



Fire & Light

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Holy Fathers of the

Seventh Ecumenical Council (787)

**Martyr Longinus the Centurion,
who stood at the Cross of the Lord**

You have enabled all men,
O thrice-blessed Fathers,
to come to the knowledge
of the Trinity by Its works!
For by your mystical speech
you have appeared as
champions of the Orthodox
Word, proving that the Trinity
is truly the Creator of the
world! - Vespers



† *Many Years! Newly Illumined Child Mary Blake of Montgomery!*

"The Divine Liturgy is a betrothal to Christ, it is a wedding. It places us in His Kingdom. Later, we will go out again, we will go back to our house with our passions, with our sins, and with our miseries. It doesn't matter. Again we will go to Liturgy, and again we will seize Christ, He will deify us again. And thus, with continuous struggle, with a continuous path, with the Priest before us and we behind, we will reach the Kingdom of Heaven. Do we go to the Liturgy with this desire? We obtain the Kingdom of the Heavens."
- Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra

"Drink Holy Water, the more often, the better. It is the best and most effective medicine. I'm not saying this as a priest, I'm saying it as a doctor, from my medical experience."
- St. Luke the Blessed Surgeon, Archbishop of Simferopol

"It is all grace, but I try not to waste it." – Natalie Cole

On Humility - St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

Father Paisios said that the spiritual work of a Christian should focus on the acquirement of humbleness.

— God loves man very much; He knows very well the problems of each one of us, and wishes to help us before we ask Him to do so. Since God is omnipotent, there are no difficulties which He cannot overcome, except one. The difficulty God faces, and I repeat, it is the only one, is that He "cannot" help us when our soul is not humble. God "feels sad" because, while He sees His creature suffer, He "cannot" offer any help. Whatever help He offers, it will harm the person because he lacks a humble mind- set.

Whatever happens to man, depends absolutely on his humbleness. For instance, we see a man striving and finally being subdued by one of his passions. God allows this to happen for only one reason: because his soul is filled with conceited thoughts and pride. Perhaps this man hates this specific passion and fights really hard to get rid of it. He will not achieve anything, however, because God does not help him; and He will not help him unless he humbles himself. Although he hates this specific passion, he is subdued by pride, which is the passion that introduces man to all other passions. "Pride is the cause of every passion," said St. John of the Ladder. {over}

Man wants to progress spiritually and asks God to give him love, prayer, obedience and all virtues. We should be aware that God will not give us what we are asking for, no matter how hard we try, unless we humble ourselves. If our only aim is humility, then God will give us everything for free.

God wants and desires only one thing from us: our humbleness. He does not need anything else; just to humble ourselves, so He can actually make us partakers of His divine grace, which was granted to us through the mystery of Holy Baptism. Although we did not love Him yet, neither had we struggled to acquire His grace, He gave it to us as a gift out of His extreme kindness. He is only asking from us to humble ourselves and respond out of gratefulness and appreciation to His love. Thus, divine grace, which abides in us, will be activated and function accordingly. It will make us love God and get to know Him; it will do everything for us, if we only humble ourselves and allow for it to act.

The only obstacle to the energy of God's grace is our pride, our lack of humility.

St. Peter in chapter 5 of his 1st Epistle helps us to clearly understand our fault and tells us what we should do: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you." (1 Peter 5:5-7)

If we concentrate solely on our struggle for humility, then everything will be granted to us by God as a blessing. When we take care of everything else except our humbleness, then we will never achieve anything good; even if we did, we wouldn't be able to keep it for long. We need only one thing: the humbleness of our heart, which will give rise to the Kingdom of God's grace.

A Brief Analysis of the Jesus Prayer, by Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra

The prayer of Mount Athos, who does not recognize it? It is comprised of one small phrase, of measured words:

"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

With the loud cry "**Lord**", we glorify God, His glorious majesty, the King of Israel, the Creator of visible and invisible creation, Whom Seraphim and Cherubim tremble before.

With the sweet invocation and summons "**Jesus**", we witness that Christ is present, our Savior, and we gratefully thank Him, because He has prepared for us life eternal.

With the third word "**Christ**", we theologically confess that Christ is the Son of God and God. No man saved us, nor angel, but Jesus Christ, the true God.

There follows the intimate petition "**have mercy**", and we venerate and entreat that God would be propitious, fulfilling our salvation's demands, the desires and needs of our hearts.

That "**on me**", what range it has! It is not only myself, it is everyone admitted to citizenship in the state of Christ, in the holy Church; it is all those who are members of the body of the Bridegroom.

