

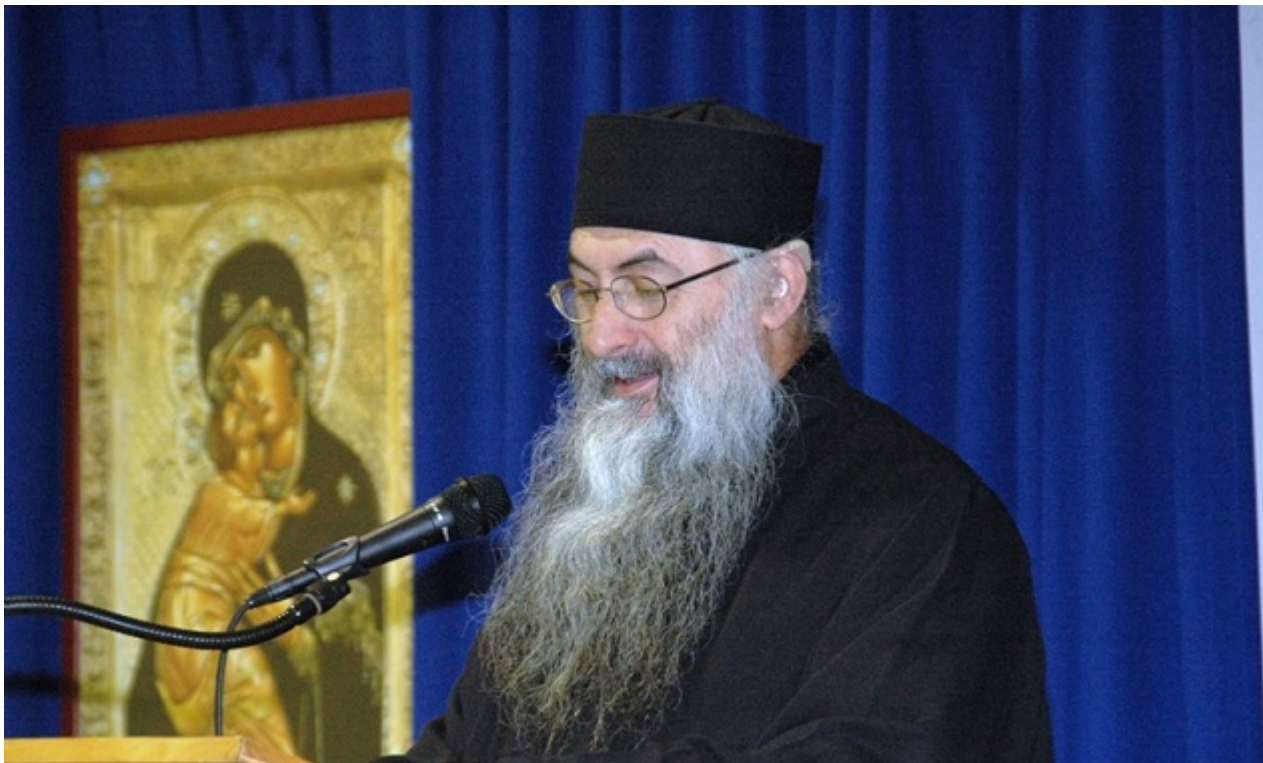
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Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou) “Remember thy First Love” (Georgios I. Mantzaridis, Professor)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, Publisher: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist 2010 – ISBN: 1874679738.



To the always impeccable series of publications from the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, in Essex, England, has been added another exceptional book, inspired by the late Elder Sophrony and written by his beloved spiritual child and the person who is continuing his work, Archimandrite Zacharias. This book sketches the three stages of the spiritual life, on the basis of the theology of Elder Sophrony.

The introduction presents, in masterful fashion, the nature and evolutionary path of faith. Initial faith is not born of fear, but precedes fear and then goes on to give

birth to the beneficial fear of God which takes people's hearts prisoner. Erroneous kinds of faith are noted as well as a demonic kind, which does not lead to salvation, because it does not contain love; it is no more than a cold, intellectual and dead conviction. The second degree of faith, which is linked to charismatic despair, is what might be called "hope without hope". Such was the faith of Abraham. This is the faith which brings people from the shore of created reality to that of the uncreated, bridging the gap between God and people. Finally, the third degree of faith is that which leaves no room for even the slightest trace of doubt. Such is the faithfulness of the righteous.

