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In the hermitage of humility: the figure of an elder [3]

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



[Previous post: <http://bit.ly/2tBA1mO>]

On many occasions, at the big feast of the province, instead of being the chief celebrant at the liturgy, as was his right, grandly wearing his monastic veil and expensive vestments and ordering his juniors about, the Elder would wear a shabby habit, would not concelebrate, but instead assisted and served the other Fathers as if he were the least of them. He'd carry the candles and do similar humble tasks. Needless to say, his great maxim was, as far as I can understand, the following: 'Miss no opportunity to humble yourself'. Moreover, he never told a spiritual child of his 'Do this': for example 'Bring a candle' or 'Polish a candelabra'. He would even, on occasion, actually pretend not to be on too familiar terms with his disciples, because he didn't want to make anyone feel under any kind of pressure. If, however someone came up to him of their own accord and said: 'Father, give me something to do', then he would assign them something.



The Holy Monastery of St. Nikolaos Anapafsas, Meteora. Photo by Giannis Kenanoglou.

On a separate occasion, the Elder had gone to a village to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and it happened that I also was there. Suddenly, while he was giving the sermon, an old woman had the audacity to brazenly walk up to the Royal Doors and interrupt him, saying: 'Get a move on, because we've got a memorial service to get through as well'. Had he been some other priest, he would have severely reprimanded the woman. However, he simply nodded in a kind and understanding manner, said to her calmly 'All right', but continued his sermon as normal until the end. Some parishoners though did reproach the old lady, and rightly so.

Yet another time, unfortunately, a priest was giving Holy Communion without due reverence and at such a rate that it was being spilt all over the believers' clothes. A woman standing next to me got quite a bit spilt on her top. Only that once have I ever seen anything so horrific. I later went and told the Elder what had happened. He revered the Holy Sacraments above all else and told me that if the incident had happened recently that I should notify the lady in question that she must burn her top and scatter the ashes in the sea, because she couldn't wear it again. Unfortunately though, some time had passed so she would have washed it.

The Elder also especially loved the saints, as well as their holy relics too. In fact, in his office, where he took confessions, he kept a little relic of a very great female saint. This often used to give off a sweet fragrance. 'She's welcoming you', he

would say happily to the people who had come for confession.

I'll now move on to the very core, the quintessence, of the Elder's life's work, to his valuable spiritual legacy and inheritance, which was nothing other than his battle for holy humility. He wanted all the faithful to understand its value. He never missed an opportunity to talk about this subject. He used to say that when he was at university, a professor there would ask his students: 'Ladies and gentlemen, my dear students, if we were to assume that the road to Heaven started here at the University (from Panepistimiou St. in Athens, which was named for the university) and ended in New York, which point do you suppose the greatest saint of all time reached along that road?' Nobody knew. The professor answered: 'Don't rack your brains. Let me tell you. The greatest saint of all time got as far as Omonoia (about two hundred yards down the road!)'. The students protested. 'What's wrong?' asked the professor. 'Why are you all talking now, when a moment ago you were silent? That's how far the saint got. God does the rest. And what people contribute themselves is simply humility'.

'Have no fear for the person who is humble', said the Elder, and he explained that even if that person has sins, small or great, it's certain that they will be saved, because God will find a way to lead them to repentance and make them a vessel of virtue. God is drawn to the humble person, He's moved, He wants to embrace them and kiss them. How, though, can we acquire humility? We need, said the Elder, a good confessor, we must not forget Christ's horrific pain and suffering on the Cross, we must be mindful of the fact that a grave awaits us and, moreover, we must forgive our enemies with all our heart. It's also necessary for us to give alms with a lot of love, a lot of pain and as much as possible. Furthermore, we must study the Holy Bible, the New Testament (as well as all of the Holy Scriptures of course), so that we become enlightened and get to know Christ.

A characteristic trait of a humble person, said the Elder, is never to judge anyone. So, there was this one time when I was telling the Elder about some clergyman, who was going about saying that certain contemporary Saints (prior to their canonization), such as Fr .Porfyrios, Fr. Paisios and others, were not real Saints. I brought this to the Elder's attention, and, quite puzzled, he said to me: 'Well, I never...This priest denies such great saints of our time?', without however judging the him. Nevertheless, not long after, I told him that this same clergyman had recounted a great miracle to me that one of those Saints, whose holiness he wouldn't accept, had performed on him. I asked the Elder how these two things could be reconciled, and he replied, 'There's no way they can be'. Nonetheless, the Elder was truly relieved when I told him that the said clergyman was, among other

things, suffering from a brain tumour. He then said to me, 'The man's ill, son. May God make him well!' And with that, he again avoided criticizing.

The Elder added the following concerning humility: 'Strange and powerful temptations will befall those who possess this virtue. The reason being that the devil is envious of them, as he can't bear any thoughts of humility, which 'burn' him. And you don't necessarily need to be particularly virtuous for the enemy to attack; simply having thoughts of humility is enough - it's sufficient, for instance, to simply think 'I'm unworthy before God'. The devil gets angry when he sees us thinking humble thoughts, because he wants himself to be the Bridegroom of our souls, and is enraged when he sees Christ reigning in our hearts.

The Elder also described, with deep admiration, how a teacher, on hearing that an old student of his had in the meantime become a spiritual father, once came to him for confession. The Elder said: 'I wondered at the humility of that person, who came to tell his transgressions to his student'. We must, of course, approach the holy sacrament of repentance in a humble frame of mind.

I once asked him what the words of Saint Silouan meant: 'Keep your mind in Hell and don't despair'. He told me that what it means is that Christians ought to humbly compare themselves with God and say 'God is all-good, all-wise, all-powerful, I'm nothing'. In other words, we, as laymen, should not actually send ourselves via our minds to hell itself, because that's dangerous. He also added that, generally, we should avoid comparing ourselves to other people, because we might find that we outshine them, and in the end this would do us harm. In the beginning, it's good to humble yourself before the Creator; then the Lord Himself will help you with the rest.

***The person who wrote this article has asked us not to reveal his personal details or those of the Elder concerned. They are, however, known to the editorial team here at Pemptousia.**