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## The practical expression of Love towards the Lord (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

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(On the feast day of Saint Paul of Thebes and John Kalyvitis)

Our Church honours the two great saints, Paul of Thebes and John Kalyvitis. Their life stories are a little strange but quite fitting for us, monks. The former was among the first people to become monks, since he had truly forsaken the world and went to the desert all alone. Both lived alone with the Lord, something which was unheard of those days and rare. In a sense they were the pioneers of this way of life. The latter, (John Kalyvitis) lived later than Paul. He was a young child when he left home to become a monk, burning with zeal. A few years later, he left his monastery and returned to his home, but stayed only at the front step, fighting struggles beyond human power and ended his life there.

One marvels sometimes. What gave them such vigour to carry out such superhuman struggles? This is what really concerns us. We end up wondering sometimes: 'Why can't we do this?' 'How could they do it?' We even study the cases of martyrs, who were human like us, to find out how they could endure such horrifying trials; this shocks us even just hearing about them! Can anyone say that these stories were blown up? Woe, we cannot even think that! What is their secret, therefore? In whose name did these human beings made of flesh, manage to accomplish such achievement?

Obviously, the first explanation is that they have accomplished such feats through Divine Grace. But then again, we wonder: 'Ok. Was the Lord assisting only those? Is He absent in other generations? Is the Lord biased? Does He chose some people, whom He strengthens and promotes and gives others a miss?' Such questions are always appropriate. The Lord is the One who gives His grace and accomplishes 'signs and wonders' but it is man who causes Grace to operate. Thereafter, this same man with the assistance of Grace accomplishes these tasks which are beyond human nature. Therefore, what is the main reason behind all these? What is the reason which causes this kind of Grace to operate? We will find the answer in the writings of our holy Fathers. Once, St Paul of Thebes was having a conversation with Saint Antony the Great. St Paul asked St Antony: 'How come your name is better known than mine, since I have fought more fierce battles than you?' Obviously their conversation was not so much for their benefit as for ours, when we were going to learn of it later. St Antony teasingly replied: 'It is simply because I love the Lord more than you. My name has become better known only because I love the Lord more than you'.

Now the mystery has begun to unravel. He who accomplishes more is the one who loves the Lord more and Divine Grace influences him more. This is the

key! In practice how are we to love the Lord more so that Grace increases in us and assists us in overcoming our despicable ways which hamper our spiritual progress? This is the most appropriate question for us, as monks.

If we are to show how much we love the Lord in practice, we ought to obey His commands. *'Whoever does not love me does not keep my words' (John 14, 24)*. Also *'whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he is the one who loves me' (John 14, 20)*. I can safely say that to a great extent what causes this outcome is the expression of our love towards the Lord; we have also heard this from our Fathers and it is worth keeping. Such an expression (of love) begins with the memory of the Lord. Someone, who says that he loves the Lord but does not remember Him is like someone who is not telling the truth. We all have such an experience. Our mind sticks on the subject of our love or on what has captured our attention. If we truly wish to love the Lord, we are obliged to force ourselves to keep remembering Him constantly. We must do what St Gregory the Theologian says: *'It is better to remember the Lord rather than breathe'*.

These are the keys; one after the other. The mysteries, which may have been unfathomable, now unravel in front of us. Obviously earlier fathers had more dedication towards hard work and more muscle. They themselves reveal that they had entered into the struggle with such commitment towards hard work and lived through such harsh conditions, that not only they did not submit to any pleasure or vanity, but they did not even obey the laws of necessity. Having such passion for hard work it was obvious that they would find Someone whose memory they would hold on to. For this reason, they particularly concentrated on the issues of the mental prayer and inwardness and held the former to a high esteem. This issue was handed down to us and it is very consoling and pleasurable. Indeed we, more than our forefathers, are weak and have neither selflessness nor any ability. However, we do wish to be saved. Thus we have a double issue here. We wish to be saved- and we most certainly must be saved- but our passions are more powerful since we are weak and have no selflessness. Unfortunately we also commit more sins. Therefore, we must get rid of the passions since their existence hampers our deliverance. Thus, we must hasten to cause the influence of Grace, so that she can help us, free us from the bondage of our passions and from our weaknesses and guide us to our salvation.

