# In the Era of Comforts There Is so Much Discomfort (1) (ELDER PAISIOS OF MOUNT ATHOS)

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### *Even Hearts Have Turned Into Steel*

Because modern conveniences have exceeded all bounds, they have become inconveniences. Machines have multiplied and so have distractions; man has been turned into a machine. All kinds of machines and inventions now rule over man. This is why human hearts too are turning into steel. All of these modern comforts make the cultivation of conscience in people difficult. In the old days, people used to work with animals and were more compassionate. If you overloaded an animal and the poor thing kneeled down from the weight, you felt bad for it. If it was hungry and looked at you snivelling, it broke your heart. I remember, when a cow of ours fell ill, we suffered with it, because we considered it a member of the family. Today people own lots of devices made of steel, but, unfortunately, even their own hearts have turned into steel.
Is the equipment broken? It is welded together. Is the car not running? It is taken to the repair shop. If it cannot be fixed, they throw it away; they have no feelings for it. After all, it's just a piece of iron. The heart does not take part in these decisions, and this is how selfishness and pride find fertile ground and take root.
Today, we have so little consideration for our fellow human beings. In the old days, if there was any leftover food, people would find someone that needed it and would give it away before it spoiled. A spiritually advanced person would even say, "Let the poor person eat first and I will eat later." Nowadays, people put the food in the refrigerator and don't even think of those in need. I remember, whenever we had a good yield of vegetables or fruit, we would always share it with our neighbours. What could we do with all that produce? It would spoil anyway. Now that we have refrigerators people think to themselves, "Why share it with others? We'll put it in the fridge and keep it for ourselves." And I will not even mention the tons of produce we throw away or bury in landfills, while millions of people in other parts of the world are starving to death.

### *We Are Mad About Technology*

Modern devices are endless. They run faster than the mind of man, because the devil has a part in it too. In the old days, when we did not have telephones, faxes, and all kinds of gadgets, we lived tranquil and simple lives.

- Back then, Geronda, people would enjoy their lives!

- Yes, they did, unlike today when all these gadgets are driving them crazy! All these conveniences make people suffer and suffocate with anxiety. I remember how cheerful people were when I was at the Sinai Desert! I remember, years ago, when I was at the Monastery of Sinai (2), what a cheerful people the Bedouin were! They lived a simple life in a tent. They could not live in Alexandria or Cairo; they found comfort in the desert, inside their tents. They drank some tea, if they had any, and praised God. But now with the advent of civilization they too have started to forget God. You see, they have caught the European spirit. First the Israelites constructed huts for them and then they sold them all the old cars of Israel (3). Ah, those enterprising Israelites! Each Bedouin now has a hut, a broken car parked outside and lots of anxiety. The car breaks down and they go through all kinds of trouble to fix it. And what do you think they gain out of all this? Nothing more than a headache!
At least in the old days, things were well-built and lasted a long time. Now you pay all this money to buy something and pretty soon it breaks down. So the factories keep making new things and taking people's money. People are working so hard trying to make ends meet. Machines are the brainchild of the European scientists who spend their time with "screwdrivers". Let's say, at first, they make a lid. Then, they improve it by making it a screw-on lid, after that they may add a push-button opening device to the lid to improve it even more. Each time, they try to improve it more and more... In other words, they invent new and better machines. And before the poor people have paid off the last model, they try to buy the latest and best. They end up tired and in debt. Today, even a poor man will sell whatever he has, oxen, horses, in order to buy a cheap car - pretty soon, the way things are going, we will have to go to the zoo to see a donkey! And so finally he buys a car. But then the car breaks down and there are no parts for it, or so they say, and he is soon forced to buy another one. He cannot afford the most expensive, so, he buys one that is better than what he had before, putting the old one aside. We must be very careful not to fall into this channel ourselves and try to keep up with the newest fashions!

### *Television Has Done Great Damage*

- Geronda, nowadays telecommunications are so advanced that one can see live what is happening at the other side of the earth.