And finally, so that our prayer be full of life, we close with the word "**a sinner**", confessing - since we are all sinners - as all the Saints confess and became through this sound sons of light and of the day.

Through this we understand, that this prayer involves: Glorification, Thanksgiving, Theology Supplication and Confession.

† † †

The Holy Fathers on Thoughts (I)

Where do thoughts come from? What to do with them?

...The war which the demons wage against us by means of thoughts is more severe than the war they wage by means of material things.

St. Maximos the Confessor

St. Paisios of Mt. Athos:

Once, a young man visited the Elder for advice. Being simple-hearted, however, he couldn't restrain from listening to negative thoughts. These thoughts were acting as an obstacle to every good work he was trying to accomplish. Father Paisios, due to his discretion, realized that his negative thoughts were the cause of his problem, and told him the following:

— There was a man who used to say: "If I get married and have children, and my children are boys and there is a war, they will have to join the army and finally they will get killed. So, there is no reason for me to get married."

Then, the Elder turns to him and says:

— Isn't that a silly thought?

— Yes, the young man replied.

The Elder went on:

— Be careful, because you are doing the same thing. Bear in mind that you will never achieve anything good, if you think and act this way.

"Almost all of us consider our thoughts to be simple and natural, therefore, we spontaneously rely on them. On the contrary, we should neither trust, nor accept them. We must not have any thoughts in our mind or heart, neither positive ones, nor negative ones, for this space inside us belongs to the grace of God. We are obliged to keep it clean, not only of our various thoughts but also of the slightest and most elusive slip of the mind. We can only achieve this, if we fervently love Christ and unhesitatingly trust Him. As a result, we humble ourselves, and divine grace, naturally, will be revived inside us, for it is only granted to the humble ones; "God opposes the proud, but gives Grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5).

"We must have positive thoughts, otherwise none of the spiritual fathers - not even the Saints - can help us. When Jesus was on the Cross and all the terrible events were taking place, two thieves were also being crucified with Him. "And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour" (Mk 15:33). "...And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs, after his resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to *many*." (Mt 27:51-53). Each one of them had a different attitude towards Him, even though they were both placed next to the same God; a God who had never been blamed for, or accused by anyone for the slightest sin. On the contrary, many people were benefited by Him: some had been cured of a specific disease, others had been resurrected and all these miracles took place in public. Now, even nature was reacting against the injustice done to Him.

- St. Paisios

Elder Ephraim of Arizona

On the remembrance of God, and on good thoughts

It is not so easy for the demons to harm a person who keeps the constant remembrance of God in his soul. They can tempt him, but it is difficult for them to harm him. This is because he does not permit them to trip him up, for he is armed with the weapon of the constant remembrance of God. Whoever has his soul's eyes open and sees God is not easily harmed by the enemies. The very spiritual men of old did not need spiritual books. They did not have such a great need to read many patristic books,

because they constantly meditated upon things about God. Whatever they saw immediately gave them an opportunity to meditate upon something, to discover something unknown. All of creation was a university for them. Wherever they turned their eyes, they saw something to meditate upon—sometimes the providence of God, other times His wisdom; sometimes His judgment, other times His teachings, and so on. With the eyes of their soul they saw invisible things. Meditating upon them filled their hearts with spiritual knowledge.

We people of today—since we do not have the eyes of our soul open—do not have the ability to remain in the spiritual meditation. Even when we do see something, we need religious books to know something about God. The minds of these spiritual men were so strong that they could conceive thoughts and ideas with deep wisdom. Our minds are so weak that they can barely retain anything. The Fathers then were, for the most part, simple people; yet, they acquired full knowledge, because the Holy Spirit helped them understand the Scriptures.

The remembrance of God is an all-powerful weapon, a mighty suit of armor against Satan and the various sins. When the mind ceases to remember God and meditate upon divine things, man is overcome by negligence, indolence, forgetfulness, and then by evil desires!

If you see your mind rushing towards the world, know that your soul lacks divine consolation, which is why it turns to the world for consolation.