Thus, we, more than our predecessors, need to locate Divine Grace operating inside us, both in quality and quantity. We are only required to express our love towards the Lord through this means, namely His memory. Therefore, we ought to force ourselves to recite the mental prayer. If someone wishes to keep

remembering the Lord there is no better way than this. All virtues are somehow the paths, the routes which lead us towards the Lord, towards His memory and towards our relationship with Him. But there is no better virtue than the mental prayer which leads us directly and actively towards the memory of the Lord. It is for this reason that our Fathers, with whom we lived, have insisted on this issue. And if you ask me, I also say to you that as monks, we ought to adhere to this prayer on top of all the other promises we have given. We may make some allowances for other things but not on this. We are all able to stick with this, if we want to. Whether standing, or sitting, whether we are sick or working, walking or eating or whatever else we are doing, we must recite the prayer for as long as we are awake so that we even recite it in our sleep. To those who have made some progress, the mental prayer operates in their sleep. You must be attentive and keep trying. You must not give up in any way. Let's go to our cells now and get on with it. We will meet with resistance and temptation, of course. We know these things. It is possible to make progress and feel at peace for one or two nights, a week or a fortnight. This cannot possibly continue; it will be interrupted. Sleepiness will come or slumber or various thoughts and a thousand other predicaments, of which we all have had experience. It is irrational to be scared since we know who will come and from where and what he is looking for. However, we also know that our goal is to preserve on the memory of the Lord and on this we will insist. Won't he let us stand? Let us sit down. Won't he let us sit but brings on sleepiness? We will get up again. Will he not allow us to stand? Let us walk. He comes and pressurizes us. We are overwhelmed by various thoughts. We stop for a second and somehow talk with ourselves or rather we tell the one who is opposing us: 'What do you want from me? I will not give up. I did not come here by chance. I am fully aware of my mission and I know very well that I am a monk. I will not retreat. This is my duty. I love my Jesus, who has called me to follow Him and I will continue to pursue Him. I will not allow you to stop me'.

In his way we fortify our determination, we receive some courage and continue on our way. Doesn't the mind stay on the prayer? Is it confused and stressed by various thoughts? Never mind. The lips are praying. The lips will not stop. They will continue reciting the prayer and will call out: 'Yes, Devil. You will not allow the mind to concentrate on the prayer? I will call out with my lips. My Lord knows even the movements of my hands. I insist and I will call upon Him and He will come to my rescue. *'Raise the war cry you nations, and be shattered! Listen all you distant lands. Prepare for battle, and be shattered! Prepare for battle, and be shattered! Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us'* (Isaiah 8, 9-10).

If we insist in this way, be certain that we will succeed since our lives are entirely programmed by the Lord's providence and this cannot possibly be forged. Aren't we offended how a child, 12- 13 years old as Saint John Kalyvitis was when he became a monk, returned and crashed Satan's power with such selflessness, which horrifies us even to hear of it? What kind of child was he? Was he like ourselves, who were farmers and laborers and have had experience of the harsh life? What did he know of life other than how to live in opulence? And look what he had achieved! He provoked Divine Grace with his selflessness and she awarded him with so many trophies.

We are also looking to acquire this same Grace. St Paul of Thebes had acquired it from the very first time without realizing it. He dared leave for the desert alone without company, counsel, experience or knowledge and fought with the battalions of demons without any fear in the face of such unrelenting temptations. He did not turn back. He had faith in the Lord and was saying to himself: 'It is not possible. I have started this for the sake of the Lord. It is not possible for Him to abandon me'. And indeed he has succeeded.

*source: Translated by Olga Konari Kokkinou from the Greek edition: Γέροντος Ιωσήφ Βατοπαιδινού, Διδαχές από τον Άθωνα, Εκδόσεις 'Το Άγιον Όρος', Θεσσαλονίκη, 1989.*