- Yes, they see the entire world but they don't see themselves. That is the only thing they do not see. Today it's the human mind not God that destroys people.

- Geronda, is television very harmful?

- Of course it is. Someone came and told me, "Television is good, Father." "Eggs are

good too," I replied, "but if you mix them with chicken droppings, they become useless." The exact same thing happens with radio and television. Today if you turn on the radio to listen to the news, you must put up with listening to a song before you can hear the news. In the old days, it was different. You knew the time the news would come on, and that is when you turned the radio on. Now you are forced to listen to the song as well; otherwise, if you turn the radio off, you will miss the news. Television has done us great damage. It's especially destructive for children. A seven-year-old child came to the *Kalyvi* once. I saw the demon of television speaking through the child's mouth, exactly as demons speak through the mouth of the possessed. It was like a baby born with teeth. It is not easy to find normal kids; they are turning into little monsters. And you see they don't get to think for themselves, they only repeat what they have heard and seen on television. That's why they have come up with television to begin with; to make people numb and dumb, so that they will take what they hear and see on television for a fact and act accordingly.

- Geronda, mothers are asking us how they can keep their children away from television.

- They must help them understand that television dulls their children's minds. They lose the ability to think on their own, to think critically - not to mention the damage it causes to their eyesight. And we are talking about man-made television. But there is another kind, a spiritual television. When people uproot their old self and the eyes of the soul are cleansed, they can see into the future without the aid of any machines. Have they told their children about this other kind of television? If they don't, these boxes will make our children dumb. Adam and Eve had the gift of foresight. But they lost it when they fell from Grace. If the Grace of the Holy Baptism is preserved, children will get with it spiritual foresight. But this requires watchfulness, vigilance and spiritual work. Today, so many mothers, having lost their spiritual bearings, preoccupy themselves with worthless and frivolous things and then they come and ask me, "What am I to do, Father? I am losing my child!"

### *Monks and Modern Conveniences*

- Geronda, how should a monk use modern conveniences?

- He should always have fewer and simpler things than the rest of the people. I feel much better when I use wood for heating, cooking and handiwork. But when the forests become obsolete, I will use the simplest and cheapest available resources. An oil stove, for example, or some humble type of heating, and petrol gas for handiwork.

- How can one determine whether something is really essential in a Coenobitic Monastery?

- If they think in a monastic way, it will be easy to figure it out. If a monk or nun does not think in a monastic way, then everything becomes a necessity and he becomes worse than those who live in the world. Monks must live in humbler circumstances than they did when they lived in the world; never better. We should not have better things here than we did at home. In general, the Monastery must be poorer than the homes in which we were raised. This will help the monk with his interior life and will also be of help to lay people. God has provided that we do not find peace in possessions and comforts. If laymen are troubled by all these modern comforts, you can imagine how much more they trouble the monk. If I found myself in a rich house and the host asked where I would like to stay, in the living room with the fancy furniture, or in a stable with a couple of goats, I would honestly say that I prefer the stable with the goats because I would find more peace there. When I left the world to become a monk, I was not seeking a better house or a palace. My goal was to find something worse than what I had been used to. Otherwise I am not doing anything for Christ. But today's logic works like this: "How could living in a palace harm your soul? If you stay in the stable, it's going to stink while the palace will be full of sweet scents and it will be easier to make your prostrations." We must have a spiritual sensor. You see in a compass, both arrows have magnets that turn it in one direction or the other. Christ has a magnet too, but we need one ourselves in order to turn towards Him.

In the old days, life in the Coenobitic Monasteries was so hard! I remember in the kitchen they had a cauldron and used a crank to lift it. And we used wood to light the fire in order to cook. The fire was either too low or too high and the food would stick at the bottom of the cauldron. When fish would get stuck, they used a steel broom to scrape the bottom. Then we had to collect the ashes and place them in a clay jar with a hole underneath to make lye and wash the dishes. This was so rough on our hands! And we lifted the water with a windlass to the *archontariki*. Some of the things that I see today in Monasteries are not justified.

