

Talk delivered on
Wednesday, June 2, 2004
by His Grace, Bishop Tikhon of South Canaan

2004 Pastoral Conference
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SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD

Your Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman,
Your Eminence, Archbishop Nathaniel,
Your Grace, Bishop Nikon
Venerable Fathers.

I would first like to echo the words which His Beatitude, Metropolitan Herman offered this afternoon, and welcome all of you to Saint Tikhon's Monastery and Seminary for this Pastoral Conference. It is always a blessing when we, as Orthodox Christians, have the opportunity to gather in a visible expression of our unity of Faith, and it is a special blessing when the clergy are offered that opportunity to share and learn from each other. May the Holy Spirit inspire and guide us in the next few days as we discuss the various aspects of our pastoral ministry.

I also ask for your patience and your prayers as we speak this evening about one of the most central aspects of our life as clergy of the Orthodox Church. Spiritual fatherhood, the subject of our discussion, can be taken in a very narrow sense, in which the role and title of spiritual father is reserved for the great saints of our Church, the rare holy elders and clairvoyant monastics which we find throughout the history of our Church. While they are indeed an important and inspiring reality in the Church, for which we should be grateful to God, I would like to speak a little this evening about spiritual fatherhood in a broader sense, in the sense in which all of us here are fulfilling or striving to fulfill our calling as priest of the Church. Many of you here are my elders both in wisdom and in experience and what I offer here are simply some of my own observations and reflections on spiritual fatherhood which perhaps could provide a small opportunity for discussion.

I think that we can truly say that, in all that we do, we are spiritual fathers: whether we are hearing confessions, serving the Divine Liturgy, offering the Holy Mysteries to the faithful, visiting the sick, counseling the faithful, feeding the poor or preaching the Gospel. And so, I would like to begin by relating a story, a form of which I am sure, most of us have encountered. This particular story was related to me by a priest of my acquaintance, who told me of a telephone call which he had received from a woman in great distress. Although the connection was not very clear, the priest understood that the woman's daughter had just died suddenly and, overwhelmed with grief, she was calling her priest for help and consolation. The priest himself was shocked at the news, but, as a good priest, immediately began to listen as the woman spoke

of her great love for the deceased, of the important place she held in her life and of her emptiness and sorrow over her passing from this life. The priest then began to offer words of consolation to the distraught woman and helped her to regain her calm. It was only towards the end of the conversation, as he began to talk to her about the funeral arrangements, that the priest realized that the woman was not in fact talking about the death of her daughter, but about the death of her pet dog. He had misunderstood the words because of the difficult phone connection and laughed to himself as he realized that he had misunderstood the gravity of the situation. But before he was able to say anything more, the woman thanked him profusely for bringing peace to her soul. I mention this particular account because I believe that it reveals something that is crucial for us as pastors to remember: and that is that there is always a practical aspect to the great mysteries which we are called to minister. It is of course absolutely imperative for us as clergy to know the theology of our Church. But it is equally as important for us to be able to apply that knowledge in a practical way, in a real way, in our daily lives and in the lives of our faithful.

The subject of spiritual fatherhood is always one that arouses much discussion, especially surrounding the subject of elders, and obedience and penances, and the application of canons and so on. It is not my intention to address all of these issues this evening, but rather to suggest, as His Beatitude did this afternoon, that there is not a great dichotomy between the sublime theology and ascetical tradition of the Church and the lives of each and every one of us, whether we are ordained or not. The examples that the saints provide for us are not meant to separate them from the rest of the world, but to provide living evidence that perfection is attainable for all. This is important for us to know as for our own salvation and it is important for us to convey to our faithful.

An example of this can be seen in Saint Ambrose of Optina who is universally respected as a holy starets in the line of the Great Optina elders. There is much we could say about him, but I would just like to underline one of the gifts which he possessed, which was the ability to adapt himself to each person and to pass immediately from discussions of high theology to the discussion of practical problems of everyday life. In his life, there is an account of a young man who criticized the elder for wasting his time advising a peasant woman how to feed her turkeys. He answered his critic with these words: "Don't you understand that her whole life is bound up with these turkeys, and that the peace of her soul is of no less account than that of those who come to me with questions about sublime matters?"

