

## A Depiction of What We Must Do [for our salvation]: Elder Basil of Poiana Marului



*Skete of Poiana Marului in Romania, where the Elder Basil (AD 1692 - AD 1767), the first great master and teacher of the hesychast life in modern times under whose wings the renowned St. Paisy Velichkovsky flourished.*

*Photo by Laurentiu Vasilescu*

### **A Depiction of What We Must Do,**

We who are in the Grip of the Passions and who Trample on the Lord's Commandments, and How to Correct our Way of Life by Repentance and Noetic Work, Living in Submission and Not According to our Former Ways

THIS WORK IS THE INSTRUCTION OF THE ELDER BASIL  
OF POIANA MARULUI

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The Great Basil and John Chrysostom, those renowned Fathers and teachers of the whole world, commenting on the following saying of the Lord, "As I find you, so will I judge you" [cf. Ezekiel 33:20], say that trampling on the least of the Lord's commandments is sufficient to send one to gehenna and exclude him from the kingdom of heaven. That is why I, who have spent my life studying and nevertheless constantly trampling on the Lord's commandments, have exhausted my soul by both untimely hope and hopelessness. I have also read the teachings of our great teachers that there is no sin that surpasses God's long-suffering and some saints who wrote "Did you fall?. Stand up. Did you fall again? Rise up once again, without giving up. whenever you sin, do not lose hope."

From this we can see if we disobey the commandments every hour of every day, we must also repent every hour of each day. That is, we should regret and feel remorse for our faults. Isaac the Syrian says that monks should beseech the Lord at every hour, not only when they feel the need for forgiveness of past sins known and unknown, not only to be freed from voluntary faults, but also in order to be cleansed of all those sins which we commit out of weakness and circumstance. I am not speaking here of mortal sins, such as carnal sin, murder, theft, poisoning and so on, for which canons and rules exist, but of those sins which are caused by one of the three powers of the soul: the intelligent, the incensive, and the appetitive. These are the sins which do not let a monk pray to God with a pure conscience. These are the sins that the Lord has in mind when He says, "When you bring your offering to the altar and remember that your brother has something against you..., and so bring your offering" {Matthew 5:23-24}. Thus, the monastic life is kept through the commandments and repentance. If we cannot keep these two all of the time because of our bad habits, let us at least feel regret and sadness over our unrighteousness in trampling on the commandments. Without such regret over apparently small sins, no one will see the Lord, as the fathers say.

This is the beginning of salvation not only for us, who are besieged by bad

habits and passions, but also for the saints themselves, even though the measure and depth of their repentance is more profound than ours. St. Cassian says that the sins and transgressions of the commandments committed by the saints do not diminish their sanctity. Does not the righteous man sin seven times a day [Proverbs 24:16 *(For a righteous man will fall seven times, and rise again: but the ungodly shall be without strength in troubles. (Septuagint, translated by Michael Asser 2009.)*)]? But he rises each time and does not spend a minute without tears and repentance. Yes, we sin every day, at times unconsciously or out of forgetfulness, without intending to or involuntarily, or because of our weakness we sin every day willingly and unwillingly. Is this not what the apostle Paul refers to when he says, “I do what I do not want and what I do not want is what I do” [Romans 7:15]? We commit excusable sins without asking to be excused. Or rather, we fall into sins that can be forgiven and yet we feel no contrition and thus become guilty of God’s judgment and bring God’s wrath upon ourselves. In the words of an ancient saying, “We have made a habit of sinning with our own free will” that is, we are consciously aware of committing sins and have developed the habit of sinning with our own free will.

Not content merely with our lack of daily repentance and contrition, imagining that the sins we commit every hour of the day have been forgiven already, we burden our brothers with the responsibility for them. Has the time not arrived for us, stupid fools that we are, to realize the futility of accusing our brothers and to take responsibility for our own hourly sins? We should ask forgiveness of our fellow men face to face and beg forgiveness of God with the intellect in secret. Otherwise, there is no way that these sins can actually be forgiven, even though we think they are. St. Isaac says that this regret which we experience because of the weight of what hinders us is reckoned as pure fruit of the grace of God.

