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EVERY ONE OF US IS A POTENTIAL SAINT



Every one of us is a potential saint, even if we do not believe right now! Metropolitan Nicholas (Khadzhinkolai) of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, a hierarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, considers disbelief the most valuable experience in the spiritual life.

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—Despota Nicholas, why does disbelief have meaning and value for you? It is, quite frankly, paradoxical to hear from a metropolitan...

—Because the Lord reveals Himself only to those who sincerely doubt His existence. I doubted. When I was seventeen, I straight out said, “I am an atheist.”

—Did it last long?

—About until I was twenty-two. I still believe it's better to humbly doubt from the sidelines than to boast of being within the Church's enclosure [when you don't actually believe]. My best teachers in the faith were not "savvy" theologians and hereditary clergymen, but those who underwent the novitiate of unbelief.

—It's all the stranger to hear from a Greek—it's more like something from recent Russian history...

—Greece truly perceives itself as being within the two-thousand-year continuous tradition, and with you [Russians—Trans.] everything is indeed being born again! This explains the inexpressible color and freshness of Church life. It is a revolution of the Spirit! It's unique in the history of mankind and indicative for Orthodoxy throughout the world, because our faith is not of this world. That's why I didn't want to believe in my youth simply "because you have to." I didn't need anyone's stories and arguments about Christ, I was looking to experience His presence. But He didn't come. And I confessed: "I don't know anything about Him." The true God is the One without Whom it's impossible to live. The Church lives by Him, because He isn't a certain sum of opinions about Him by certain people; He is Life itself.

Since you're already physicists... First lessons on Athos

—Even St. Paisios the Athonite was infected with disbelief in his adolescence. Did you meet Elder Paisios while you were still an unbeliever?

—Yes, and I didn't understand him. I can even say I was scared. He was obviously able to unfurl my life—I felt it but didn't succumb. I tried to get out from under his influence. I thought, let him train on others.

I remember when I first went to see him in his kalyva with my brother, he asked: "What do you guys do?" "We're physicists," we answered. "Listen! Since you're already physicists, you have to achieve the main thing—the disintegration of the atom of your own self. Then subtle energy will be released, by which you will be able to escape the Earth's gravity and embrace the contemplative Sun, which is Christ."

I really liked how, using the language of science familiar to us, he opened spiritual horizons to us. Over time, these horizons became significantly more interesting even than cosmic heights for me.

In our first visit to the elder, I heard how some high schooler asked his blessing to

become a novice and the elder joked: “Have you finished college?!” and when he, downcast, said he was still only in high school, the elder said: “I only take those with a university diploma!” I remember that...

Do you know what else he interested us in in our first visit? He said: “I don’t know what sciences you’re studying there, in your universities, but if you come here, to the Holy Mount Athos, then understand that here we study only one natural science—holiness. If someone loves God above all, then he feels that his skin is softening, and he melts all over like wax, receiving the fire of God’s blessing. Thus is the human soul freed...”

This was incomprehensible for me at the time... But the elder continued.

“There’s one man,” he said (I think about himself), “who is sometimes transported to other places on the planet.” Can you imagine what it was like for physicists to hear this?! “During his prayer here, on Athos, the Lord enraptured him and carried him to the region of the Caspian Sea... and gave him a commission. When he fulfilled it, God carried him back. How could that happen? And what proof is there that it really happened? When he returned to his cell he suddenly saw in his hand a flower that only grows in the Caspian region...”

I didn’t believe him then. I perceived everything too rationally then. I still don’t know how much I have managed to split the atom of my self; but at least now I don’t have a problem perceiving such stories.

“You no longer ask: Does God exist? You see Him!”

—Then you were even able to live next to Elder Paisios?

—Yes, my college degree helped [laughs]. I really went and showed him my diploma and reminded him of his words... But he generally wasn’t taking anyone to himself.

I’ll tell you, these are completely different things: To hear something about a saint, to read about his works, to meet a saint, and to live together with a saint. When you find yourself near such a person, like Elder Paisios, you are assured: The Lord lives. He’s real and you communicate with Him. You no longer ask: Does God exist? You see Him!

—That is, knowledge in the Church is always experience? And this in particular is the difference between faith and scientific knowledge?

—The power of faith expands your consciousness beyond its inherent rationality.

God is bigger than our conceptions of Him. Those who seek Him with their reason will not find Him, because such a God does not exist. There is no God Who can be deduced from the equation of life and proved logically. The true God is born in the heart in the experience of faith, and thus death is overcome.

I really envy in a good way those youths who entered the monastery before being poisoned by skepticism, pragmatism, and rationalism. Their noses have not fallen to the ground. Otherwise, such reason would impede the search for God. It's impossible to comprehend God with such a mind.

God can reveal Himself. And He does it only if you humble yourself, recognizing your mind as nothing. And then, having already experienced God, you can turn to your mind to tell others something about the Creator. But not anything more than what God Himself revealed to you about Himself.

In academic life we try to understand something and make a discovery at all costs. But our spiritual life reveals to us that some things are impossible to understand in principle.

Humility is the whole essence!

—Is that how a man humbles himself?

—Humility is the alpha and the omega of the spiritual path. For God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5). The great St. Gregory Palamas constantly prayed: “Lord, illuminate my darkness.” Humility—in it is the whole essence!

