

5 Φεβρουαρίου 2018

The proper intention - Feast day of St Agatha (Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

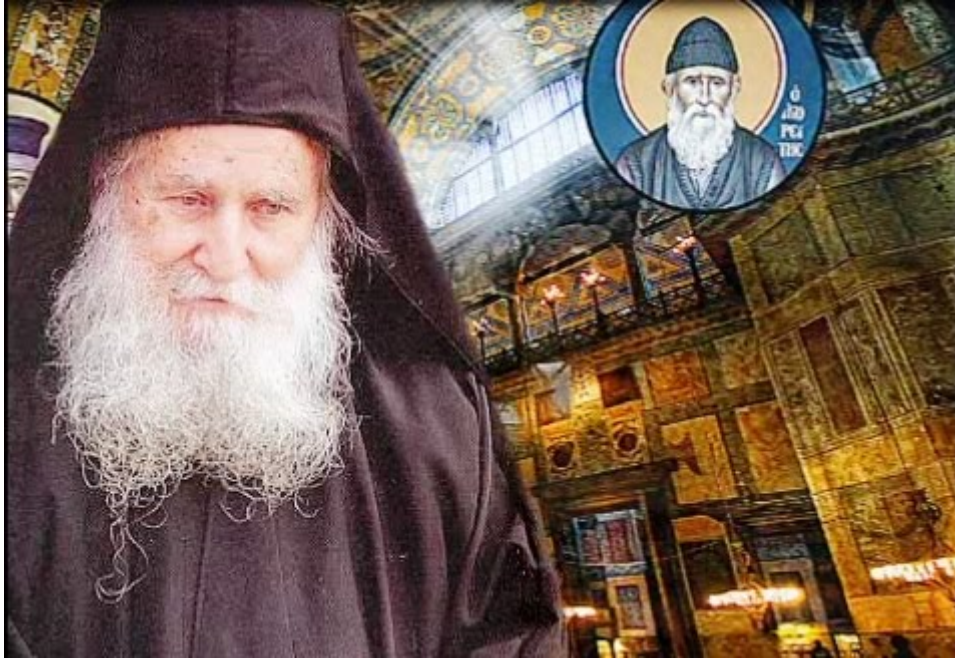
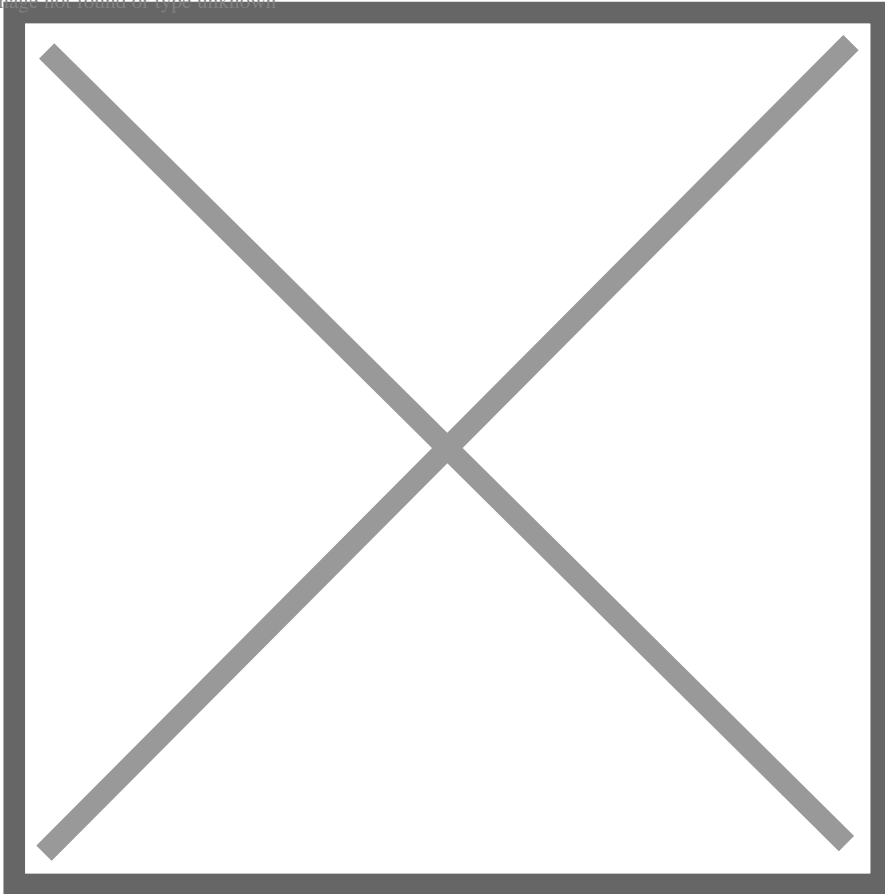


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The Lord always seeks to find the proper intention in man for it is said that 'Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Corinthians, 9, 7). He also urges: 'Let your reasonableness be known to everyone' (Philippians 4, 5) which has almost the same meaning.