Recall the story of the deacon of the Kievan Caves. It was not for carnal sins, murder or other mortal sins that the angel of the Lord pierced him with a spear; it was only because of the long-standing anger he entertained in his mind?

Remember also the recluse who became the prey of the devil’s iron claw. The

whole city, including the bishop, thought that he was a saint and a servant of God. He suffered what he did not because of sins he committed in deed, but because his mind was continually filled with lustful thoughts. For that alone he was soiled before God, even though he did not actually commit the act of fornication. Sinful desire alone is enough to attract all the passions and like a queen it works together with them according to our will and level of development.

The fathers tell us that one of these passions always grows up with us, as if from birth, one that we find pleasure in more than the others. Because the soul is fond of this passion, our enemy, as is his wont, knows how to subdue us through it. For one it will be an insatiable appetite for delicious food, for others carnal sins, love of money, anger, worldly concerns, laziness, self-esteem, arrogance. All of them increase through habit. they are like the demon mentioned by the great Makarios; this demon was wearing on his hairy chest a collection of assorted containers with thirst-quenching beverages; he would pour a drink for each monk according to the latter's predilection.

Concerning this diabolical arrogance, the blessed Hesychios writes: "The great lawgiver Moses teaches us when he says, *'Pay attention to yourself so that you have no secret thoughts in your heart'* [Deuteronomy 15:9]. The phrase *'a secret thought in your heart,'* refers to a cleverly prepared image which can be called something evil and repulsive before God. The fathers call this thought a suggestion introduced into the heart by the enemy; our thought pursue it and converse with it with passionate pleasure."

This should be sufficient to convince us to set to work. It is not I who say this but the holy fathers who declare: Whoever seeks salvation nowadays, let him lay down as a law for himself and vow before God to keep His precepts in his feelings and his mind day after day, morning and night. This means not to look with our eyes with a lustful desire and for the mind not to converse with lustful thoughts in the soul, not to grow angry or incite your brother to anger, not to develop the mental habit of harboring rancorous thoughts over something another person did, not to speak badly of others, not to lie not to swear, not to curse anyone, not to be vain, not to exalt oneself over others in word, deed, or thought, to renounce our own will and to do unto others as we

would have them do unto us [Luke 6:31]. Together with this resolution and beginning we must also keep close watch over ourselves continuously all the time.

Should we be caught up by some habit despite our resolve and break one of these precepts, we should take care above all not to fall into despair. But at once, blaming our own weakness, let us pray to God with a broken heart and humiliated spirit. Rather than create ill feeling between our brothers and ourselves and thus giving way to anger and abuse, let us not accuse others. It is better to accept the guilt and ask for forgiveness, even if both are guilty. Thus the one will apologize to the other for losing his temper and speaking abusively, while the other will do likewise because of his impatience and self-righteousness. When we forgive one another our sins, this is pleasing to God and He will forgive us in His mercy. It was He who commanded us to forgive our brother seven times seventy [Matthew 18:22], and St. Isaac says that God receives this kind of forgiveness and repentance in place of the deed itself. If, to the contrary, we neglect these things, then He will turn away from us and be offended with us for having obeyed our passions without resistance, as St Dorotheos says.

At this point the only thing remaining to us, if we sincerely want to free ourselves, is to learn noetic work. through this we shall uproot our passions.

As [St.] Gregory of Sinai says:

“The spiritual energy received at the time of our baptism is actualized in two ways. The first, which we could call common to everyone, is through practicing the commandments. This requires much prolonged labor. Eventually we discover that the more we practice the divine commandments the more God makes the rays of His light shine upon us. The second way consists in the artful application of oneself to calling upon the Lord Jesus, that is, the remembrance of God in all submissiveness. The first way is very time-consuming; the second shorter and free from risk, if we want to find and know the truth. So let us try to acquire this activity of the heart alone without illusion and imaginings.”

