

Spiritual Struggle = the Normal Christian Life



St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) Russian Hierarch well known for his spiritual writings.

***Podvig*, a Russian term meaning: Spiritual Struggle = the Normal Christian Life**

Any Orthodox Christian who does even the least bit of spiritual reading will come across the word “podvig.” While this word can be described, it cannot be translated into one single English word—which is why we continue to use, and must therefore learn to understand, this Russian term.

The word itself has been defined as “spiritual struggle”. Like so many things in Orthodoxy, in doing it, we understand it within our souls even if we cannot explain it. In performing a podvig, we find it as a means of drawing nearer to Christ as we travel along the path of salvation. We bear the scars of sin in our bodies which drags us down to the earth like a magnet, yet our soul longs to ascend to the heights. As man, composed of

body and soul, we find the two opposing each other. Even St. Paul says *I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate.... for though the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not, with the result that instead of doing the good things I want to do, I carry out the sinful things I do not want.*

As Orthodox Christians, we know that we must labor toward purification, illumination, theosis (deification). The first step of purifying ourselves from the passions, from all which draws us away from God and shackles us from ascending to the heights, employs the use of podvig.

St. Theophan the Recluse defines our entire Christian life as podvig. He explains that the spirit hates sin, while the flesh dwells in it. How is this battle within ourselves to be resolved? Through podvig, that spiritual struggle of bringing the soul into mastery over the body.

The Church gives us the directions for doing this through fasting, prostrations, standing in prayer, etc. All of these things oppose the body, and as we fulfill these ascetical practices, we do indeed find that they help us draw nearer to our Creator and Savior. As we aspire to deepen our souls in Christ we find that we want to do more, to go beyond what the Church has already told us are the necessary first steps.

Podvig is precisely that “doing more”.

According to St Theophan “all the saints accept the only true path to virtue to be pain and hard work... lightness and ease are a sign of a false path. Anyone who is not struggling, not in podvig, is in prelest” (spiritual delusion) (*The Path to Salvation*, pg 209).

Our Lord said, *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me* (Matt. 16:24). St Innocent, in his book, *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven*, writes clearly that the way which leads to the kingdom of Heaven is precisely to deny oneself,

take up the cross, and follow Christ. Our beloved American saint goes on to explain that “to deny oneself means to give up one’s bad habits, to root out of the heart all that ties us to the world...there are external and internal crosses. To take up one’s cross means not only to bear crosses laid on us by others or sent by Providence, but *...even to lay crosses upon oneself and bear them.*”

This is a clear direction to podvig.

When we take up an additional cross, a podvig, with the blessing of our spiritual father, we find that the Lord Himself comes and helps us to carry that cross, walking side by side with us. Isn’t this what we long for? To have the Lord near, to be close to Him?

All of podvig is a form of repentance, of turning around and getting back unto the correct path. Because it is so intricately linked to repentance, no one should ever undertake a specific podvig without the approval of his father confessor/spiritual father. The evil one is very crafty and he wants nothing more than to drag us into the same pride through which he fell. He will try to use the very means with which we are trying to overcome our sins to lead us into the sin of pride. Yes, we can become prideful and vain glorious over our own podvig! In fact, it frequently happens that an astute spiritual guide will tell his spiritual child to abandon his podvig.

When we take on a podvig it is for the sake of opposing the body which draws us down to the earth and away from God. Do I eat too much? Then I must take a podvig of additional fasting or denying myself the special foods in which I tend to indulge Am I lazy? Then I need to work harder. Do I not want to get out of bed in the morning? Then get up earlier to pray. The list goes on and each person, with the help of his father confessor, knows which vices particularly afflict him. Every vice has an opposing virtue and in striving toward that virtue, the vice can, with the help of God (for nothing can be accomplished without prayer and grace from the

Lord!), be overcome, or at least lessened to a great degree.

Any podvig can be for the sake of opposing a passion with which we are afflicted, as stated above, but we can also take on a podvig as a form of prayer for ourselves, our families or any other person. An example of this could be the parent who has a sick child. In addition to praying for that child, the parent can take on a podvig of additional prostrations and/or fasting as an extra effort with that prayer.

Indeed, we not only can, but should, add a podvig to our prayers of petition to the Lord.

Throughout the centuries we can see in the history of the Christian Church that living the life of a Christian meant podvig. The early centuries saw hundreds of thousands of martyrs, many known to us by name, but the majority of them unknown. In the more recent history we have witnessed decades of communist oppression which produced thousands of martyrs and confessors for the faith—those individuals who refused to deny Christ and suffered beyond description. Being a Christian meant podvig. It has also been clear throughout the ages that when Christians became lax, when externals were emphasized and not the interior life, when abuses and corruption crept into the Church, podvig came from outside in the form of Islamic or communist persecution. Both individually and collectively, we must realize that if we do not accept and seek podvig ourselves, it will be imposed upon us!

While most of the faithful accept and observe the fasting days and seasons—and recognize the spiritual benefits from them—we have lost the concept of taking any other additional fasting upon ourselves as a form of podvig. While we give willingly and cheerfully to the poor and to the Church, it is rarely to the point of denying ourselves of any necessities from those resources. We accept our daily prayer rule, but where are the prostrations outside of Great Lent?

All of the things listed above (and there are indeed many, many more, depending on the individual) can be a form of podvig.

The Christian life in this fallen world is a struggle. If we are not struggling, then are we on the right path? When all is going well, we tend to let our focus stray away from God, while in hardship we seek Him. We should always remember that Adam was in paradise where he lacked for nothing, but it was there that he lost that perfect communion with God. When did he find Him again? When the Lord descended into hades, grasped his hand and delivered him and all those who had been held there.

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