In one Monastery, I saw the monks cutting bread with a machine. That's not right! If someone is ill or not feeling well and cannot cut the bread with a knife, and there is a need to cut it because there is no one else to do it, then using a machine is justified. But when you see a healthy man cutting the bread with a wheel, you know there's something wrong. This fellow can work a jackhammer, but he uses a machine to cut bread, and considers it an achievement!

Make sure that you advance in spiritual matters and not in equipment and comfort. Do not delight in these things. If Monasticism abandons the ascetic life, it will not be Monasticism anymore. If you put convenience above Monasticism, above *ascesis*, you will not prosper. The monk avoids conveniences, because they do not help him spiritually. In secular life, excessive conveniences make life difficult for people. But comforts do not befit a monk, even if he could find peace in them. We should not seek comforts. During the time of Saint Arsenios the Great (4), they did not have electricity or gas lights; only some fancy lamps in the palace that used very fine oil. Couldn't he

have brought these lamps with him in the desert? Of course he could. But he did not do it. He used a cotton fuse with whatever kind of seed oil was available at that time. In doing our chores, we sometimes may justify the use of machines or other conveniences to do our work faster and have more time for our spiritual life. As a result our life becomes stressful and full of concerns and anxieties, and we come to resemble lay people rather than monks. When some young monks joined a Monastery, the first thing they did was to buy pressure cookers in order to gain time for their spiritual activities; they ended up sitting around and talking for hours. It's not that modern conveniences help us gain time and apply it to spiritual things. These devices do save us time, but we don't seem to have enough time to dedicate to prayer.

- Geronda, I heard people say that Saint Athanasios the Athonite was a progressive!

- Yes, he was progressive, but not in the sense that people understand the word today. Let them read the life of Saint Athanasios and see the difference. The Monastery had eight hundred to one thousand monks during his time and many people sought help there! There were numerous poor and hungry people who gathered at the Lavra Monastery to find food and shelter. The Saint had even purchased two oxen for the mill in order to cope with all these mouths. Why don't they do the same today? He had to create a modern type oven so that he would have bread to give to people. The Byzantine emperors had endowed the Monasteries with a lot of property because they served as Charitable Institutions. The Monasteries were established to help people spiritually and materially, which is why the emperors endowed them so well.
We must understand that if we carry on this way (without discrimination), the day will come when this world will end, and we will find ourselves standing before God, in debt. We monks should make use not only of everything that people discard today, but also of all useless things that the rich have thrown away in the past. You must remember two things: first that we are going to die and secondly that we may not die from natural causes. Either way, you should be prepared. If you remember these two things, all will go well, spiritually or otherwise. And then everything else will fall into place. ***Deprivation Is Good For Us***

- Geronda, why are there so many people suffering today?

- It's simple: they refuse to strain themselves. There is too much convenience and it's making people sick and miserable. Modern comforts have stupefied people and the sloth we see in so many today has brought on many diseases. In the past, it would take so much work to just thresh the wheat! The labour was hard but then the bread was so sweet! You never saw people throw bread away. If you found a small of piece of bread somewhere, you picked it up and kissed it. Even today, those who lived through the German Occupation will see a piece of bread and put it aside, while most