When a person's soul is warm towards God, he is enlightened and feels compunction, and it is impossible for his mind to incline towards the world at the same time. The soul inclines towards the world when it is not united, in a sense, with God. The mind is an area, a place. If God does not occupy it, then the enemy will occupy it. This place cannot remain empty, having neither God nor evil, sin, temptation, or the activity of Satan. The mind is like a mill that is turning. Whatever is thrown into the funnel, which leads to the millstones below, will come out as flour of that type. If you throw wheat in, you will get wheat flour. If you throw thorns in, you will get thorn flour—a harmful substance. The mill is always turning; the mind of man is always working—like a mill. Do you want to have good results? Put good material into the mill. Do you want to find compunction, tears, joy, peace, etc.? Put good thoughts into the mill of your mind—for example, thoughts about the soul, about the Judgment, the remembrance of death, and so on—and then you will get corresponding spiritual results! But if a person puts sinful thoughts into the mill of his mind, he will definitely have sin as a result. The material that will be given to the mind depends on the intentions of man. And these intentions will be either commended or censured. We should always strive to have salvific thoughts and beneficial images in our mind, so that we do not leave room for Satan to throw in his garbage—sinful thoughts and fantasies!

Abba Moses was asked, "What should a man do in all the temptations and evil thoughts that come upon him?" The elder said to him, "He should weep and implore the goodness of God to come to his aid, and he will obtain peace if he prays with discernment. For it is written, "With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118:6).

The devil sees the strength and firmness of will of those who pay attention to spiritual life, and strives to conquer their mind by means of ... curiosity, in order to gain possession of their mind and will. For this purpose he is wont to suggest to them thoughts that are lofty, subtle and wondrous, especially to those who are sharp-witted and quick to make lofty speculations. Attracted by the pleasure of possessing and examining such lofty thoughts, they forget to watch over their purity of heart...; they make an idol of their own mind and thus, little by little, without realizing it, they fall into the thought that they no longer need any advice or admonition from others, since they are accustomed in all cases to hasten to the idol of their own understanding and judgment.

You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit,
James K.A. Smith, Brazos Press, 224 pages {The need for Liturgy in life}

Review by GRACY OLMSTEAD • September 22, 2016

I still remember learning Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 3 in E major. My violin teacher was a stickler for technique, especially when it came to playing Bach. She called this particular piece a "marathon": it required careful pacing and a good deal of commitment. There are a lot of fast passages that, if learned too hastily, sound rushed and fitful. The key, she affirmed week after week, was to practice the piece slowly with a metronome, paying excruciating detail to rhythm and fingering. She assured me that once I grew intimately acquainted with the notes and bowings, the speed would come by itself. Like second nature.

She was right. And to my surprise, the more time I spent practicing that piece, the more I came to love it. Whereas at the beginning of my study I was only mildly interested in Bach, the more I played this and other pieces by him, the more I came to love his music, with all its delicacy and finesse.

Perhaps it's this remembrance that helped me identify so deeply with James K.A. Smith's new book *You Are What You Love*. Smith begins his book with a classic quotation from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which Augustine declares that "You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." There is a teleological bent to human nature: we are dynamic beings in search of a specific end. And while philosophy since the Enlightenment has conditioned us to believe "we are what we think" (thanks in large part to René Descartes), Augustine's statement positions the seat of human character and creaturehood in the heart, not the head, suggesting that our proper end is devotion, not cognition. "What if, instead of starting from the assumption that human beings are thinking things, we started from the conviction that human beings are first and foremost lovers?" Smith asks. Then, the question becomes not "whether you will love something as ultimate," but rather, "what you will love as ultimate."

We are in fact creatures most often shaped by our gut instincts and desires—governed by eros, not thought. Smith doesn't use this term in a merely sexual sense: eros, for him, refers to the entire spectrum of human desires and loves that pervade our lives. But if our loves and motivations are governed by the heart or the gut, not the head, how do we know what we really love or want? Can't we all too easily deceive ourselves?

Smith says yes—but adds a word of assurance. Our hearts are not unnavigable and unknowable: they bend to the tunes and rhythms we set for them. The key is to know that love is a habit, not merely a choice. In order to foster proper loves, we must consciously choose to immerse ourselves in the correct "liturgies": defined here as daily rhythms, stories, and habits that shape us.

This is where that Bach Partita comes in: to foster virtuous love is "more like practicing scales on the piano than learning music theory," writes Smith. "The goal is, in a sense, for your fingers to learn the scales so they can then play 'naturally,' as it were. Learning here isn't just information acquisition; it's more like inscribing something into the very fiber of your being." Learning to love God is like learning to play Bach: it requires daily immersion in habits and practices that train the "muscles" of my heart to desire, and thus do, what it ought.

