

Elder Paisios (A talk by Dr A.M.)

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1. Introduction

In the Orthodox Church there are two ways to salvation. They are:

A/ the married life

B/ Monasticism

Both paths are blessed by God. Indeed Saint Seraphim of Sarov had said that it does not matter which approach we take, so long as we are practising Orthodox Christians. Tonight I would like to briefly focus on a monastic. We have had, and continue to have, many holy monastics (both women and men): Saint Anthony, Saint Xenia, Saint Mary of Egypt are only a small number of monastics who reached sainthood. The life of the monastic that I would like to discuss tonight is that of Elder Paisios. The term "Elder" means a person who has reached a high level of spiritual maturity and gained much Grace from God. The Greek equivalent of an elder is a "Geron", whilst in Russian it is a "Staretz".

2. Who was Elder Paisios?

Elder Paisios was born on 25 July 1924, in Cappadocia, Minor Asia. On his baptism he was given the name Arsenios by his godfather, Saint Arsenios (instead of Christos, the name chosen by his father). Shortly afterwards, his family migrated to Ipiros, Greece as refugees after the Asia Minor disaster.

Arsenios (Elder Paisios) had a deep desire to become a monastic. From a very young age he would go to the forest to pray. The Elder was drafted in the armed forces in 1945. He was recognised and admired for his good character and bravery. For example, he always asked to be based in the front line thereby preferring to put his life at greater risk than his fellow soldiers. Arsenios he did this because he realised that his fellow soldiers were likely to have had children and wives.

In 1949 he completed his national service and went to become a monastic on Mount Athos, or The Garden of the Mother of God. His spiritual struggle was centred around the need to cleanse his soul from negative thoughts and in the process cultivate positive thoughts.

He was very sensitive to other people and their needs, despite the numerous and persistent health problems that plagued him from 1966 onwards. He frequently felt weak and tired early from his ailments, but always had time for visitors and prayer

towards God. His sensitivity is also shown when in hospital towards the latter part of his life. He refused visitors, only because he felt that many people would come to see him, at a time when other sick people in the hospital may not have had any visitors. The Elder's extraordinary sensitivity towards his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is also shown when in prayer, he would never ask God for anything for himself. He felt that he had everything, through his divine baptism in the Orthodox Church. Rather, he would spend his time hearing and consulting the many people who were burdened with pain and problems. By night, elder Paisios prayed for not only the people who asked him, but for the whole world. Thus, his whole life was centred around God and His creation, the human being.

3. The Elder's Teachings

Many people went to Elder Paisios simply to get advice in order to solve their personal problems. This is despite the tiring journey to Mount Athos. His teachings basically stemmed from the contact with the various people who sought his advice. Some are as follows:

3a.

When human beings rely on their **own** thoughts and judgements, then they become susceptible to demonic influences that in turn can lead to major mistakes. The fathers of the Church did **not** rely on their own thoughts and judgement for matters. Rather, they relied on prayer, fasting and guidance from their spiritual father as ways by which God would guide them. Today unfortunately, we regularly see circumstances where people provide an answer even before the question is completed. This shows that some people do not hesitate to rely on their own thoughts and judgements that result in major crises in life.

In particular, we should not trust in our own thoughts because the demonic influence will be reflected:

- In occasions where thoughts are telling the individual that he/she is a good, a virtuous character, a struggler etc., which leads to provide pride
- And on the other hand lead to thoughts of despondency and that they will not be saved.

3b.

The elder regularly met people who were critical of other people. As a result, he would provide to them the following explanation:

There are only two categories of people. There is no third. The first category resembles that of a fly. A fly as you may know, has the characteristic of being attracted by uncleanliness. For example, if there is a garden full of beautiful flowers and an animal has left behind its excrement, the fly will fly over the beautiful flowers and land on the dirty part of the garden and sit there. If the fly could speak and it was asked if there were beautiful flowers anywhere, it would answer "I do not know". It would however, say that it knew of the existence of:

- toilets
- animal wastes
- rubbish
- generally unclean places/environments

The other category of people resemble the bee. The important characteristic of a bee is that it searches for what is good and sweet. For example, lets say that a room basically contains unclean elements, but in one little corner there is a loukoumi (a Greek sweet), the bee will fly over all the rubbish and uncleanliness in the room and eventually settle on the loukoumi.

If the bee could speak and it was asked the question: Where is there rubbish? it would say it does not know, but rather could say where there were flowers, honey and generally good things.

In other words the Elder wanted people in the first category to:

- Focus on themselves and their weaknesses rather than be hypocritical and judge others.
- Not to judge others because this precludes Gods mercy.

3c.

A pilgrim once asked the Elder the following:

" Elder, I am confused because some members of the Church state obedience is the most important virtue whilst others say prayer. Some Fathers of the Church state that love. As a result I am confused as to what Christ requires of us. The Elder responded as follows:

A pre-condition for acquiring any virtue is not to have your own will but rather to totally, unconditionally and voluntarily submit it to God and your fellow man. It is then that Divine Inspiration guides one in life and simultaneously also acquires

virtues. The situation is like a rocket that is ready for a mission into space. The countdown begins so that when zero is reached the rocket blasts off. In a likewise manner, when our own will reaches zero, then we take off spiritually.