people will throw it in the garbage as worthless. They don't appreciate its value. How often do you hear "Praise be to God" for all the blessings we receive from Him? You see, everything today is done the comfortable way.
Deprivation helps a lot. When people are deprived of something, they come to appreciate it more. When we deprive ourselves voluntarily, with discernment and humility for Christ's love, we feel spiritual joy. If, for example, someone says, "I will not drink water today because so and so is sick and my God, I cannot do anything more than that," and actually does it, God will refresh him not with water but with spiritual lemonade, with divine comfort! The worn-out person feels great gratitude for even the smallest help. But take a rich, spoiled child; he does not feel any joy even when his parents satisfy all his caprices. He may have everything and still feel like his life is horrible; so he breaks and destroys whatever he finds, whereas some poor child will feel great gratitude for even a tiny bit of help. If a friend pays for their transportation to the Holy Mountain, they are very grateful to him and to God. You hear rich children say, "We have everything; why should we have everything?" They gripe because they have everything they want instead of thanking God and helping some poor person. There is no greater ingratitude than this. They feel a void inside, because they have everything. They blame their parents, because they give them everything, and then they leave home and go hiking around with a backpack. And the parents give them money to call home so that they will not worry, but these young people don't even care. Eventually, the parents end up looking for them.
A young man from a good family who had everything, but did not find fulfilment and joy in anything, left home secretly and slept in trains so that he could experience hardship. But if he had a job and lived with his sweat and toil, his life would have meaning, he would have peace and would praise God all the time.
Today most people are not deprived of anything and for this reason they do not have *philotimo*. If one has not worked hard, he cannot appreciate the hard work of others. What is the point of choosing a comfortable profession in order to make money, and then start looking for hardship? The Swedes, who receive state allowances for almost everything and do not need to work for it, end up roaming the streets. They get tired doing nothing and feel stressed because they are spiritually derailed like a wheel which leaves its axle and then rolls aimlessly and falls over the cliff.

### *All These Conveniences Are Making Us Useless*

Today people care for beauty more than anything else and this keeps them preoccupied. This, of course, suits the European way of life (5). With their screwdrivers hard at work, Europeans are constantly creating beautiful new things, and supposedly more practical, so that people will not have to move a finger. In the past, people worked with tools that made them stronger. Nowadays, the tools that we use at work make us need physiotherapy and massages. Doctors now have to be trained in massage therapy! Today you see carpenters with pot bellies! There was no

such thing back in our days! There was no way you could keep a belly and move that plane back and forth!
When conveniences become excessive, man is rendered useless and lazy. Even though we can turn something by hand, we think to ourselves, "No, I'll just press a button and it will turn by itself." When someone gets used to doing things the easy way, he wants to have it easy all the time. Today people want to work a little and get paid a lot. If they could get away without working at all, even better! The same spirit has entered spiritual life. We want to become saints without labouring for it.
People who live easy lives usually have bad health. They are so spoiled that, if a war breaks out, they will not be able to endure. In the old days, even children were tough and could endure a lot. Now we need vitamins B, C and D and a Mercedes in order to make it. Do you see how an atrophic child's arms strengthen the minute he starts working? Many parents come and tell me, "Pray for my child, he is a paraplegic" (6). The real question is who is paraplegic, the child or the parents? I tell them to feed the child non-fattening foods and make him walk. Once they lose weight, they start moving around with more ease, like normal children; they may even get well enough to play soccer. God will help the truly paraplegic children who cannot be helped by man. In Konitsa, there was a very difficult child, who had been burned by a bomb. His leg had shrunk and he could not stretch it out. But because he was very lively and moved his leg constantly, it eventually stretched out. He even joined the guerrilla movement under Zervas.
Myself, when I had sciatica, I said the Jesus Prayer while walking and my leg got stronger. Many times movement helps. If I fall sick for a couple of days and cannot move, I say, "My God, help me to get up and move a little and I will take care of the rest. I will go fetch wood." Remaining in bed makes things worse, which is why as soon as I gather the courage, even if I have a bit of a cold, I force myself to get up and cut some wood. I dress warmly to sweat the cold off. Of course I know that it's more comfortable to lie in bed, but I force myself to get up and it all goes away. For example, I see that when I have company and I sit on the log for a long time I become stiff. I could get a little rug to place underneath but then I would have to find one for all the visitors (7). That is why, after my visitors are gone, I go for an hour's walk and say the Jesus Prayer while walking. And because I have some circulation problems in my lower legs, I stretch my legs a lot. If I were to let myself go, I would need to be served, while now I can serve others.