Smith points to the ancient liturgies of the Christian church as guiding voices that can sculpt our loves and pull us toward God. He pays careful attention here to the work that ancient musical worship, prayers, baptism, sacraments, and the liturgical calendar all do in shaping our loves. To take our faith beyond the realm of head knowledge requires "the recalibration of our heart-habits and the

recapturing of our imagination”—something that happens when we regularly engage in “embodied, tangible, and visceral” practices. The order and cadence of a worship service begins to shape our imaginations, and thus our loves.

While he doesn't unequivocally castigate modern churches, Smith strongly argues for a return to ancient ecclesiastical customs and traditions. He suggests that the disillusionment driving record numbers of young people from the church today has more to do with an abandonment of ancient liturgies than with “boring” tradition. Modern youth groups—offering doughnuts and grungy worship bands, hip youth pastors and foosball tables—tend not to reinforce the liturgies. Packaging a teaching in the trappings of pop culture treats young people like “thinking things” who just need the right verses and a few good allegories to stay in the church. But if Smith's premise is correct, these ministries negate their message by reinforcing secular liturgies on a subconscious, gut level. Youth aren't nourished by biblical arguments: instead, they walk away with stomachs sated by doughnuts, ears filled with popular music, and emotions fixated on the conversations and flirtations of their peers. This is not how we build ecclesiastical discipleship and community. This is how we lose young people to pop culture.

In contrast, the traditional liturgies of the church reveal to young people a depth that transcends cliché and a community “that is ancient, thereby connecting them to a body that is older than their youth pastor and wider than their youth group.” Indeed, Smith says his experience as a professor at Villanova University suggests that young people will be drawn and kept within the church by high church liturgy and ancient traditions—if the church is brave enough to embrace them once more.

But Smith's examination doesn't end with the ecclesiastical. If liturgy is to be defined as the habits and messages that undergird our lives and foster our loves, it cannot be confined to the four walls of the church. So he carries this examination onward: first to the family, calling parents to pay careful mind to the ethos they're fostering in their homes. “Every household has a ‘hum,’ and that hum has a tune that is attuned to some end, some telos,” Smith writes. “We need to tune our homes, and thus our hearts, to sing his grace.” We can affirm the true, the good, and the beautiful through what we eat, watch, play, and pray.

A Christian home should be mindful of formative liturgies—“story, poetry, music, symbols, and images”—that foster children's spiritual growth “under the hood” of consciousness. “Children are ritual animals,” he writes, “who absorb the gospel in practices that speak to their imaginations.” Participation in the liturgical calendar—using candles, colors, feasts, festivals, and stories—can help integrate our children into the family of faith.

But quotidian home practices matter, too: a family that regularly gathers around the dinner table is practicing a liturgy. So, too, the family in which gardening or other household chores are done together, bringing order and beauty to the home and its surroundings. Such practices help shape and cultivate the life within.

In education, there are also proper liturgies we can foster. Smith notes that from Sunday school to the university, there are stories of the good life, of what we ought to love, that are constantly propagated to our kids. He suggests fostering their moral imaginations at every opportunity, whether learning economics, U.S. history, or social studies. If we believe there's a telos to human existence, and we want our children to recognize it, we should craft their education in such a way that they learn to trace its patterns throughout life. A “holistic, formative approach to education ... is bound up with a teleological purview—embedding the tasks of teaching and learning in a bigger vision and ultimate Story that guide and govern learning.”

Smith warns that, if we do not tell such stories, we run the risk of our children tuning their hearts to

culture's alternative messages—to what he calls “rival liturgies.” These have their own vision of the good life and man's telos and are often fostered in specific spaces: the shopping mall, for instance, fosters a worship of materialism and consumerism alongside deification of the self. One could also point to habits of worship fostered around the television, the soccer fields, or football stadiums, and the ever present smartphone. Pornography is a steadily more pervasive influence on American society, shaping views of sex and intimacy in adolescents and adults. This is an example of how a secular liturgy can shape our loves.

Because “our idolatries ... are more liturgical than theological,” our daily habits and haunts reveal more about us than the statements of faith we might post on Facebook. Regardless of where you go, what you watch, what you listen to, there are liturgies to consume. And their messages—full of poignancy and life-driving potency—will direct your life goals and shape your character. If Smith is right, you become them because you are what you love.

