

The Role of the Priest as Spiritual Father in the Orthodox Spiritual Life

Bp Thomas Joseph and Peter Schweitzer

As a way of life rather than a religion, Orthodoxy presumes and presupposes a particular worldview that is unique and Christ-centered. It is a way of being in the world, a way of interacting with our brothers and sisters as well as the entire cosmos. It is in this context that I would like to share a few thoughts about the priest's spiritual fatherhood and the mode of its expression in the Church.

The notion of spiritual fatherhood has a long and venerable tradition within the holy Orthodox Church. We find Saint Paul reminding the people of Corinth of his spiritual fatherhood and paternal care for the people of Corinth. "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me." In reminding the Corinthians of his spiritual fatherhood, Saint Paul affirms the generative nature of the role. The fruit of their paternal guidance is healthy Christians who are freed from the passions and illnesses associated with sin.

The tradition reflected in this passage is one we still practice today - our tradition of calling our deacons and priests "father," and of referring to our Orthodox Christian spiritual elders through the centuries as "the fathers of the Church."

This concept has come under attack from all sides today. On the one hand, we are witnessing a period of profound gender confusion. Our young people are being taught that gender is not significant and that male and female, father and mother are interchangeable. We are being bombarded on television and social media with the confusing and dangerous message that we can choose or change our gender to accommodate our whims and feelings. Obviously, this does significant harm to the notion of spiritual fatherhood and is entirely incompatible with the Gospel and the Orthodox way of life.

On the other hand, some who study the Bible point to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel where He says, "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven." Taken out of context, this leads some to believe that calling a priest father is contrary to the words of Christ Himself. Yet, as in all things, context is key.

These words are found in Saint Matthew's Gospel, chapter 23, verse 9. In this "call no man father" passage, our Lord is making a particular point for a very particular audience. He is contrasting His own living truth with the teachings of the "scribes and Pharisees" who were convinced that only they understood God's Law and were fit to interpret it. Christ is accusing the rabbis opposed to him of deliberately twisting God's Word to suit their own desires. Christ stood in opposition to those who seek to elevate themselves and place themselves before God.

Our Lord wants true teachers. He wants true spiritual fathers who can take on the mantle of spiritual leadership. But He only wants teachers and fathers who understand that they themselves are not the source of the Tradition which they are passing on, but are instead conduits for the Tradition of God.

Before we examine the qualities of priestly spiritual fatherhood, we must inquire as to the nature of the priesthood. The priest is not a functionary ordained to dispense the holy Mysteries of the Triune God. Orthodoxy is a therapeutic science which seeks the healing of every person who approaches the Church. The right practice of medicine requires a good physician, a professional physician, and this applies to spiritual healing as well. The priest is properly and foundationally a spiritual physician who cures. In his book, Orthodox Psychotherapy, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos notes that the priest has two roles: 1) to perform the holy Mysteries, and 2) to heal people. For the priest to save his own soul and heal others the spiritual priesthood must be the foundation of the sacramental priesthood. What is this spiritual priesthood? According to His Eminence, those who possess spiritual priesthood have attained noetic prayer, which is to say that their nous has been cleansed of the passions and the indwelling of the

Holy Spirit within the nous makes healing possible. This priesthood helps man to go from the image of God to the likeness of God. It can guide him to deification, which is in fact the healing of man, or rather which manifests this healing. The spiritual priesthood is characterized by the ability to free people from their passions, to cleanse the nous, and to acquire the Holy Spirit. This is such an awesome enterprise that Saint John Chrysostom wrote to Saint Basil attempting to justify his refusal to be made a bishop.

Saint Gregory the Theologian writes, "It is necessary first to be purified, then to purify; to be made wise, then to make wise; to become light, then to enlighten; to approach God, then to bring others to him; to be sanctified, then to sanctify. . ." (Orations 2, 71). This is a prerequisite for true spiritual priesthood and an undeniable quality of the spiritual father. Thus, before the spiritual father can guide and assist others in the Christian life, he first needs to live it himself. He must be a "prime example to the believers" (1 Timothy 4:2) and "fully living the gospel." According to Saint Basil the Great, "his very life must reflect a prime example by following every commandment of the Lord." His example must speak louder than his words. He must inspire with his virtuous lifestyle. He needs to build people up with his love and fatherly affection since according to Saint John of the Ladder, "a true shepherd shows forth or is proven through his love, because the Great Shepherd was crucified out of love."