Let us worthless creatures that we are, make this the basis of our lives. Know

for certain that if we apply ourselves to this work to the best of our ability, all the commandments of Christ and all the precepts of the holy fathers will also be accomplished through this practice alone. They will be fulfilled either by actually accomplishing them or through our repentance, as I said earlier. That voluntary poverty and perfect wisdom are the foundations of monastic life was shown by Christ Himself, the Giver of life. His life on earth was an example of divine-manliness. If we understand all this with faith and good will, then we must also realize that fasting, prayer, vigils, prostrations and especially almsgiving are all within the power not only of monks but of laymen as well, if only they want it. As for voluntary poverty and abstinence, most Christians cannot even bear the thought of them, not any more than the thought of obedience or renunciation of one's will. For whoever practices obedience and renounces his will is offering a bloodless martyrdom without which, says [St. John] Climacus, no one will see God. By this Climacus shows that all the Lord's commandments are perfected through obedience and renunciation of one's will. We must therefore be ready to offer these things, but with great discernment, not for man but for Christ.

In our days there is a widespread practice of being obedient for human reasons.

Such a person will be obedient in order to get himself ordained priest, another to become steward, yet another to be sacristan, prior or abbot. For such purposes they are willing to obey their superiors, hoping to receive in return prestige, riches, or other pleasures of this world. In this way they denigrate and violate the monastic discipline and vow, while seeming to others to be approaching perfection and worthy of respect.

All such persons will pretend that they gained these positions of steward, prior and so forth out of obedience. It would have been obedience had it not been intermingled with such under-the-table dealing. Thus carnal fruits are produced by what had originally been spiritual [Galatians 3:3]. It is like women who instead of giving birth to human beings bring forth freakish and deformed creatures.

Our blessed fathers have taught us through obedience, I mean conformity to the commandments of Jesus Christ, to uproot our love of pleasure, that is the

taste for succulent dishes, love of money, vainglory, and all the other passions. Instead of this, we find these would-be wise teachers preaching a new technique of obedience through which one can acquire prestige, riches and power in the world. What we see in the bright sunlight is perfectly visible and attractive, but in secret this kind of obedience is attached to self-gratification. Under this kind of obedience there will be no lack of complete satisfaction with good food, money and vainglory. This is the sort of teaching that Basil the Great, the teacher of the whole world, diametrically opposes when he says that the solitary should never seek grave responsibilities and authority over others. This is a truly diabolical disease, because it leads to arrogance, the devil's own characteristic, and those who fall victim to it will suffer in the same way as the devil.

This being so, what kind of answer will those persons give who, as soon as they receive the monastic habit, ordain themselves in their own thoughts and will to the rank of abbot, archimandrite and why not bishop also? Such things are done by those who are saturated with external learning and it seems easy to them to teach and correct others. The writings of spiritual men seem ridiculous to them.

Any man who does not force himself to travel the narrow path of the Gospel and who has not taken care for the purity of his intellect, even if he has mastered all the external wisdom [of the world] remains blind of soul, founding himself only on the letter which kills, without receiving the Spirit which vivifies [2 Corinthians 3:6]. Not only is he unable to correct others, he cannot even correct himself at all, because the understanding of this world is one thing, while spiritual understanding is something quite different. From the spiritual the saints have been trained by the Holy Spirit and have shone like the sun in the world. But today it is not from the Holy Spirit but from Aristotle, Cicero and Plato and the other pagan wise men that people acquire their understanding.

This explains why these people have blinded themselves with lies and their understanding has been led astray from the correct path. The saints learned the commandments of Christ and noetic work. These others have learned only spoken words; inside their soul there is fog and darkness, and all their

wisdom is on their tongue.

Therefore let us return to the understanding previously proposed. From it we know that those who exhaust themselves in obedience will win true understanding. The one who forces himself in obedience for Christ alone and submits himself to His precepts will find relief from his passions. The one who forces himself for the things of the world hoping to obtain prestige and riches along with physical pleasures is unaware of his burden. This is why the fathers rightly say that there is obedience for God's sake and obedience for the devil's sake.