Much like C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, Smith's book bridges denominational divides in order to urge a deeper appreciation and embrace of catholic, historic Christianity. He aims to foster practices that will encourage our faiths on an individual and church-wide level, without condemning a specific set of Christian believers. Such a project seems very timely, as legions of millennials leave the faith and an increasing number of American churches are shorn of their liturgical, theological splendor to become gyms and apartment complexes. American families, often driven apart by divorce, alienation, or generational division, are here reminded why they must hold fast the rituals and customs of their faith. We're urged to keep on the lookout for secular, consumerist liturgies that might tempt us to improper loves.

[Wikimedia Commons](#)

It's worth noting, too, that this book is palatable and engaging for those not sold on ancient church liturgies. I've spent the past couple months reading it aloud with my husband, who does not have a high church background and has expressed valid reservations in the past concerning its cadences of worship. This book helped him understand why I love liturgy and gave him a larger vision for the role liturgy can play in the church, regardless of one's denomination.

Every night, as I tuck my baby girl into bed, I sing hymns and say the Lord's prayer with her. If you think of her as just a tiny “thinking thing,” the ritual wouldn't make sense. She's too young to yet understand the words. But if we are indeed “first and foremost lovers,” creatures shaped by practice and liturgy, then every song and word has a purpose.

ST. PAISIOS OF MT. ATHOS ~ What are the Passions?

“Every person needs a ‘governing spirit’ [Psalm 50:12] in order to govern his own self, so that he is not ruled by the passions. I see the passions as the powers of the soul. God does not grant weaknesses; He grants powers *. But when we do not exercise these powers for what is good, then the devil comes to exploit them and they become passions. And afterwards, we complain and blame God. On the other hand, if we exercise these powers against evil, they will help us in the spiritual struggle.”

(*) “The Elder simply expresses the truth of our Faith, that God: ‘did not do anything evil nor created evil’ [St. John of the Ladder]. Consequently: ‘Neither did God create the passions in human nature, but because of our negligence they entered into our nature unnaturally’ [St. Nicodemos the Athonite]. According to the Holy Fathers, the passions derive from the unnatural use either of the functions of the body or of the powers of the soul. When this contrary to nature becomes chronic, it also becomes a bad habit that requires a great struggle to be uprooted.” (Fr. Demetrios Carellas)

From the Fathers:

On Creation not being spontaneous:

"What is it that gave order to things of heaven and things of earth, and all those things that move in the air and in the water, or rather to what was in existence before these, viz., to heaven and earth and air and the elements of fire and water? What was it that mingled and distributed these? What was it that set these in motion and keeps them in their unceasing and unhindered course? Was it not the Artificer of these things, and He Who has implanted in everything the law whereby the universe is carried on and directed? Who then is the Artificer of these things? Is it not He Who created them and brought them into existence. For we shall not attribute such a power to the spontaneous. For, supposing their coming into existence was due to the spontaneous; what of the power that put all in order? And let us grant this, if you please. What of that which has preserved and kept them in harmony with the original laws of their existence? Clearly it is something quite distinct from the spontaneous. And what could this be other than Deity?"

~ St. John of Damascus (8th century)

Prostrations...are very helpful after sleep, upon waking, as they also are for a young man, before lying down to sleep at night. Apart from igniting our spiritual engine before praying, prostrations also offer us many other good things. The first of these is that we venerate God and humbly ask for His mercy. The second thing is that our unruly flesh is humbled, bringing with it peace and dispassion of the flesh. The third is that they offer physical health and drive out the moldiness of self-indulgence, bring two-fold health to a person.

~ Elder Paisios of the Holy Mt. (+1994)

On Grace and Works

Grace is not merely faith, but also active prayer. For the latter shows in practice true faith, made living by Jesus, for it comes from the Spirit through love. And so faith is dead and lifeless in a man who does not see it active in himself. More than that - a man has no right to be called faithful, if his faith is a bare word and if he has not in him a faith made active by love or the Spirit. Thus faith must be made evident by progress in works, or it must act in the light and shine in works, as the divine Apostle says: 'Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works (James 2:18).'"

~ St. Gregory of Sinai (13th C)

On Faith

"Faith is the key of God's treasury. She dwells in simple, kind, loving hearts. 'All things are possible to him that believeth.' Faith is a spiritual mouth, the more freely it opens the greater the stream by which the Divine springs enter into it; let this mouth freely open, as your bodily one does; do not let your lips be compressed by doubt and unbelief: if you compress them by doubt and unbelief, the treasury of God's blessings will be closed to you. The more openly, the more heartily you believe in God's omnipotence, the more bountifully will God's heart be opened to you. 'What things soever ye desire, when ye pray believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them.'"

~ St. John of Kronstadt (1908)