

Archimandrite ZACHARIAS (Zacharou)

THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE HEART

'Be ye also enlarged' (2 Corinthians 6:13)
in the Theology of St Silouan the Athonite
and Elder Sophrony of Essex



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Essex, UK

1st American edition 2006

2nd American edition (with minor corrections and indexes) 2012

Published by
Mount Thabor Publishing
106 Hilltop Road
Dalton, PA 18414 USA

ISBN: 978-0-9800207-3-1

1st UK edition, revised, with indexes 2013

Published by
The Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist
Tolleshunt Knights, by Maldon, Essex CM9 8EZ, GB
ISBN 978-1-874679-90-5 Hardback edition

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FOREWORD

This book consists of the talks given by Archimandrite Zacharias in Wichita, Kansas, at the 2001 Clergy Brotherhood Retreat of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, at the invitation of Bishop Basil of the Diocese of Mid-America. The talks are supplemented by two lectures given at a one-day conference on monasticism after the Retreat. Each talk was followed by questions and answers which we have included here in the hope that readers will benefit from a greater awareness of the needs and concerns voiced here. Though many of them may be described as local concerns, they are none the less expressive of the realities being faced by the Orthodox Church throughout the world.

Father Zacharias outlines the nature and purpose of human existence, and its restoration in Christ. His approach is centred on the ascetic tradition of the Orthodox Church, with particular reference to the inspired teachings of Saint Silouan the Athonite (1866-1938) and Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993), founder of the Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex, in England. For those who were not familiar with their writings, Father Zacharias began his talks with a detailed presentation of the lives of these two men.

A Note on Biblical References

For purely practical reasons, the numbering of Old Testament passages has been given according to the Massoretic (Hebrew) text, followed by most English translations of the Bible. The Roman numeral LXX is used to draw the reader's attention to instances where the Septuagint (Greek) text differs from the Massoretic. New Testa-

SAINT SILOUAN THE ATHONITE
AND HIS DISCIPLE
THE ELDER SOPHRONY

WHILE THE BLESSED ELDER and Founder of our monastery, Father Sophrony, was still alive, some of us, his monks, would eagerly seek out an opportunity – ‘in season, out of season’¹– to visit him in order to be edified by his word. Every contact with him was a source of inspiration, and new horizons in life would open up before us. The Elder lived in a little house at the edge of the monastic enclosure. In his last years, he was considerably weakened by old age, and he would only sleep at intervals in an armchair. In our contact and our conversations with the people visiting us it often happened that a question or a problem would arise, and we would run to our Elder asking him for the appropriate answer. We would sometimes find him asleep; then, gently shaking his armchair, we would wake him up. We then presented him the question that had arisen. He would open his eyes and almost immediately the answer would flow from his mouth. It was a marvellous and wondrous event. His voice came from beyond, from heaven. The grace contained in his words would inform and irresistibly convince not only our own hearts, but also the hearts of the

1. 2 Tim. 4:2.

people that had sought the will of God, and to whom we transmitted his words.

Living near Father Sophrony, the miracle that impressed me more than anything else, was the word of God coming from his mouth, and the energy of grace with which it was loaded. We witnessed so many miracles while he was praying for people, and none of us considered them of great importance, because he himself did not pay attention to them. But what really astonished us all was the word proceeding from his mouth.

On one occasion he prayed twice for an ill person, a man who did not have faith, but was full of doubts. It was his wife and his mother-in-law who had brought him almost by force to the monastery for Father Sophrony to read prayers for him. After he had read the prayers the second time and lifted up his stole from the sick man, he said to him, 'Look! We are not wonderworkers, we are priests, and pray for the reconciliation of people with God.' And somehow Father Sophrony was sad and did not want to pray more. Then the man looked at him with a smile, and said, 'Yes, I am not healed physically, but my soul is healed.' And indeed, the joy of Father Sophrony at that moment was far greater than when miracles would happen in a visible way at his prayers.

Another time, a man, whose face had been deformed by a stroke, was on his death bed. Taking Father Kyrill, our Abbot, with him, Father Sophrony went and read prayers for this man. When Father Kyrill returned, he said to me in great awe: 'You know, while (Grandfather – as

he called Father Sophrony) was reading the prayer, the face of that man was straightening up.' And the prophecy of Ezekiel sprang to mind about the dry bones which shall rise and form a skeleton, and be covered with nerves and flesh, the spirit of life returning unto them². So even for such physical healings he was not as happy as in the case of that man who cried out that his soul was healed.