It seems to me that often people tend to be very concerned about the sublime matters. And this is especially the case in the case of spiritual fatherhood, whether it is the priests themselves who want to be acknowledged as experienced confessors and good spiritual fathers with many spiritual children; or whether it is those of the faithful who spend their entire lives looking for that perfect spiritual father who will tell them exactly what to do and impart to them the grace of God. Once again, I would like to emphasize that I am not denying the importance and value of our holy elders, or denying the sublime and exalted aspects of spiritual fatherhood. What I am suggesting is that it is not always necessary for those sublime aspects of spiritual fatherhood to be revealed in sublime ways.

I would like to look at three aspects of spiritual fatherhood that can be characterized as lofty and exalted: The spiritual father as Prophet, the spiritual father as Physician, the spiritual father as

Teacher. But I would also like to take those characteristics and show how they can be applied in a practical way in our lives as spiritual fathers and in the lives of our spiritual children.

The Spiritual Father as Prophet

When we speak of the spiritual father as prophet, we must be careful to explain what we mean by the term “prophet.” When most people hear the word prophet, they think of someone who can foretell the future. This is indeed one aspect of the prophetic ministry in both the Old and New Testaments. But it is only one aspect, one expression of the essence of prophecy. The true prophet, in fact, is one who has seen the heavenly kingdom and is inspired to lead his fellows to that kingdom, who has beheld the glory of God, has come to repentance in his own heart and has thereby been given the grace to speak the word of God to the faithful, not only with his words but with his very life.

Now, very few of us would call ourselves prophets in this sense, and few of us would claim that we have seen the glory of God, or beheld the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, let alone having the gift to be able to share this with the faithful. So how are we, as simple bishops and priests, to live out our calling to be prophets?

Archimandrite Sophrony of blessed memory, writes that the prophetic ministry of Spiritual Fatherhood, is ‘linked with the mystery of the word of God, which is begotten in the heart of man through prayer.’ ¹ The task of the spiritual father then, is to remain on the path of God’s will through his own prayer of repentance and to announce that will to his brethren. ² This is still a lofty goal, but it is a goal that is attainable for all of us, for we can all offer a prayer of repentance, no matter what spiritual level we may be at. It is only by offering our own prayer of repentance that we will be able to lead others to that prayer for themselves. And when there is prayer and repentance, then the will of God is revealed.

All of us have had the experience, whether in confession or outside of confession, of being presented with a great problem, where we don’t know what to say or to do to encourage the person before us. It is at moments like these when we feel ourselves to be very far from being prophets. And yet it is also at those very moments of uncertainty that, if we turn with humility to the Lord and ask for a word, we find that He gives it, and from speechlessness and helplessness, we suddenly are able to offer some advice and help. In this humble way, we are participating in the same grace which the prophets had, the same grace which the great elders were given.

The Spiritual Father as Physician

Another lofty title for the spiritual father is physician. We recall the words of Saint John of the Ladder, who writes that *a Physician is he who suffers from no carnal or spiritual malady, and has no need of any remedy from other men.* ³ This is a very frightening definition of a spiritual father, of course, for who among us can say that he suffers from no carnal or spiritual illness and has no need of help? I am sure that every priest here trembles when he begins the prayer before the Great Entrance, “No one who is bound with the desires and pleasures of the flesh is worthy to approach or draw near or to serve Thee, O King of Glory; for to minister to Thee is great and awesome even to the heavenly powers...” And yet, how many stop the liturgy at that point because they are not worthy? We do not stop at this point, but continue until we hear the

encouraging words of the prayer which remind us that that the Lord Himself has come to us and “committed to us the ministry of this liturgical and bloodless sacrifice.”

