Christ, just as Saint Paul said, It is no longer I who live; Christ lives in me. This should be your aim. Let all other efforts be secret and hidden. What must dominate is love for Christ. Let this be in your head, your thought, your imagination, your heart and your will. Your most intense effort should be how you will encounter Christ, how you will be united to Him and how you will keep Him in your heart.

Forget about all your weaknesses so that the adverse spirit does not realize what is going on and grab you and pin you down and cause you grief. Make no effort to free yourself from these weaknesses. Make your struggle with calmness and simplicity, without contortion and anxiety. Don't say: 'Now I'll force myself and I'll pray to acquire love and become good.' It is not profitable to afflict yourself to become good. In this way your negative response will be worse. Everything should be done in a natural way, calmly and freely. Nor should you pray, 'O God free me from my anger, my sorrow, etc.' It is not good to pray about or think about the specific passion; something happens in our soul and we become even more enmeshed in the passion. Attack your passion head on, and you'll see how strongly it will entwine you and grip you and you won't be able to do anything.

Don't struggle directly with temptation, don't pray for it to go away, don't say, 'Take it from me, O God!' Then you are acknowledging the strength of the temptation and it takes hold of you. Because, although you are saying 'Take it from me, O God', basically you are bringing it to mind and fomenting it even more. Your desire to be free of the passion will, of course, be there, but it will exist in a hidden and discreet way, without appearing outwardly. Remember what Scripture says: Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Let all your strength be turned to love for God, worship of God and adhesion to God. In this way your release from evil and from your weaknesses will happen in a mystical manner, without your being aware of it and without exertion.

This is the kind of effort I make. I have found that the bloodless mode is the best mode of sanctification. It is better, that is, to devote ourselves to love through the study of the hymns and psalms. This study and preoccupation directs my mind to Christ and refreshes my heart without my realizing it. At

the same time I pray, opening my arms in longing, love and joy, and the Lord takes me up into His love. That is our aim – to attain to that love. What do you say? Isn't this way bloodless?

There are many other ways, for example through remembrance of death, of hell and of the devil. Thus you avoid evil out of fear and through counting the cost. In my own life, I have never employed those methods which are exhausting, cause a negative reaction and produce the opposite of the desired effect. The soul, especially when it is sensitive, is filled with gladness and enthusiasm through love; it is strengthened and transforms, alters and transfigures all the negative and ugly things.

For this reason I prefer the 'easy path,' that is, the way that leads through the meditation on the poetic canons of the saints. In these canons we will discover the means employed by the saints, the ascetics and the martyrs. It is good to 'steal' their wisdom, that is, for us to do what they did. They cast themselves upon Christ's love. They gave their hearts. We must steal their method. ✦

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*Wounded by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*, Denise Harvey (Publisher), 2005, Limni, Evia, Greece.