Our Elder had one belief and one desire. He was totally convinced that the word of God for our generation was given to his father in God, St Silouan. He fervently desired, if possible, to make this word known to all the peoples of the earth, for whom the Saint himself had prayed that they may come to know God in the Holy Spirit. He wanted us also to participate in this fervent desire of his, thereby repaying as far as possible our sacred obligation to the Saint. During one of our conversations, he urged me to write down the thoughts that I had occasionally expressed to him concerning the meaning of St Silouan's words. Rather perplexed, for I was acutely aware of my own poverty and insignificance, I asked him, 'But Father, what can I write?' His answer was to be my guiding star. In a decisive tone, he said to me, 'Repeat what I have said!' From that moment, I understood a phenomenon which is frequently observed in the history of monasticism.

Each time that in the heart of a holy monk the word of God would be born, and this word would announce the deep judgments of God's will to the people, then the following generations of monks from that same monastery

2. See Ezek. 37:1–14.

would repeat the words of that holy Elder. They would analyse his thought and be inspired to elaborate upon his teachings, thus rekindling in the souls of their contemporaries the true faith, which was delivered to the Saints once and for all³. In this way, they would minister to the word of the Saints, build up the Body of the Church and, at the same time, work out their own salvation. The Monastery of Studion, in Constantinople was for centuries a characteristic example of this phenomenon.

Consequently, the suggestion and request of our Elder Sophrony to occupy ourselves with the word of his holy teacher, Silouan, is both meet and right according to tradition. The only stumbling block is my own unworthiness. The Elder himself, humbly and without doubt, believed that the direct and revelatory word of God was given to St Silouan, whereas he considered his own work to be that of a post-man delivering a letter that he has not written himself. He is merely transmitting the word of his Father, a word that deserves the closest attention and profound study, not just in an objective manner, but by living it in a personal way.⁴

St Silouan's word gives the answers to the burning issues and impasses of his generation with apostolic conviction. It also defines with Christ-like authority the sure criteria of authentic knowledge of God in the Orthodox Church. For example, he says that the criterion for the presence of the Holy Spirit, the criterion of the truth, is love for one's

3. Cf. Jude 1:3.

4. Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), Saint Silouan the Athonite, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991; repr. ed. Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), pp. 229-230.

enemies.

St Silouan was truly a God-inspired servant of the word of Christ. The main source that informs us about his life and teaching is the book *Saint Silouan the Athonite* by Father Sophrony. From the very first page, this book draws attention to and poses the question about the meaning of life in all its depth and tragic gravity. It reveals the inscrutable abyss of our God's judgments on the one hand, and on the other, the impossibility for man in his present state to fathom the divine will and conform to the pre-eternal design of the Holy Trinity concerning him. According to the testimony of his closest disciple, St Silouan's exterior life does not rouse any particular interest. A few events prior to his becoming a monk bear witness to his dynamic character, his religious profundity and his healthy constitution. Otherwise, his life passed almost unnoticed. Even during his monastic years, comparatively few people recognised him for what he was. But blessed Silouan was an event so magnificent that he attracted God's attention, and the love of all the Saints in heaven. His whole being – soul, mind and body – became a scented vessel, full of the grace of the Holy Spirit. His heart was like a beautiful garden, full of flowers, in the depth of which the Lord was well-pleased to have a luminous and beloved dwelling.

St Silouan was born in 1866 in the village of Shovsk, which was in the district of Lebedinsk in the province of Tambov. He came from a rather wealthy peasant family, which had been freed from serfdom but a few decades earlier. He arrived on Mount Athos in 1892, and received the

monastic tonsure in the Monastery of the Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon in 1896. He became a great-schema monk in 1911. He fulfilled various obediences in the monastery 'of his repentance', where he also served as a steward for many years. There he led the ascetic life for forty-six years. The greatest spiritual event of his life was the vision of the living Christ, Whom he was counted worthy to behold six months after his entry into the monastery. During those months, he had given himself over with great ardour to unceasing and agonizing prayer. This vision filled both his heart and his whole body with the strength of the Holy Spirit, and illumined his mind with the knowledge of the great mystery of Christ. In the ensuing long years of his life, he tirelessly and ceaselessly witnessed to the fact that 'God is love'⁵ – indescribable and infinite love. Full of days, and replete with peace and the grace of God, he departed to the Lord in 1938.

By God's providence, Father Sophrony also dwelt in the same monastery for about fourteen years. During the final years of St Silouan's life, especially from 1931 until the day of his repose, it happened that Father Sophrony was his closest disciple and certainly the one most able to relate the Saint's life. He assumed this undertaking after much thought and hesitation. Father Sophrony's exclusive aim in portraying the spiritual life of the Saint was to benefit the faithful, for in the person of the Saint the most precious aspects of the mystery of our faith were recapitulated. As the Elder mentions, it was in fear that he presented this testimony. Just as all the works of the Lord are awesome and

5. 1 John 4:8, 16.

wonderful, so is a spiritual witness awesome and wonderful, and one needs readiness for struggle and self-denial in order to be able to receive this testimony. Our God is a difficult God, because He offers a cross; but that cross is the expression of His love ‘unto the end’.⁶ And precisely for this reason His love is so unbearable to this world.