The Holy Fathers are quite insistent on this point. Priests are to be spiritual fathers and the qualities necessary for them to perform the singularly important task of healing presumed their freedom from the passions. Indeed Saint John Chrysostom writes that a priest has to have more attentiveness and spiritual strength even than the hermits themselves! For if the hermits, who are freed from the city, the marketplace, and its people, are not secure in the spirit, how much more strength and vigor needs to be exercised by the priest in order to be able to snatch his soul away from all infection and keep its spiritual beauty inviolate. That is why he affirms that the clergy who live in the world need even more purity than the monks. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos cites Saint Symeon the New Theologian in emphasizing this point. His Eminence writes, "Anyone who has not abandoned the world and been

counted worthy receive the Holy Spirit as were the holy Apostles, who has not undergone purification and illumination and been found worth to 'contemplate the unapproachable light,'--such a man would not dare to accept the priesthood and the authority over souls, or to push himself to accept such!"

Saint Dionysios the Areopagite emphasizes this point by comparing the three degrees of the spiritual life (purification, illumination, and deification) to the three degrees of the priesthood (deacon, priest, and bishop). According to Saint Dionysios, ordination to any of these degrees of priesthood presupposes acquisition of the corresponding spiritual state. Metropolitan Hierotheos comments on the Areopagite's teaching by writing:

Since the task of the deacon is to purify others of passions, he should himself, prior to ordination, have reached a stage of purification so that he is himself a living exponent of the practical philosophy. Since according to the patristic teachings it is the priest's task to illuminate others, his ordination presupposes that he has an illuminated nous, which, as we have seen, is a degree of theoria. Thus the priest must remember God unceasingly in prayer, must know spiritual work, be fluent in Holy Scripture and be able to contemplate the inner principles of all created things. As for the bishop, since his primary task is to perfect the people of God by the inner principles of theology, he must experience the mystical theology, and live in communion with God. This close relationship with God makes him a prophet, a divine initiate capable of mystically imparting the word of truth to the people of God. The form which the ordination of deacons, priests, and bishops takes is equally indicative of the spiritual condition which they are assumed to have reached in order to fulfill these essential tasks. For how can people be helped if the helpers have no personal experience of the task which they are to carry out?

This is daunting, I know. If we are not trembling and filled with fear at the thought of our awesome responsibility before God and His people, nothing can move us! Yet, I have just begun. This is merely an introduction to the topic of spiritual fatherhood.

Before describing the qualities of a spiritual father, it is necessary to discuss the indispensable role of asceticism and hesychasm in the life of the church and of the spiritual father himself. These are not

particular to the life of a monastic but are essential tools for all Christians striving to live the life of faith.

As Elder Ephraim of Vatopaidi wrote:

Hesychasm is not lived only by monastics and those who have foresworn the world. Hesychasm is an inner condition, it is a continuous dwelling in God and purity of the nous. Hesychasm is the way in which the realm of the heart is revealed, the center of our existence, that which we may term our person. This is the only way in which people can be reborn spiritually and have their hypostatic (personal) state emerge. Without this ascetic training, there is no point to the sacramental life of the Church, which can act towards perdition as well as salvation.

Elder Ephraim writes “It is the ONLY way in which people can be reborn spiritually. . .” If we desire to be spiritual fathers, we ourselves must live a life of asceticism and hesychasm. Hieromonk Alexios Trader, a monk of Karakallou Monastery on Mount Athos and a former teacher at Saint Tikhon’s Seminary, points out:

Hesychasm is the Spirit of the Law that enlivens the Law. It is the incense of sweet spiritual fragrance that makes asceticism more than self-denial and the divine services more than rites following detailed rubrics. Through hesychasm, asceticism and the divine services take on an angelic radiance and the freshness of paradise. Above all, hesychasm strengthens the mode of faith and purifies the nous, so that one looks at all the world, all one’s problems, all of creation from a new vantage point, the vantage point of the mind of Christ, which in the Greek is the nous of Christ, the highest, most noble, and most piercing vision of reality that the Saint can hope to gain. In this way, hesychasm offers the struggler a way of coping with the thoughts that transforms the suffering into union with our suffering Savior who through suffering opens unto us the gates of paradise.