- Geronda, is comfort always harmful?

- Look, in some cases comfort is necessary. If you are in pain, for example, you must sit on something soft. But why should it be made of velvet? It can be made of a simpler fabric. If, of course, you are tough enough, you will not need to use anything soft.

- Geronda, people use the expression, "He is an old bone."

- Yes, over there near the *Kalyvi*, there was a Cypriot monk, Elder Joseph of *Carpasia*. He was one hundred and six years old, but he would take care of his needs by himself. Where can you find people like him today? Some pensioners cannot even walk. Their legs weaken and they put on weight, because they sit around all day and become useless. But if they were active, their health would be so much better. They took Elder Joseph to *Vatopedi* Monastery. They washed and bathed him and took care of him. He told them, "The minute I got here I became sick. You made me sick; take me back to my *Kalyvi*. They were forced to take him back. I went to see him one day. "What's going on?" I asked him. "I learned you went to the Monastery." "Yes, I went," he replied. "They took me down there by car, they washed and cleaned me up and took care of me, but I got sick. 'Take me back,' I told them. As soon as I got here I became well." He cannot see well now, and yet he is weaving k*omboschoinia*.
Once I sent him some angel's hair pasta and he said, "Does Elder Paisios believe that I am some sickly person and he sent me angel's hair pasta?" He is in such good health that he can eat all kinds of beans: garbanzo, white beans, and broad beans. He is fit and brave like a young man! He walks with two canes and collects wild greens from the fields. He sows onion seed; he carries water to wash his clothes and his head. Then he reads from the Hours and the Psalter, he does his Canon and prays the Jesus Prayer. You should have seen him when he hired some workmen to fix the roof! He climbed the ladder with his two canes to watch the work in progress. "Get down," they told him. "No, I will climb up to see how you are fixing it," he said. He suffers for sure, but do you know how much joy he feels! His heart flutters. The Fathers take his clothes secretly to wash them. I asked him once, "What are you doing with your clothes?" "They take them secretly and wash them," he told me, "but I wash them too. I put some detergent and soak them in the washtub." Do you see how much trust this Elder places in God while others who have everything suffer from phobias and so forth? This man became ill when he was taken care of and got well when he was left alone.

The easy life does not help. Comfort does not fit the life of the monk; it's sheer dishonesty for those living in the desert. Perhaps you were raised spoiled, but now, if you are in good health, you must get used to hardship. Otherwise you are not a true monk.

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1. In this chapter we observe the militant spirit which the Elder had as an ascetic monk, as well as his agony not to see this ascetic spirit of Monasticism changed and altered by technology and modern advances. He was not against civilization. He wanted to stress that we must rule civilization and not be ruled by it. He used to say that especially the monk must control modern conveniences and use them with discretion in order to be able to channel his powers toward the spiritual combat.

2. 1962-1964.

3. Sinai Peninsula now belongs to Egypt, but then it belonged to Israel.

4. Saint Arsenios the Great was born in Rome about 354 A.D. He was a man of great wisdom and virtue. He was called "Father of Kings" because the Emperor Theodosios had entrusted him with the education of his children, Arcadios and Honorios. In 394, after receiving divine calling, he departed for the desert of Egypt and from there he went to Skete. Despite the fact that he had lived in palaces, he rose to prominence as a monk because of the great austerity of his asceticism. After the devastation of Skete in 434, he went to the Mountain of Troe where he died in 440.

5. Elder Paisios does not want to disparage the Europeans or the West, but he aims to strike at rationalism and atheism.

6. The Elder does not mean severe cases.

7. Out of hospitality.

(ELDER PAISIOS OF MOUNT ATHOS SPIRITUAL COUNSELS "*WITH PAIN AND LOVE for Contemporary Man*", Part 2, Chapter 2, p. 152-166, Holy Monastery "Evangelist John the Theologian" SOUROTI, THESSALONIKI, GREECE)