Our Church celebrates tomorrow the memory of St Agatha. Even though she was a young girl, she fought the good struggle so fiercely that she surprised even the Heavens so much that after her martyrdom an angel wrote on her tomb: '*A voluntarily pious mind honored by the Lord, delivers the country*' (Νούς όσιος αυτοπροαίρετος, τιμή εκ Θεού και πατρίδος λύτρωσις).

How was such a young girl able to win such an honorary mention? Are you able to appreciate what it means for the Lord to express His admiration for someone's deeds in a solid way? Imagine to what level of perfection she reached, that she was in a sense able to demand such an approval on behalf of the Lord's providence. If one assesses this, one attains to what is described as 'salvation for free'.

One needs to demonstrate his preference and his intention. Namely that he turns towards the Lord solely out of love; neither out of fear nor coercion, '*not reluctantly or under compulsion*' (2 Corinthians, 9, 7). The issue of need has entered man's life after the forefathers' fall. Man, as a master and as the image and likeness of the Lord, must never be demoted to the level of need, since the term 'need' entails cowardice, weakness, imperfection, fear, uncertainty etc. However, it is totally impossible to avoid having needs in our life after-the-fall. But at least we ought to rise above the level of 'need' when our free intention is involved in our sacrifice and our offerings to the Lord.

Our attitude towards the divine must not be tainted by need, fear or self-interest. We simply believe in our Lord, because He is worth it. We follow Him because this is fitting. We worship Him because He is the core of every worship, honour and glory and not because we hope to receive 'what belongs to Him'. What does 'belong to Him'? He has already 'given Himself over for our sake'. Nevertheless, even knowing that He will 'give Himself and what belongs to Him over to us', we are always moved by love towards Him. This is how this young girl, this most great martyr who is the crown of our Church, was thinking and acting. And she won the Lord's appreciation so much that, as we have already mentioned, the angel publicly honoured her grave in such a privileged manner. This was done because the Lord was pleased with her intention.

We are constantly waging a titan war against the forces of darkness. What for? We fight in order to seal the faith which we have accepted; to give it flesh and make it substantial. For it is said that faith without flesh, namely without deeds, is dead; it is abstract and has no value. All creatures possess this kind of abstract faith, even the devil. However we are trying to put into practice what we believe in. The forces of darkness seek to obstruct our path, to prevent us from practically verifying our faith and prove us liars, namely infidels. This is what is meant by Judgement; we will be judged according to our faith or faithlessness in relation to the spiritual law. Those who believed and those who did not believe will be judged on Judgement Day.

Once we zealously start our struggle to prove our faith, then the devil is overpowered, since in reality he has no personality (πρόσωπο). He obviously exists as a spiritual entity. He exists in himself and outside every place and location but especially outside our realm since '*The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins*' (Psalms 9, 6). Our Jesus says: '*the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me* (John 14, 30). Also: '*the ruler of this world is judged* (John 16, 11). And '*now will the ruler of this world be cast out*' (John 12, 31). These are the trophies which our

Lord has given us with His presence and His Cross, with which He has defeated Satan. Therefore, the devil takes a symbolic pose against us: neither directly nor straightforwardly. He comes deceitfully and cunningly to delude us, in subterfuge and cover up. He also uses seemingly reasonable pretexts to deceive us, since it is impossible for him to do so directly. Even the most deluded mind finds it impossible to see the devil clearly, to receive him and deny the Lord. However, the mind is tricked by the false symbols and the enemy's reasonable looking pretexts until it is deceived accepting his bait and becomes a traitor. Once man is deceived and follows Satan, the latter acquires a personality; he no longer appears in symbols but authoritatively. For this reason James says: *'Resist the devil and he will flee from you'* (James 4, 7).

As soon as every spiritual warrior, who has the proper intention, faces some difficulty, he stops for a moment and thinks: 'I am about to start the all night vigil and out of the blue I am feeling some unnatural tiredness, sleepiness, sloth, something weighing me down and a hardening of my heart. I stop and think: Ok, what is this now? Am I not the same person? Yes, I am. Didn't I keep my regime? Yes, I did. Didn't I sleep properly, didn't I rest properly and didn't I keep the rest of my regime? Yes. So, what is this thing now? It is him. I was expecting him'. The warrior stands tall and tells him: 'You did badly to come along with all those who brought you here. You have nothing to gain. I am here. What are you going to do to me? Will you not let me recite the mental prayer? I will not recite it. Will you not let me keep my vigil, nor stand up during my regime? I will not do it because I am not subject to the law. If my spiritual struggle is programmed this way, it is only because I wanted it to be so and I had decided to do it this way, believing that this is the most appropriate way to succeed'. As soon as the evil one obstructs me shamelessly, I stop everything in order to prove that I do not need any planning since both planning and regime are mine. I am not subjected to the law since *'God is treating you as sons'* (Hebrews 12, 7); we are His sons and He is our Father and there is no law downgrading us. Our deliverance comes from the Cross of our Jesus, Who came into the world and carried upon Himself the sins of the world; it is His most holy blood which delivers us and not our deeds. Thus, when we verify our true intention and stand by it in this way, Satan is nullified.