Ignoring the well-known distinctions of the stages of the spiritual life as these are often presented in books of Orthodox "spirituality" (purification, enlightenment, deification) it notes that Elder Sophrony was unwilling to express himself in generalities and presented the spiritual life as a sphere: at whatever point we touch it, it brings us into contact with the whole. Every time that God touches our heart, purification, enlightenment and deification are worked within us, from the beginning of our lives with Him. The path of each person towards God and their relationship to Him is unique. So even the initial grace that some people receive may reach the measure of those who are perfect. But having noted that certain phenomena are repeated over time in people's lives, he ended by viewing the spiritual life in the following three stages: a) the visitation of the Holy Spirit, during which people draw up a testament with God; b) the long and harsh struggle people undergo when God withdraws His grace; and c) the permanent recovery of grace. The emphasis, of course, is on the second stage, while he himself lived through all three and was therefore in a position to recognize each one and to offer assistance to those who turned to him for it.

The introductory part of the book concludes with the paragraph "After the earthquake, the Spirit of Truth". Being broken, the writer observes, is the forerunner of the gift of the Holy Spirit. This brokenness humbles our heart and humility enlarges it so that it can accept the Holy Spirit. The precious and fragile gift of the humble Holy Spirit requires a correct response from the person who has benefited. If they show off, moved by pride, they will lose it and will aggravate others. This is why monks struggle to hide any gift of grace they might have received and not show it in their outwards appearance.

The main part of the book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter refers to the first stage of the spiritual life and has as its heading the Biblical text "He First Loved Us" (*1 Jn. 4, 19*). The second and third chapters, also with Biblical headings "The God of Glory Thundereth" and "Receive not the Grace of God in Vain", refer to

the second stage. Finally, the third and last stage is referred to in the last chapter of the book, with the heading “This Day have I Begotten thee” (Ps. 2, 4).

However deeply our hearts have become corrupted by sin, the author writes, the hour will come when we, like Zacchaeus, will burn with the desire to know the Lord, to learn exactly Who He is. Contemplation of the face of the Lord is the “one thing that is necessary”.

It is emphasized, most appositely, that theology is like the empirical sciences. We experiment, and we learn about God and His ways. We put the truth about God to the test, expressing the commandments of Christ as hypotheses. Thus, for example, in the case of the benediction of those who are in mourning (“Blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted”), the hypothesis is that, if we mourn, we receive comfort from God. That can be experienced empirically. All that is required is for people to want to carry out the experiment.

Every encounter with God is a surprise. From the examples of Zacchaeus, Nathaniel and the Samaritan Woman, we can recognize the opportunity to meet God anywhere, at any moment of our lives. The visitation of grace is the prelude to a personal agreement with God, which is confirmed with baptism or in the monastic tonsure. The first stage in the spiritual life is a dynamic period of great spiritual enrichment, which inspires some people to abandon the world and follow the monastic life. When this happens, victory over the world is half achieved. By withdrawal from the world, the crucifixion of the world occurs. But what remains is for the second half to be accomplished: the crucifixion of the person for the world, which demands a titanic struggle. This stage is characterized by the withdrawal of grace, when people are called upon to demonstrate that they are truly the children of God. As Elder Sophrony observed, according to the writer, there can be no authenticity in people who have not been taught by God and have not experienced the removal of grace. Lack of this experience makes them imperfect and excludes them from the totality of the faithful.

In general terms, the author observes, the second stage of the spiritual life is a period of crucifixion on crosses of two kinds: one visible, the other invisible. He also considers that a closer examination of the Beatitudes demonstrates that they begin with the invisible cross, i.e. spiritual poverty and end with the visible cross of persecution or martyrdom. Particular weight is given by the writer to the discovery of the “deep heart”. Unless we struggle valiantly to live within our heart, we shall remain blind, and subject to our unruly passions. The dictates of our heart and intellect escape our control and we sin, whether we want to or not. We have a duty to maintain and cultivate the ground of our heart, because the hidden things of the

heart are most valuable in the sight of God.

In presenting the third stage in the spiritual life the author notes that, compared to the first, the grace of God now resides much more abundantly in people, permanently and on a stable basis. This stage is further characterized by the stability of a more profound love. He goes on to analyze the notion of Gospel love and notes that it elevates to levels much higher than the norm and that fulfilling it makes people more like God. Whoever reaches the level of loving his or her enemies defeats death. This love is the folly of the Christian faith and the absurdity of the cross.

The last part of the third stage, with which the book ends, refers to “charismatic humility”. The Fathers of the Church describe many forms of humility, of which the writer formally identifies three: a) psychological humility, when people realize their sinfulness and feel the need for treatment; b) ascetic humility when they see themselves as the worst of all people; and c) absolute and perfect humility, which Saint Silouan the Athonite called “the humility of Christ”. Saint Silouan set humility as the goal of his life and assessed himself on the basis of the perfection of his humility. This humility, which has a charismatic nature, frees people’s hearts from the weight of things attached to them and leads to divine universality.

At the end of the book, there are questions and answers, as well as an index of Biblical references.