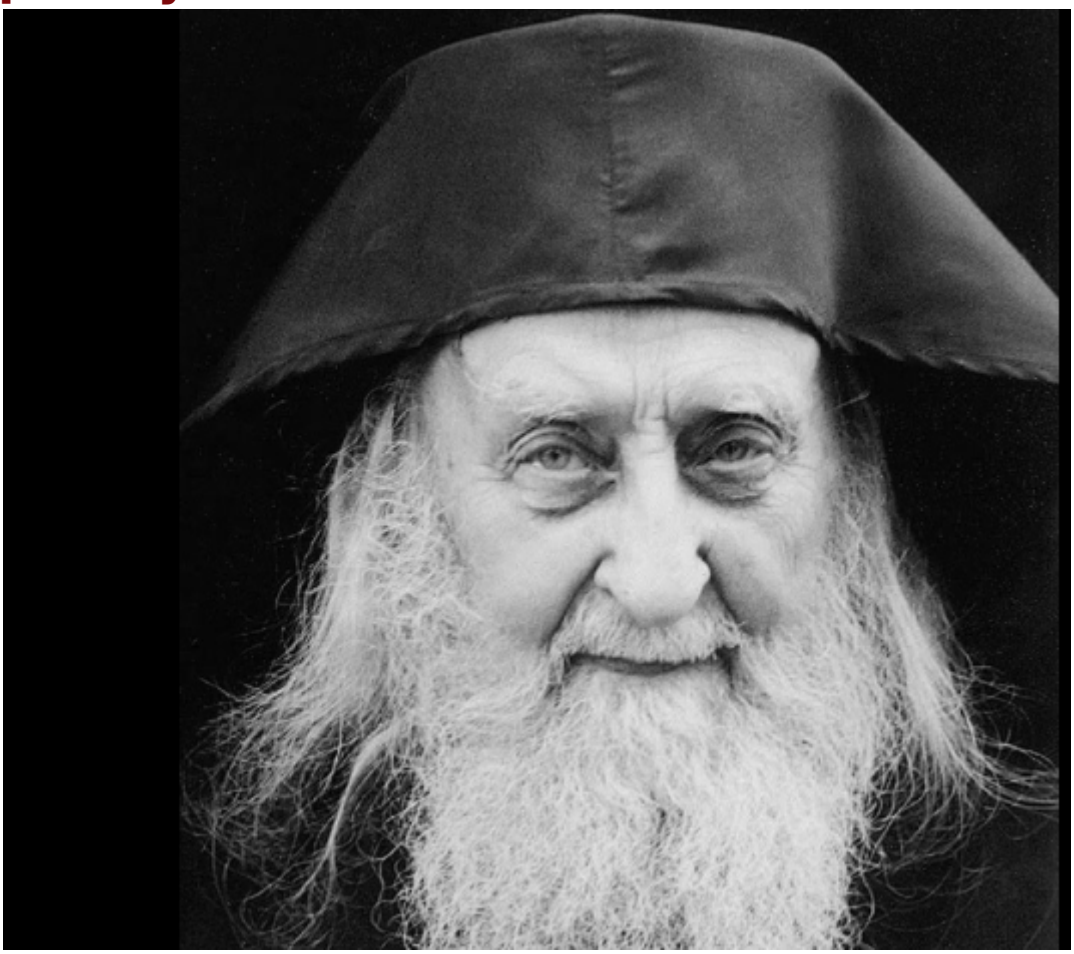
01/07/2021

St Sophrony: The Communal life of the Church



On the 11th of July the Church commemorates Saint Sophrony, the Athonite ascetic and monastic who sparked the flame of faith and vitalised Orthodox Christian spirituality in the United Kingdom. St Sophrony (1896-1993) was canonised on the 22nd of October 2019 by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. We will dedicate the forthcoming weekly meditations to the writings, the example and the legacy of St Sophrony, the Saint who offered us a beacon of light, a prayerful, humble yet authentic and graceful presence and Christian witness in our country, by founding the monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex.

‘Exceedingly honourable are thy friends O Lord,’ (Ps 138:16) the Prophet and King David writes. St Paul tells us that by seeing the courage, the example and the witness of holy people, we in turn are encouraged to lead a life of dedication to Christ, a life characterised by His love: ‘Seeing we are also compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every burden, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.’ (Heb 12:1)

Holiness, transformation and Sainthood are not simply, according to the tradition and teaching of the Church, the aims and goals of each Christian, but rather they express the natural state of human existence, the fulfilment of our human lives. We have been created by God to be nothing less than a reflection of His perfect goodness, a witness to His philanthropy, a partaker of His uncreated energies and an example of His mercy. St Sophrony writes: ‘The human soul is the image of God. It finds rest only when it attains perfection.’

This may all seem a distant dream, an unrealistic task, or even an impossible challenge, when perhaps faced with frequent temptations, consistent barriers, constant challenges in life. We cannot grow in faith and in virtue on our own. For this reason Saint Sophrony advises us:

‘We do not think about how to change with our own powers. We strive to receive strength from God in order to act at all times with love… ‘The most important thing in the spiritual life is to strive to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. It changes our lives We will live in the same house, in the same circumstances, and with the same people, but our life will already be different. But this is possible only under certain conditions: if we find the time to pray fervently…that a prayerful attitude may define our entire day.’

While Saint Sophrony stresses the need for us to cultivate the personal prayer of the heart, never forgetting Christ in our daily lives and routines, the sacramental life of the Church must be the epicentre of our lives and the source of all other endeavours, missionary work and ministry:

‘Our greatest missionary work in life takes place in the Divine Liturgy. The Fathers of the Church would always build an Altar of Sacrifice in whatever country or city they travelled to. And this is so, because when the heart is sweetened by the Divine Liturgy, it then seeks God. It then desires to live an Orthodox ecclesiastical life, the heart of which is the Holy Eucharist.’

He thus stresses the communal aspect of our worship and our Christian witness. If

we were to ask for Saint Sophrony's advice on 'who I am,' or 'how can I find myself,' perhaps the Saint would advise us not to search for fulfilment in ourselves, not to look out for ourselves solely, but to look to Christ and His Body, the Church. We 'should not be praying with self-centred feelings. We do not celebrate as individuals,' the Saint stresses.

We must therefore strive to grow, pray, worship and minister to Christ together, with no ulterior motives or agendas, but in a spirit of community and self-sacrifice. Only in the context of the Church can we live out Christ's commandments and fully unite with Him: 'Within the Church it is possible to live the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ,' Saint Sophrony writes. Within the Church 'one becomes everything to all men, when he behaves sincerely with those whom he meets and with whom he lives, when he has no desire to impose his own will, but accepts the will of others as his own.'

As we approach Saint Sophrony's feast, let us rejoice alongside the beloved monastic community of St John the Baptist in Essex, as a local Orthodox Church, as young Orthodox Christians of this country, in appreciation of his legacy and teaching. Let us also realise that we have the responsibility and calling to play our own part in preserving and cultivating the authentic expression of the Christian faith in these lands, for the glory of God and for the spiritual benefit and edification of all peoples.

How about reading more of St Sophrony's writings and teachings?

Useful sources used:

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• We Shall See Him As He Is, 1985. Essex, England: Stravropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1988.
• Saint Silouan, the Athonite, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press; reprint edition, 1999.
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