Our invitations to “Come and See” that we extend to non-Orthodox will be fruitless unless we gradually draw them into this way of being in the world. If we invite them without this we are doomed to failure. All too often our pastoral efforts are reduced to rational argumentation such as “We are the original Christian Church,” refutations of papal infallibility, or historical reasons for our rejection of papal claims. The rational model doesn’t work because we are not providing our audience with a new way of

“seeing.” Father Alexios writes, “Reason, unenlightened by the nous, continues to produce thoughts that are based on reason’s own self-preservation and self-glorification. In order for thoughts to be controlled and properly ordered, the nous enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit must be re-established as king of the human heart. The traditional path in which this takes place is known as hesychasm.”

A good father shows his children the way. He teaches them through demonstration and example. Let me give you an example. When you first teach your child how to ride a bike, you don’t take out an owner’s manual and begin to read from it. No, you get on a bike and show the child how it’s done. The same for us who are called to be spiritual fathers. We must be practicing asceticism and hesychasm so that the knowledge we pass on to our spiritual children is purified and enlightened.

Catechesis is surely necessary but it must be Orthodox catechesis and this means we begin with asceticism and hesychasm. When we explain to them fasting and standing for the long services, we place those teachings in the context of these two great pillars. This is our way of life and it must be clear from the outset. Do not be tempted to think these are only for the advanced. The process of purification, illumination, and deification are the only way to salvation in Christ. If we wait to introduce these subjects for fear of driving them away, we will surely lose them. They will walk away and “see” the Orthodox as a quaint, ethnic enclave of people stuck in the past.

In a world filled with anxiety, chaos, and disorder, people are unknowingly clamoring for an alternative. For those in the world who are mired in the passions and unable to control burdensome and fearful thoughts, we have a life of joy and true hope to offer them. This is the task of the spiritual father who lives the ascetic life in hesychasm.

In this context, what are some of the qualities, apart from the awesome prerequisites of which I have already mentioned, that make a spiritual father?

First, the spiritual father must be a warrior. He must be trained in the art of spiritual warfare and capable of engaging in battle on his own behalf and for his spiritual children. This means he must be able to recognize and diagnose the passions and various illnesses that afflict the modern soul. He must know the corresponding virtues that root out these passions. This requires intimate and thorough knowledge of the Church Fathers. This should include such ascetics Saints Barsanuphius and John, Abba Dorotheos, particularly his work Practical Teaching on the Christian Life, and Saint John Climacus' the Ladder of Divine Ascent as a starting place. The spiritual father as warrior must know the weapons at his disposal as well as when and how to use them. A warrior has manly courage. The Psalmist exhorts us, "Be stouthearted and wait on the Lord!" (Psalm 27) As a spiritual father, the warrior must have the strength to perform ascetical feats for himself and his children. He must be able to pray for them when they can't pray and fast for them when they don't have the strength. A warrior must also be a leader who exhorts, cajoles, guides, and corrects when necessary.

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos provides a wonderful illustration of some of the other qualities of a good spiritual father. He writes, "The Holy Elder Philotheos (Zervakos) points out the qualities of the good Confessor or Spiritual Father using St. Arsenios of Paros (1800-1877) as his exemplar. These qualities are particularly the following: humility, gentleness, patience, discernment, compassion and love. These virtues, he says, Father Arsenios eminently possessed. Thus, he remarks, St. Arsenios received all with love and paternal affection, and gave to all with understanding and discernment the 'medicines' necessary for the therapy of their souls. Besides other necessary 'medicines' he used to give to all two common ones: the medicine of repentance and the medicine of God's compassion and love. He exhorted all to repent sincerely, and not to despair on account of their many sins, but to have hope in God's immeasurable compassion, realizing that God accepts sinners when they repent. As proof of God's

great compassion he cited the examples of the Prodigal Son, the Thief, the Harlot, the Publican, and many others. Through love and gentleness Saint Arsenios led many to repentance and salvation.