Thus, the Elder was trying to emphasise humility as the mother of all virtues. That is, from humility one can acquire all the other virtues, with God's help.

3d

That person who desires a miracle, an extraordinary occurrence from God so as to believe, is not thinking in a noble manner. It is not that God cannot do this, but rather He avoids this so as to encourage the human being to come to Him on the basis of self will, based on the love of Christ, and not because God has the power to perform miracles.

God therefore, wants people to love Him because of the love He has shown towards them, particularly through the mystery of the Incarnation of God in becoming man through the person of Jesus Christ.

3e

A person once asked the Elder what differentiates a Saint from other people. The Elder responded by saying:

"It is Divine Justice"

The person then asked the Elder what is Divine Justice. The Elder responded by stating the following example:

Let's assume that two people are sitting in a room with a bowl of ten (10) apricots. If one of the two eats more than five (5) apricots then this is gluttony. If both eat five (5) apricots each then this is human justice. But if one of the two people realises that the other likes apricots and eats less than five (5), in order to allow the other person to eat more than five (5), then this is Divine Justice.

3f

God will not listen to our prayers and our night vigils will be in vain if we are unjust towards our fellow human beings.

3g

The Elder once said to a person in dialogue that a spiritual struggle will be fruitless if it self reliant because it indicates the person's egoism. Rather, a person should struggle with the assistance of prayer to God. This shows humility and in the process God will bless the spiritual struggle which in turn will lead to fruitful results.

3h

Prayer, and in particular alms giving are extremely beneficial for departed relatives who did not repent whilst living on the earth.

3i

Once a person said to the Elder:

"Elder, many see regular Church goers as Pharisees because they lack love and sacrifice towards others"

The Elder responded by saying:

“For a start, pharisaism means undertaking works in order to be seen and applauded. Secondly, how do these critics know that regular Church goes lack love and sacrifice towards their fellow human being?”

Then the Elder said to this person a story.

There was once a region in Greece that was plagued by drought. The monks of the monastery would give whatever surplus money that came their way to the suffering farmers.

However, there was a certain monk who did not fit this pattern. As a result, many saw him as “tight” with money. However, when the monk died, many farmers from the surrounding area came to his funeral to pay their last respects for the invaluable assistance provided to them.

Thus, the monk had SECRETLY given his surplus money to those farmers in chronic need thereby simultaneously fulfilling his Christian duty.

3j

When a person lives simply, understands his/her weaknesses and relies on God for protection and help, then the Good God seeing this provides Grace and help to the extent that it is spiritually visible.

3k

On the issue of death, the elder would say that there is no death, but rather a movement from one life to another.

3l

Elder Paisios also taught in a practical manner. One day, three people had visited him. He provided loukoumi and water to the first two to greet them in the traditional manner. However, when he came to the third person, the elder dropped the loukoumi on the ground, stepped on it and gave it to the third person. When this person asked why he was given a loukoumi grounded in dirt, the Elder said:

“This is what you are doing with the morals of the youth with your activities”

The important point to note therefore is not only the lesson that elder Paisios gave, but also the divine foresight given to him by God.

4. Elder Paisios’s Works

More importantly however, the Elder put his teachings into practise. The essence of his teachings was love toward God and His creation the human being. Indeed, he practised this out of divine love; that is, as payback for God’s unrestricted love to him and all people.

Mark 10, v43-46

“Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your

servant. And whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servants. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for man”

The Elder experienced his first health problem in 1966 when respiratory problems led to his hospitalisation for a number of months and eventually resulted in a large part of his lungs being removed. As a result, he had to take numerous pills over a prolonged period that caused him to feel weak and to get tired easily.

Elder Paisios’s respiratory problem deteriorated further and required further surgery and the elimination of another part of his lung. This in turn aggravated the Elder’s weakness and further shortened the time within which he would feel tired. Another side effect of his second lung operation was that he would get cold easily which required at least a light jumper, even in the summer.

The strong antibiotics that the Elder took led to a complication in his intestines where most of the food eaten would cause him discomfort.

In latter years he also suffered from an illness which created severe pain. Furthermore, from 1988 he suffered from bleeding of the intestine that eventually became worse. As a result, he had to go to the toilet regularly and at the same time found it difficult to sleep at night because of the acute pain. In the end, the pain was so severe that he once fainted.

Despite all his health problems which significantly weakened him and led to prolonged and severe pain, Elder Paisios nevertheless, being motivated by love, neglected himself in order to help his fellow human being in whatever way he could. Thus, he endeavoured to apply in his life, the important emphasises placed on sacrifice and love in the Bible. For example in James it states that:

“Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”

James 2, Verse 17,

Moreover,

In Mark 10, v43-46

Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many”

Thus, he regularly accepted visitors with all their problems, which he also made his own, dedicating by time to discuss matters. The Elder’s sacrifice was also shown when on a visit to the women’s monastery of St John the Theologian, he stood for hours on end, despite his severe pain to give his blessing to the many people who were there.

