

‘A flaming fire is extinguished by water: so charity from the heart atones for sins’ (Protopresbyter Stefanos Anagnostopoulos)

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Interpreting the phrase ‘I was hungry and you gave me food’, the Fathers of the Church say that some people have been saved without performing any works of charity. First and foremost was the robber who was crucified on the right of Christ, although there were also saints, such as Mary the Egyptian. So the Lord was talking about spiritual nourishment rather than charity. In the Gospel we’re told: Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of the Father who sent me’ [Jn. 4, 34]. What is the will of our Heavenly Father? Our salvation.



And Saint Symeon the New Theologian, interpreting the same phrase, says: ‘When

we observe the commandments of Jesus Christ our Saviour with love then He, the Lord of all creation, is fed by us. Just as the filthy demons are nourished by our wicked actions and gain strength to fight against us, so, when we refrain from sin and evil, from egotism and vanity, from envy and sloth and the other passions, the vile demons become hungry and weak. Likewise, Christ, Who became poor for our salvation, is nourished and sated when we observe His commandments. And then again, He's troubled and hungry when we don't do His all-holy will'. This is what Saint Symeon the New Theologian tells us. The saints, the children of our Orthodox Church, those fragrant blossoms of paradise, the golden mouths of the divine word, are exemplary in their charity and we should imitate them. Because they love us, have mercy on us, nourish us, heal us, protect us and save us. Because what good is it if we've found a solution to all our financial and social problems, yet those of our soul remain unresolved? Really, I ask you, what's the benefit? Who will fill the gap within us? Who will give us hope? Who will support us in the faith?

Every act of charity must be a religious act, not merely the work of some philanthropic sphere, of altruism or simply humanism. It must be linked to the Holy Sacraments, to worship, to repentance and to prayer. The value of charity increases and is more lustrous the closer it comes to God in the Trinity and, through Him, to all our fellow human beings.

In the Wisdom of Sirach [3, 34], the Holy Spirit confirms that: 'A flaming fire is extinguished by water: so charity from the heart atones for sins'. Just as water puts out a fire, so almsgiving from the heart, in repentance and tears, with prayer and fasting, is able to blot out sins.

To continue. In another part of Scripture [Daniel 4, 27], the Prophet tells King Nebuchadnezzar: 'Atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed'. And again [Tobit 4, 10] confirms that: 'alms deliver from death, and save people from passing into darkness'.

The Apostle Peter, in his first general epistle, chapter 4, verse 9, warns us [that the end of all things is near] and says: 'Be hospitable to one another without complaining'. We may be hospitable, but we need to ensure it's 'without complaining'. Without back-biting. Without castigating those we're welcoming. Each of us should ask our heart and answer for it at holy confession. Because [as Saint Peter says, 4, 8)] 'Love covers a multitude of sins'. All of this from Scripture.

All of these Scriptural quotations impel us to the proper exercise of charity, so that we won't lose our just reward, which will bring us to repentance and, through

repentance, to salvation. There are many other facets of spiritual almsgiving to consider, but for the present we've said enough.

(to be continued)