However, when we begin our spiritual regime with a sluggish attitude, making various compromises, trying to find a way to avoid it because we did not lay down firm foundations, then the evil one becomes all powerful against us just as the Scriptures say. *'Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour'* (1 Peter 5, 8). Yet, he is not like a roaring lion for us but like an ant, since he has nothing to do with us. At this very moment, we are

practically 'inside'; we have no doubt about anything since we have obeyed in practice our Lord's 'follow me' call. We heard this call and jumped, not just walked towards Him; we abandoned our country and our homes, our families and our very own nature and became self-exiles and objects of ridicule to those who believe that they have a right to ridicule us; we live in slums like the beasts because the essence of the 'follow me' call has been embedded in us and became the dogma of our lives. At this very hour we are 'inside'; the devil can do nothing and has nothing to gain.

The fact that we have not yet become 'pure at heart' and that we have not reached the point of perceiving the Lord and His deep things, is not up to us. It is up to the all Mercy and Grace of our Jesus and it will be given to us when He wishes. Nevertheless, we are expecting to receive these not because we are worth it, neither because we are able to receive them but because this is how His Fatherly love operates and awards these trophies to those who follow Him. But we must always keep in mind this: we ought to persevere in our confession, ought to maintain our proper intention towards Him and ought to continue our progress, following Him to wherever our destination beckons us. Then we will be able to open our palm with 'laudable audacity' as our holy fathers say and say to Him without reservation: *'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4, 7)'* now hear us Lord and give us what You have promised according to your Mercy. However, all these will take place if we maintain a proper intention. If our intention is lukewarm, then we will not acquire this kind of audacity. Try to verify this from experience. As soon as we feel some defeat inside us, we lose our boldness. Again there is something tricky here. The sense of defeat is not what is important. What is important is dealing with it in the right way. Not sinning is not an issue even if man lives only for one day. There is no man who has lived and not sinned. Therefore we know that we possess a sinful nature. We know that it is impossible to remain without sin, ever. It is not in our nature. Neither the Lord demands this from us. That's why He has stipulated through His Church that there is need for indefinite repentance.

Therefore, we have acquired a wrong attitude if we lose our courage and feel that the Lord is angry with us. The Lord loves the sinners and the righteous alike, even the demons, since He is the All Merciful Self Love. Neither does He change nor does He vary. Why are we then afraid of Him? Let me give you an example. Sometimes we make a mistake; we cause harm to our physical or spiritual father and we immediately lose our courage; we begin to feel embarrassed or be scared of him and generally speaking all our boldness and belief in his love are gone. Who is the culprit behind all this confusion? Our father does not know anything yet since

he hasn't seen the damage; yet we are almost trembling from guilt. Did you understand who is causing the fear? It is the guilt of the wrong-doing and not the fact that the Lord has modified His love into anger. Yet guilt is not actually provoking us; it is the way we deal with it which is harmful. It is from the way one deals with guilt that one loses out on his proper, genuine intention, on his pure volition. He loses out from this and thus he loses his boldness, even though there is no reason for this to happen. Even though sin exists, the Lord does not get angry because man commits it- since a sinless nature does not exist - but when man changes his intention. Thus the devil deceives man by presenting him the right reasons in order to cause him despair as a matter of necessity.

Bear in mind that Satan's power is not derived from causing us to commit a sin; he does not gain anything by the enormity of the sin committed. His purpose is to throw us into despair- this devilish dark cloud which shades the mind, extinguishes man's intention and hands him over to his enemies unconditionally.

All right then. 'We have wronged the Lord; we will offer our pleas to the Lord'. What does all this have to do with Satan? Why does he, of all 'people', appear to be the judge; the 'pure' to judge us, the sinners? But it is for our sake that the Son of the Lord was crucified; to save us and to abolish him. Who gave Satan the right to judge us? This is a wrong attitude (i.e. to allow him to be the judge). Do you understand? Here is another example. As soon as man makes a mistake, he stops and says to himself: 'Have I decided to deny Jesus; to change my spiritual life; to go back to my Christian beliefs? No. Therefore, what was done was done inadvertently '. My intention has not altered; it has not changed. Therefore my sin is one of the symptoms we have acquired as a result of the forefathers' fall, when we have lost our personality. Being subject to the pressure of the horrid changes in his spiritual life, caused by the fall, man does not manage to stand straight all the time and slips- just like the one who walks on uneven terrain; it is impossible for him not to slip and not become all tattered up.

Therefore, if this is the truth there is no reason for someone to become depressed and discouraged. Thus we must preserve our intention to its hearty and proper condition. We are ready to suffer all things for the sake of our Jesus. No one can stop us or place obstacles in our way. We are not scared of anyone for '*he who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world*' (1 John 4, 4). This is the truth. I have been greatly moved by the life story of this young girl and great martyr, who has managed to crash Satan and save her country.

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