As for us, let us force ourselves to demonstrate the power of obedience for the sake of God. Let us always be insatiable in achieving the supreme height set forth in the words of our father Gregory of Sinai the God-seer who says submission is serving Christ, and angelic activity, the ladder to heaven, a direct ascent to God, the crowns of the rich, the ministry of the angels, a path free from passions, running our course to heaven. Therefore submission is the mother of humility, but obedience is the gate of ascent. Submission pushes the practitioner of obedience intimately close to God, unites him with Christ and secures him with the Spirit of the Lord, sets him free, cuts short his fondness for material things and releases him from all his carnal attachments and passions. Like a compassionate mother, a mother boiling over with compassion, it yokes him to God, pure and spotless. Obedience, moreover, brings all the commandments to perfection; it fulfills them all. It strengthens the soul in an invisible and unknown way through all the various tasks we are assigned to do. It enriches the soul. It lays up treasures at every hour. It lifts a man to God and stands him before Him. It crowns a man and mystically beautifies him. Thus submission is like a mother, because it gives birth to infants who deny the world; it lifts them to heaven. Obedience, meanwhile, is like a nurse who gives nourishment and growth and leads the worker of obedience to perfection. Again, submission is heaven, but obedience is the heaven above the heavens, like a divine ascent. The first enthrones a man on the gift of humility, the other on the throne of love. That is why whoever falls from submission has fallen from heaven and from God.

Now that we have beheld such a depiction of obedience, it follows that if we



really want to save ourselves at this present time, we should keep what we have just described as a kind of model for correcting our life and for obedience according to God and not according to passionate human thought, so that we become obedient to God and not servants of men, submitting ourselves to the pleasure and glory of this world.

Now concerning this weakness which we said sometimes comes over a person and leads him to commit a small sin against the commandments, should this man turn to God saying with his mind, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner,” beyond all doubt this will obtain forgiveness of sins for him, and with this prayer also he will fulfill his entire rule, following the example of that widow of the Gospel who used to cry out to the judge day and night claiming her due [Luke 18:1-8].

In order to prove what we have just said, it is sufficient to quote at this point the rule of the great St. Basil, a man equal to the apostles, who established the rule that nocturns, matins, the hours, vespers and compline are to be chanted by all the monks of the community with perfect attention of the mind, and after that, he recommends manual work for everyone, saying, “Lift up your hands in the midst of your work in psalms and spiritual melodies some with the tongue, others with the heard, glorifying God,” as he writes, “and practice prayer during your work, because,” he says, if we follow this kind of pattern, then we can easily grasp the harmony of the sayings of the apostle, ‘Pray without ceasing’ [Thessalonians 5:17] and , ‘Work day and night’ [2 Thessalonians 3:8].

According to this model and rule, we must all chant the seven daily services mentioned here as a community. During the rest of the time, let us acquire the habit of practicing noetic prayer; let us acquire this habit wherever we be, whether we be in our cell or on the road, whether we are seated or standing or lying down, wherever we may be, so that our mind never be void of the memory of God. This kind of a rule and prayer encourages us to help ourselves and to stimulate one another to pray without ceasing.

This holy prayer of Jesus with the intellect, or activity of the heart did not appear just out of nowhere, or from some obscure, trifling monk. It has its

beginning in the days of the apostles and was shown forth by an angel in the time of the great Pachomios in Tabenna. It bore fruit thirty and sixty and a hundred fold in the great Sketis of Alexandria, because through the Holy Spirit they discovered the art of this activity through much effort and inquiring of the fathers with divine vision. It spread throughout all Egypt and Palestine. Concerning this prayer the blessed Hesychios of Jerusalem, priest of the Great Church, has written as many as two hundred chapters. After him John Climacus and St. John Chrysostom, Ignatios and Kallistos the blessed Patriarchs of Constantinople, whom St. Symeon the bishop of Thessalonica mentions by name when he lists them in chapter 294 and informs us that each of them wrote complete books with a wonderful mastery of philosophy about the noetic prayer of Jesus alone.

Therefore let no one follow the present-day customs of putting all of one's efforts into chanting psalms, canons and troparia and thus neglect noetic prayer, because the God-seer Gregory of Sinai says:

“Our chanting should be angelic in keeping with our way of life and not carnal, not to say pagan. Because chanting with the voice and with loud cries is a primitive form of the cry of the mind, it was given to us because of our sloth and inability to understand. It lifts men towards what is genuine. For those who do not know that prayer is the source of good actions, watering them like some spiritual fruit tree, it is appropriate to chant at length, even without measure, and constantly to employ a great variety of prayers, never leaving off until through their painfully intense efforts they attain to divine vision by discovering noetic prayer at work within them.”