The Elder’s love even extended to people that had never met him. For example, between 9-10pm he would pray for those people working at night and between 10-12pm for those people travelling. From midnight onwards he would pray for all people who were in night clubs, and thereafter for all other people such as those in positions of government and influence so that would reach the correct decisions to

the benefit of society.

Elder Paisios only gave himself a few hours of sleep in the early morning in order to give him enough strength to confront the next day's visitors and their problems.

The Elder also spent a little time during the day carving little wooden crosses and icons that he gave to visitors as a blessing.

Elder Paisios's respect for people was so great that he would regularly make prostrations in front of them. When a fellow monk asked him why he did this, he answered:

“I see the Divine Grace which the person has acquired during the holy mystery of Baptism”

Thus, the Elder's actions showed that he took to heart the words of our Lord Jesus Christ:

“Greater love has no one than this, then to lay down one's life for his friends”

John 15, Verse 13.

Thus, Elder Paisios lay down his life every day and for all, both God and the human being, with absolutely no regard for his life.

5. On the Elder's Miracles

5a

A person had only one eye that the doctors suggested had to be operated upon. However, this person was extremely reluctant, fearing that if the operation was unsuccessful, then he would completely lose his eyesight.

He then travelled to Mount Athos to consult Elder Paisios. In particular, this man asked the Elder whether he should go through with the operation. The Elder responded by stating that he should go through with the operation. However, the man again informed the Elder of his fear of losing his eyesight. The Elder tried to persuade this man to go through with the operation. In the end, after much hesitancy, this man was persuaded to go through with the operation when the Elder had told him that if anything went wrong with the surgery, he would give him one of his own eyes. The man eventually had the operation with success. However, after the operation, the surgeon visited the patient to check on his health. At one stage, the surgeon informed the patient that:

“I couldn't help getting the impression that whilst I was operating upon you, somebody was guiding my hand”.

5b

A couple could not have children. Even the doctors had advised them that there was nothing further they could do to help them.

However, the husband had heard of Elder Paisios and decided to travel to Mount Athos to consult him. After the husband explained the situation, the Elder advised him not to lose heart, that his wife would eventually bear a child. This eventually happened when a baby boy was born.

After the child grew a little, the mother wanted another child. However, on this occasion the husband could not travel to Mt. Athos to ask for the Elder's prayers because he had slept in the Lord. Nevertheless, the mother went to the tomb of the Elder, at the Monastery of St John the Theologian that is on the outskirts of Thessaloniki. She prayed to the Elder for another child.

Subsequently, another baby boy was born. He was named Paisios, in honour of the Elder, who for a second time had interceded to God for the couple.

5c

A young man went to Mt. Athos from curiosity. He had also heard about Elder Paisios and therefore, decided to visit him. However, he wanted to test and tease the Elder. This young man said to the Elder:

"Elder, what is my name?"

The Elder replied:

"Your name is... Your name is... What are those instruments called in Athens that regulate traffic? That's right, Grigori and Stamati!"

The young man was shocked when he realised the Elder was trying to say that his name was Gregory. As a result of the Elder's prophetic insight this person repented and came closer to the Church.

5d

A certain person had health problems over a number of years. Doctors could not diagnose his particular health problem. He then decided to go and visit the elder to seek advice. He was told that the problem lay in the head and that a minor operation would solve the problem.

On leaving Mt Athos, he eventually went to various doctors with the information that there was a problem in the head. However, the doctors could not undertake a diagnosis because of the unavailability of the appropriate sophisticated medical equipment.

HOWEVER, after a couple of years when this equipment became available, the diagnosis was undertaken on the head, only to confirm what the elder had said a few years earlier.

5e

Elder Paisios's prophetic insight was also evident when he informed a certain person that the Soviet Union would collapse. However, this person refused to accept this because of the military strength of that country. The elder nevertheless insisted that this would happen and that he was going to be a witness to that event.

He also took the opportunity to mention that Constantinople would return to Greek hands in the near future. This prophecy was made in 1990 when a group of students from the Athonite school went to visit the elder in order to ask him whether this would actually happen, after having heard about this from others who had been in contact with the elder. However, these students were hesitant about asking this

question.

On leaving the elders keli, elder Paisios turned around and said to them:

“You should be aware that Constantinople will revert to Greek hands and you will all live to see this event”

It is important to mention that the elder performed many other miracles such as cure people from incurable diseases such as cancer, save people from committing suicide by miraculously appearing in front of them to assist them and he was able to read the minds of people. This humble servant of God was indeed given Grace from God for both his spiritual struggle and the sacrifice and love that he showed towards people.

CONCLUSION

We may all feel awed about the achievements of Elder Paisios and become despondent that we cannot reach the same heights. However, this need not be the case as the basic purpose of tonight’s talk has been to encourage us to more fully appreciate our Orthodox faith through the Elder’s life and as a result inspire us to struggle through our own individual situations.

As I outlined at the beginning of the talk, both the monastic and married lives are blessed by God and can lead to a fuller appreciation of His existence. After all, our Church is littered with married saints, such as Saint Sophia and her 3 Daughters, Saint Photini, the Samaritan women, who had children, Saints Constantine and Helen and many others.