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Following Live Streaming and Finding the Streams of Living Water



Thirty years ago when I was a young novice at Saint Tikhon's Monastery, I recall being moved while reading an account of the Athonite Elder Callinicus the Hesychast (1853–1930) who went to the austere community of Father Daniel, a community in the Athonite desert always lacking milk, cheese, and eggs. Father Daniel explained to the young Callinicus , "At Pascha, we have no red eggs to eat. One that is preserved from year to year is brought out that we may see it and remember the Feast." (Archimandrite Cherubim, *Contemporary Ascetics of Mount Athos*, 180). This same Elder Callinicus later chose to lock himself up in his tiny cell on the side of a steep slope of Katounakia for forty-five years. Towards the end of his life, his countenance was afire with the light of Tabor; his words were full of grace; and his joy was indescribable. He may never have tasted again a Paschal egg, but he drank regularly from the streams of living water promised by our Savior. In our present trials, his example of great sacrifice for the love of our Christ can not only comfort us, but it can also show us a path that leads from noise to stillness, from turmoil to peace, from the bustling world around us to the radiant Kingdom of God within us. And that path is the one prepared by prayer and attention focused as sharply as possible upon our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Elder Callinicus had no Holy Week; he infrequently had communion; he did not even have the support of praying with other Christians. But he did find God in solitary prayer and that not only made up for everything, but also enabled him to ascend to mountaintops that many with everything do not even suspect exist. The involuntary asceticism and constraints that the current crisis places on us can hardly compare to the voluntary asceticism of that blessed monk, but God can bless us richly in these conditions if we embrace them with gratitude, if we offer them up with love to God, and if we fill our time with that simplest of prayers: Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, thereby letting it fill in the gaps of our Holy Week, letting it fill in our yearning for Holy Communion, letting it turn our homes into places of epiphany where we can meet God and God can meet us.

For that meeting to take place, we will have to offer just a bit of voluntary asceticism in addition to the involuntary asceticism imposed on us. We can still have our paschal eggs and our fellowship with others by phone and video calls. But we will also need to learn to make some time for being by oneself with God alone. We will need to learn how to turn off our electronic devices and to light a candle; we will need to turn away from the whirling frenzy of images and information that we let enter our minds and turn our hearts towards the one thing needful. We will need to return to ourselves and to look at the only screen where we can truly find God, the screen of our heart, which is the gateway to the very Kingdom of heaven.

The shepherds of Christ’s Holy Church across our nation have wisely encouraged the use of technology to meet the faithful’s need for corporate worship. Saint Basil himself speaks of the benefit of using technology to “meet a need” (Extensive Rule, PG 31.1017b). Live streaming indeed responds to many needs. It provides the emotional security of an anchor in uncertain times, the sociological assurance of a familiar context in a changed world, and the spiritual support of approaching God according to the time-honored order of the Church typicon. And yet, we should be aware that livestreaming does not assure us of partaking of the streams of living water, any more than owning a Bible assures us of being illumined by divine wisdom. In fact, over-reliance on our computer devices may be a hindrance to reaching the most important goal for us this Lent: to find every other possible way for communion with God apart from those blessed ways that we can no longer access, so that we may still continue to commune with Him both night and day.

The Elder Aimilianos taught that, in the use of technology, it is important to exercise restraint and spiritual vigilance (*The Authentic Seal*, 350–351). Our

computer screens are often just an extension of the illusions and desires flickering through our minds. They are places of dispersion, disconnection, and distraction. Using them to follow Holy Week services puts them to a good use, but our focus is still outwards, not inwards, where the Kingdom of God is to be found. At times, it may be more beneficial to read the services of Holy Week on our own, standing before our icons with the fear of God, than it is to follow a live stream. At other times, our prayers may ascend more easily to heaven by listening to the services of Holy Week by internet rather than watching them online. In other words, we can let the live-streamed service play with the screen off while we stand, bow, kneel and cross ourselves in a darkened room made fragrant with incense and illumined solely from the warm light flickering from a vigil light or candle burning before an icon of Christ, his most pure Mother, or the crucifix. And, of course, the final option of joining with our bishop or priest by prayerfully watching a live streaming service is also blessed. Whatever helps us to pray best at the time is the best choice for us, and as Saint Theophan the Recluse would say, “if prayer is right, everything is right.”

During these days, let us never forget that our Gracious Lord Jesus Christ is always with us and for us. Let us also remember that we have to seek Him out if we are to be aware of His holy presence. Our approach has to be active, not passive, our focus single-minded, not dispersed, and our dedication consistent, not unreliable. Even spending only fifteen minutes a day at prayer alone with God can begin a blessed change in the way we understand ourselves and look at the world around us. The example of the Elder Callinicus and countless others shows us that this need not be the worst Holy Week or Pascha of our lives. If we manage to find the Jerusalem in our heart, we can truly ascend to the Jerusalem with our Lord going to his voluntary Passion. We may even be granted a small taste of those peaceful Paschas celebrated on the cliffs of Athos, those inward looking Paschas full of the quiet radiance of our risen Lord. May such a Pascha indeed be ours, for if it is, even this Pascha can be beautiful, preparing us to be the Christians we were always meant to be, Christians who have discovered what “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Amen.

— Source: oca.org