Father Philotheos Zervakos goes on to give a very moving example of how St. Arsenios the New acted as a Confessor. It is as follows: “A certain girl from the island of Syros (One of the Cyclades Islands, not far from Paros) went to the Convent of the Transfiguration of Christ on Paros to visit her sister, who was a nun there. The latter had previously been informed that her sister had deviated from the right path; and when she was notified that her sister was outside the gate of the convent and wanted to see her, she at once began to scream and say: ‘Go away, go far away from the convent, because you are defiled and will defile the convent of the nuns.’ And taking along with her as helpers some other nuns, she went outside the convent. When she saw her sister waiting outside the gate, instead of feeling compassion for her for having been wounded by the soul-destroying enemy, instead of sharing her pain, embracing the kissing her, and taking care to heal her wounds, and leading her to repentance and confession, thereby saving her, she dashed against her like a lioness. And aided by other nuns, she struck her in the face, on the head, wounded her seriously, and with wild shouts and threats drove her away. ‘Go away,’ she kept telling her, ‘you foul harlot, who came here to the convent, to this holy place to defile it also. Go away, I will kill you, to wash away the shame you have brought to our family.’ She replied: ‘I erred, forgive me, my sister, don’t you share my pain?’—‘No,’ she replied, ‘you are not my sister, you are a harlot.’—‘Where shall I go?’ asked her sorrowful sister. ‘Go and drown yourself, go and kill yourself,’ replied the other. The miserable girl fled from the convent full of wounds and bloodstained. When she was about 800 yards away, she sat down by the road, weeping bitterly; and groaning painfully she said: ‘What shall become of me the wretch? Where shall I go, when even my sister, to whom I hastened to seek help and consolation, drove me away, wounded me, and filled me with despair? There remains nothing for me now but to go and drown myself in the sea! O my God, help me the wretch.’

Through the dispensation of God, Who does not want the death of the sinner but his repentance, it happened that St. Arsenios was going up to the convent. When he saw the girl crying and wounded, he felt compassion for her, and approaching her he said: 'What is the matter, my child? Why are you weeping? Who has caused you the wounds?'—'My sister, Elder,' she replied, 'together with some nuns.'— 'And why did they wound you?'— 'Because, Elder, some corrupt men and women led me astray, and I became a harlot. But I realized that I did not do well and I came to the convent to seek protection, help, from my sister. And behold, Father, what they did to me. Is that the way nuns act, having fled from the world in order to save their souls? What do you, Father, counsel me? To go to the sea and drown myself, or to go and hurl myself down a precipice?' My child, I do not give you such counsel. I love you as my child, and if you wish I shall take you with me and heal the wounds of your soul and body.'—'And where are you going to take me, Elder?'—'To the convent, my child.'—I beg you not to take me to that convent, where my sister is together with those wicked nuns, because they will kill me—they declared this to me clearly, and if I insisted on remaining there they would certainly have killed me. You, Elder, are a good Father, but those nuns are criminals.'

'Come, my dear child, and be not afraid, they will not kill you, because I shall turn you over to Christ, and no one will be able to harm you.'—'In that case, Elder, since you are going to turn me over to Christ, I am not afraid of them, because Christ is much more powerful than they.'

After he had encouraged and consoled her, St. Arsenios took her by the hand and led her up to the convent. And like another good Samaritan, by means of fatherly and affectionate words he exhorted her to repentance and confession. When she had repented sincerely and confessed candidly, he cleaned and dressed the wounds of her body and soul. Having clothed her with clean garments, those of repentance, he introduced her into the spiritual fold of the convent and included her with his other rational sheep.

She made such progress in the monastic life — in fasting, self-control, vigils, prayer, temperance and the rest of the virtues, and in the keeping of the Commandments of God — that she surpassed all the other nuns. Thus there was fulfilled the saying of the divine herald Paul the Apostle: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