This fully applies not only to the spiritual life, but also to academics. The skills of honest scientific research help us to see God as if through a person and the visible cosmos—and to humble ourselves. When an academic reaches the unsolved mysteries of existence in his scientific search, he stops, feeling his powerlessness to learn anything more. Then he begins to humbly do his work. This is “humility”—the whole point of true science.

—Then why, having made your greatest discovery, didn't you continue humbly doing your work, but instead became a monk?

—When you have the opportunity to fly to Heaven, you can't bear to wander along the earth.

—Despota Nicholas, what should those who haven't yet had the experience of such spiritual levitation do?

—Pray. If we don't notice miracles, we don't see them only because we don't know how to pray. If we want to see great miracles, we should become people who know how to pray.

In prayer, our heart unites with Christ

—How can we learn to pray?

—This world tries in every way to divert us from prayer, cramming our minds with various supposedly necessary knowledge and information. Ignorance, in fact, can be as valuable as the experience of unbelief. Empty your heart of all worry. Learn to minimize attention to that which scatters. Abba Isaac the Syrian said that in prayer all external feelings are killed, while the internal ones awaken. Sometimes it's like the resurrection of Lazarus the Four-Days-Dead: Come forth!—in prayer the soul hears the voice of the Savior and goes beyond the mortal frame of this world.

"It's probably difficult," you'll say. "Difficult, but necessary. And it's not impossible," I respond. We have to start with the small things: Maybe you won't read all the morning prayers at first, but we have to pray at least a little.

—On the contrary, neophytes often want to undertake great podvigs immediately.

—It's a problem if there is such a desire. Even drivers know that we can't start from fifth gear—only from first.

—Do you have a recommendation for how it's better to begin learning prayer—with diligence in home or church prayer?

—They are different things: When we pray in church, we ascend to an orbital station and move along a trajectory already verified by the Holy Fathers, and when we pray in private, we create our own means of transportation and set off on a journey! Both are important. Ten minutes—is that a lot? Five minutes? Only, from your whole heart! You just have to calm down, detach yourself from the vanity of the past or the coming day, and pray from your whole heart!

—And if prayer is done mechanically, is there no point in such a morning or evening rule?

—No, you still have to "read" them. Even mechanically. Generally, of course, we

need to pray correctly. That would be better! But you shouldn't only eat in restaurants, but also cook yourself sometimes. Do you understand? It's also humbling. And then, we need to constantly remember that there is a large difference between what is called "reading prayers" and "praying." Prayer is when your heart begins to move in a certain direction, set by the Gospel commandments, and unites with Christ. We must learn to trust God.

We were standing before the burial shroud not long ago... The Lord wasn't crucified for us so that we would rot alive in many cares. Pascha is not exhausted by the days of Bright Week.

Principles of life for those striving for holiness

—Despota Nicholas, share with us, please, some secrets of mastering the science of holiness.

—I'll name four Greek words that are the basic principles of life for the Athonite monk-hesychast, and for any person striving for holiness.

Ανάτασις—ascend! Let us lift up our hearts! Our soul has the possibility of reaching the most unimaginable heights. A man who has experientially felt that this is so is already more like an angel than a man. His condition is more consistent with being in the Kingdom of Heaven, it's already incomparable with the state in which the rest of the people on Earth live. He doesn't need to protect God and the Church in discussions anymore; people around him don't have any questions anymore. This is because his soul has risen so high. This is part of the capabilities of our souls!

Ἐκστασις—ecstasy. In all of our actions there must be a surmounting impulse. We're doing everything for God's sake! After all, is there anything more important than God?! We trust our logic, science, and the news we hear every now and then, so why can't we trust God?! It is always beyond the limits of fallen human nature. It doesn't mean the essence of man is overcome, but we are called to go beyond the bounds of our habits, passions, and sins.

For this to happen requires έντασις—tension, which comes from the experience of the ascetic struggle. We must labor ascetically with perseverance. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Mt. 11:12).

And this tension is resolved in έκτασις—the stretching of human nature beyond its capabilities.

We ourselves don't know what's hidden within us

There are unlimited possibilities hidden within every one of us—they're just sleeping. Watch and pray (Mt. 26:41), we are commanded in the Gospel. The university of the Church allows us to discover these possibilities. When we free them, our soul can be in constant compresence with God. This is what Elder Paisios spoke about it in our first meeting, but I couldn't understand it then...

But in fact, all the saints, any man of God, until he begins to lead an ascetic lifestyle, doesn't know that he can pray so long and fast, so much and so simply, and so on. If God hadn't revealed to him that this is all already within his capacity, he himself wouldn't know.

—Indeed, capacity, they say, is from experience...

—That's why we need to start living with God, so all the depth of the possibilities of our nature would be revealed before our eyes are closed. Every one of us is a potential saint. It's a pity to die without having tried anything like that, don't you agree?

The whole life of the Church is filled with examples of the courage of people who decided to live with God. Imagine, the world couldn't know Sts. Sergius of Radonezh or Seraphim of Sarov, and they themselves wouldn't know what forces are hidden in their souls if not for the experience of the Church!

However, the meaning of life is not in achieving extreme goals, but in humility—and through humility the Lord gives the opportunity for our soul to open up in the measure and direction that is pleasing to Him.

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