In our days the difference between psalmody and noetic prayer cannot be understood by everybody, but only by those who through long practice and investigation have palpably tasted the sweetness of the activity of the heart.

These are the ones who can say with the apostle, “Who will separate us from the love of God?” [Romans 8:35]. Thus the most venerable Sinaite says:

“Grace shows itself in the prayer in various ways and in many forms, and the distribution of the Spirit is manifested differently [1 Corinthians 12:4]. He

makes Himself known as He pleases, that is, He can also do for us what He did for Elias the Tishbite [3 Kings 19:12]. For some he shows Himself as the Spirit of fear and trembling before God, which melts their passions; when He passes through a heart of stone He crushes it to gravel inspiring such a fear that the body clings to the bones as if dead. To others He shows Himself as joy that some fathers have called “leaping”. For yet others He is like an immaterial fire kindled within them. In others He shows Himself like the gentle breeze of light. But for those who have progressed more in prayer, God works in them by Christ dwelling in their heart and revealing Himself in secret through the Spirit [Ephesians 3:17].”

Let us not forget that abstinence and fasting are the beginning and our companion throughout the entire course of the monastic life. WE have to keep them with great attention and care, according to the rules of the holy fathers.

While we have seen many of the saints performing fastings and labors that surpass human nature, on our part we must learn from many fathers with divine vision not to want to undertake those disciplines that surpass human nature, because we have not received that sort of power and heavenly fire. It is better for us to submit ourselves to the divine Gregory of Sinai and follow his rules which are good and measured, because he writes saying:

“For those who are struggling one pound of bread is enough and for the one who wants to find God let him also eat a bit of all the foods which happen to be at hand, just enough not to be sated, in order to avoid conceit and also so as not to despise the good creation of God, but to be thankful for everything. This is the discernment of the wise. As for those who are weak in faith or in soul, it would be better to abstain from such foods. These are the ones the apostle commands to eat greens, since they do not believe that they are protected by God [Romans 14:2].

“There are three levels of partaking of food: abstinence, adequacy, and satiety. The first means to be still hungry after you have eaten (that is, to get up from the table still a little hungry). Adequacy means to be neither hungry nor to be weighed down with food, while satiety means to be weighed down

with the food. To eat beyond satiety (this means to eat after you have left the table or the meal) is the gate of the stomach through which lust enters in. Therefore, discerning these things, choose for yourself what is best suited to your strength without going beyond the limits of our rule. Because it is possible only for the perfect according to what the apostle says, to be both hungry and filled and yet to be powerful in all things [Philippians 4:12-13].”

The blessed Nil Sorsky says the same. He says that the measure for beginners is to leave the table slightly hungry, and if someone eats enough to be satisfied this is not a sin. However, if a person becomes somewhat weighed down with the food, he should reproach himself and then he will achieve victory.

Concerning the time for postponing the meal, the fathers said until the ninth hour, but on a day when there is no fast, when for example there is a feast or a great saint, then it is good to advance the time of the meal. If someone is hungry in the evening let him have something in the evening as well, and also if anyone is wearied from a journey or doing heavy work. This kind of indulgence is not negligence. Regarding food, it is bad not to keep to a set rule, but there is nothing wrong with the kind of indulgence we just mentioned. Moreover, fasting without measure is equally bad. It afflicts even more injury than the absence of a rule. This is why we must keep to the time and measure that were established by the fathers.

Having thus established the kind of commandments that govern our life, let us return to the correct and faultless path to salvation in our life, that is, the reading of the divine Scriptures. That great teacher Paul teaches us when he writes to Timothy saying, “From your childhood you know the holy Scriptures which can make you wise” [2 Timothy 3:15], that is, the holy Scriptures will never let you suffer what so many others have suffered. This is because whoever knows the holy Scriptures as he should know them will not be shaken by anything that happens to him; he will be able to withstand everything. On some occasions, he places his faith in the unfathomable providence of God, while at other times he recognizes the lessons and finds the teaching in the Scriptures.

Indeed, the Scriptures tell us everything we need to know for our correction,

and through the Scriptures we also understand what things it is better for us not to know.

If we want to reprove those who are in delusion, this must always be done from the holy Scriptures. So also, if we want to correct ourselves or obtain wisdom it must also be from there.