Wishing to correct the nuns who had acted wrongly towards her, the Saint called all the nuns into the church of the convent and sharply rebuked those who wounded her, especially her sister, saying: “The good father of the parable, upon seeing from afar his prodigal son — who had spent his whole life living prodigally — returning to him, hastened to meet him, embraced him, kissed him, took him to his house, removed his old garments and clothed him with new ones and new shoes. He rejoiced greatly, because his son was dead, and was alive again, he was lost and was found. Christ came down from Heaven not in order to save the righteous, who have no need, but sinners. He came to save the lost sheep. He mingled, conversed and ate with publicans, harlots, sinners, towards whom he showed His love and affection. In this manner, that is, through His love, He saved them. But you did the opposite. Although you knew that the incorporeal wolf, the devil, had seriously wounded her soul, instead of feeling sorry for her, and running to embrace and kiss her, to rejoice, to save her from the danger of further sin, you felt hatred for her and ran to kill her. And because you were unable to kill her, you incited her to go and kill herself, to drown herself in the sea. Now learn from me, your Spiritual Father, that you are not nuns, you are not Christians, you are not even human beings. If you had a sheep and saw that it was at a precipice and was in danger of perishing, I think you would have hastened to save it. Why? Because it is an animal. If you show so much concern for an animal, should you not have shown concern for your sister, who is not an animal, but a human being, has a soul, which is worth more than the whole world? She was on the precipice of perdition, and although she came to seek your help, you pushed her so that she might fall down faster.

Therefore, you are devoid of compassion, devoid of affection, devoid of sympathy; you are murderesses. For this reason I impose upon you the penance of not receiving Holy Communion for three years, if you do not recognize the great sin which you inconsiderately fell into. Repent, confess your sin, sigh, weep bitterly, and ask for forgiveness from God, from me, your Spiritual Father, and from those sisters who did not agree to your sinful act.

Inasmuch as the nuns became aware of their sin, repented and wept bitterly, St. Arsenios forgave them and moderated their penance. Upon the sister, he imposed the penalty of not receiving Holy Communion for a year, because she provided the occasion and cause of the sin, while upon the others, that of not partaking of Holy Communion for six months, because they shared in the responsibility.

In this story, we witness a true spiritual father demonstrate humility, meekness, discernment, and compassion. We also witness chastisement for the purposes of correction rather than punishment. Saint Arsenios, was a father who possessed deep humility, much like Saint Anthony the Great and Saint Seraphim of Sarov or many other saintly monastic elders. These never sought a name for themselves. In fact, they desired just the opposite. True humility recognizes that we are mere vessels through which the Holy Spirit is working and any benefit is not of our own making. Humility also requires that we are careful and prudent when we offer direction and counsel, never placing too heavy a burden on a spiritual child lest they break and fall into despair.

Finally, the spiritual father must be prophetic. It is the duty of a spiritual father to speak the truth in love in season and out of season. (2Timothy 4:2) As Nathan the prophet confronted King David and Saint Basil the Holy Fool chastised Ivan the Terrible, a spiritual father must speak out against the false prophets and the ravenous wolves that seek to do harm to his spiritual children. The father as prophet does not desire to be liked. In fact, such a desire diminishes his ability to be prophetic. There will be

times the spiritual father must speak hard truths and prescribe bitter medicine for the good of his children. This can't be done if the father seeks popularity rather than the health of the soul.

In order to do all of this, the lives of Godly spiritual fathers must be blameless and above reproach. Our spiritual children must see in us a God-seeker and a God-pleaser not a charlatan or a hypocrite. A spiritual father must be a man of noetic prayer. He must carve out time for this before any of the various administrative duties take his attention away from this essential spiritual work.

As spiritual fathers, we will have to give an account of our own lives as well as the lives of our spiritual children whom we have begotten in Christ. Yet, the thrice holy God provides the grace with which we perform these awesome works. Moses was "slow of speech." Isaiah confessed he was "a man of unclean lips." The king and prophet David succumbed to adultery and committed murder. Jonah fled from the God of Israel. None were perfect but all were called to this duty of spiritual fatherhood. Almighty God performs the task through unworthy vessels of clay. We need only pray, fast, struggle. Consider the holy services to be your lifeline, and not just only a Sunday or feast day obligation. Commune frequently, with frequent confession. Humble yourself.

Do not believe what the world tells you about self-worth, and pleasure and meaning. The world lies to you. Look to the church, and the scriptures and the Saints for your role models and instructions for living.

When we enter upon the dread judgement seat of God, we will be asked the following: Were you purified in order to purify? Were you illumined so as to illumine? Were you perfected in order to perfect?

The yoke of spiritual fatherhood demands no less than this. If our spiritual generation is to be fruitful, our fatherhood must reflect the life of Christ.

May the Most Holy Theotokos protect you and may the thrice holy God bless you and give you the strength for the task at hand.