St Silouan came from a pious family that was full of the spirit of evangelical love. This spirit also marked his own life. Nevertheless he did not escape the temptations of the spirit of this world, nor the errors of youth. Two events contributed to his turning to repentance. The first was when he heard an account of the life and miracles of a Russian Saint, John Sezenov (1791–1839). When he heard the story of the Saint’s life, his faith was rekindled at the following thought, ‘If he was a holy man, it means that God is here with us, so there is no point in me going off to search for Him.’⁷ This thought was given him by God in order to dispel the doubts concerning God’s existence that had been instilled into him by a travelling book-peddler, when he was but four years old. Thus he regained his faith, ardently clung to the memory of God and prayed with many tears. It was during this time that the desire for the monastic life was born in his heart. His father, though, advised him to wait for a while, and enter a monastery after finishing his military service. In the meantime, he remained in this unusual state of grace for three months.

Thereafter, this first grace of God’s calling departed, and Simeon (Silouan’s name in the world) returned to the

6. John 13:1.

7. Archim. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan*, p. 11.

worldly ways of the youth of his village. It was then that God allowed him to fall into two grave sins for which he later repented all his life. Thus did the clamour of youth and the haze of despondency begin to drown the first summons to the monastic life, and he lost the grace that initially visited him.

But God, Who had chosen him, foreseeing his grateful fidelity, called him again, this time by means of a vision. As his biographer, the Elder Sophrony, relates, after one of those days of careless living, having fallen asleep, he dreamt that he saw a snake crawl down his throat. Feeling utterly appalled, he jumped up, whereupon he heard a voice saying to him, 'Just as you found it loathsome to swallow a snake in your dream, so I find your ways ugly to look upon.'⁸ This voice was unusual and extraordinarily sweet. St Silouan was convinced beyond doubt that it was the voice of the Blessed Virgin. This voice, with its beauty, meekness and unutterable sweetness, transmitted to the youth the energy of divine grace, which overwhelmed him and shook him to the core of his being. To the end of his life he gave thanks to the Mother of God who did not despise him in his sinful state, but deigned to come to him herself and to lift him from his fall. He attributed the fact that he had not been deemed worthy of seeing the Mother of God to the state of his impurity that possessed him at that time.

This new calling, which occurred a short while before his military service, decisively determined the course of his future. He radically changed his life. He felt deeply

ashamed about his past, and this shame was transformed into the most powerful and ardent repentance before God. We see the same phenomenon in the sacrament of confession: the more shame we feel when we strip ourselves naked before God, the more strength is given to us to overcome sin and the passions.

With this repentance, he received a new outlook on life and the world, which manifested itself in his attitude towards all things. He became deeply aware of the fleetingness of the visible world, and of the importance of eternity as the true destiny of our temporary existence. This outlook could be clearly seen in his conversations and in his behaviour as a whole with the people around him. During one of the village fêtes, as Father Sophrony relates, Simeon noticed a middle-aged fellow villager who was playing the accordion and dancing. This made an impression on him and drawing him aside he asked him, ‘How can you play and dance like that, Stepan – didn’t you once kill someone?’ He had indeed killed a man in a drunken brawl. Stepan answered, ‘When I was serving my sentence I prayed and prayed, begging God to forgive me. And He did. That is why I can now play and be happy.’⁹ Simeon, who was himself burdened by the guilt of his own sins, understood how one can ask God for forgiveness and obtain it, as Stepan did. This event confirmed him further in his own personal repentance.

While he was in this ardent state of repentance, he joined the army and his term went smoothly. He proved himself to be conscientious, kind and willing. He became a

pleasant, amiable and precious counsellor to his companions. His mind, though, was preoccupied by the Last Judgment, and his care was how to please the Lord, Who was increasingly revealing to him the vanity of this world. Towards the end of his military service, he went to visit St John of Kronstadt in order to ask for his prayers and blessing for the future. The Saint was absent and Simeon left him a note with but a few words: 'Batiushka,¹⁰ I want to become a monk. Pray that the world does not hold me back.'¹¹ He returned to his barracks and, as he himself professed, from the very next day he felt the flames of hell roaring round him.

While in this state, he arrived on Mount Athos and entered the Russian Monastery of St Panteleimon. There Simeon began his new life and his struggle for eternal salvation. He spent his first few days in complete silence, recalling and writing down all his sins in order to make a general confession, as was the Athonite custom and practice. The tormenting awareness of hell which accompanied him, together with the grace from the sacrament of confession, engendered in the soul of the young novice an unrestrainable and ardent repentance. After his confession the confessor encouraged him to rejoice for the forgiveness he had received, and for the new life which the Lord had given him on Mount Athos, that 'haven of salvation'¹². Inexperienced as he was, Simeon accepted the advice of the confessor with simplicity and faith, and delivered himself

8. Ibid., p. 15.

9. Ibid., p. 16.