We are unworthy to celebrate the Holy Liturgy and yet we are called to that celebration; Christ Himself comes to us to show us that we must fulfill this task. And in the same way, we are unworthy to be physicians, to help heal other people, yet Christ Himself, the Great Physician comes to our aid, for God forbid that we should actually think that it is we who have done the healing and not the grace of God. Our own imperfection should never be an excuse to be lazy, for the grace of God which healeth all that is infirm and completeth that which is lacking continues to be with us, though we may feel that we have lost that grace over the years. As His Beatitude mentioned this afternoon, asceticism is required of all Christians who wish to preserve the grace of Baptism, and asceticism is required of all clergy who desire to preserve the grace of ordination.

If we begin with this, then, we can continue to find healing for our own soul, first of all, and then we can begin to assist in the healing of others. Once again, there are many books and treatises within the Patristic tradition wherein we may find therapy and cures for the various passions and illnesses that afflict mankind. To discuss all of these would require a lifetime, but I think that we can say in summary that our goal as physicians is to prepare those who are ill to receive healing from Christ, the Divine Physician. And really the only way to accomplish this is to lead our faithful to contrition, for “a broken and contrite heart, God will not despise.” (Psalm 50) Sometimes a Spiritual Father can artificially seek to crush the heart of his spiritual children, but this is not something that can be done easily in our day. People endure enough sufferings in their lives that it is sometimes sufficient to help them to bear those sufferings with patience and humility, to remind them to follow the commandments of Christ. So often these commandments, which “are a light unto our feet” are neglected by those whose minds are drawn to lofty things.

The Spiritual Father as Teacher

The third lofty aspect of a spiritual father is that of teacher. Saint John of the Ladder once again provides for us a definition of a true teacher: *A genuine teacher, he writes, is he who has received from God the tablet of spiritual knowledge, inscribed by His Divine finger, that is, by the in-working of illumination, and who has no need of other books. It is as unseemly for teachers to give instruction from notes taken from other men’s writings as it is for painters to take inspiration from other men’s compositions.* [4](#)

I am afraid that by quoting these words of Saint John, I have already fallen short of his definition. This may seem like an odd injunction from Saint John, for we have become so accustomed, in the Church, to quoting the fathers and relying on their words. And if Saint John is correct, then I should not be quoting him at all either. But this is indeed the goal we need to strive for: to learn the writings of others so that we may forget them. Forget them, not because our memory is going bad, but forget them because we are living those words.

It may seem as impossible to attain that divine illumination and to receive the divine tablets from God Himself as it seemed impossible to be free of passions as a physician. But here again, we must do what we can. He is not saying that we should not read the fathers. Nor is he saying that we cannot say anything that has not been said before. Rather, he is encouraging us to live the

tradition of the Church, to find from God the word that we can offer to those who come to us for guidance.

We need to speak from our own experience, no matter how insignificant we may feel it to be. But our experience must be guided by humble prayer to the Lord.

The Spiritual Father as Friend

I would like to add one more characteristic of Spiritual Fatherhood which is not often discussed, but which is particularly important in our day. It is an aspect of spiritual fatherhood which can be a source of great hope and consolation for the faithful, but which also presents certain difficulties which the spiritual father must be watchful of. I would like to call this part, the spiritual father as Friend. As a prophet, a physician and a teacher, the spiritual father places himself in a position where many look up to him. And especially when he is able to help his spiritual children, they can become attached to him. This attachment is not in and of itself bad, and can be used by the spiritual father to lead the spiritual child in the direction of repentance. But the spiritual father must himself be careful not to be overcome by attachment himself. Saint John of the Ladder writes: "When we see that some love us in the Lord, then we should not allow ourselves to be especially free with them, for nothing is so likely to destroy love and produce hatred as familiarity." (Step 26:99)

Finally, it is good to remember that sometimes one can be a better friend by sending a person away, even though this may seem cruel and difficult to do. Many people today are lonely. They are lonely because they desire to be loved. And they desire to be loved because they are proud and insecure. A spiritual Father can be a true friend by directing that desire towards the Lord and by being watchful so as to respond in an appropriate way if that desire is wrongly directed.

Saint John the Baptist

As a final note, I would like to offer one more source of inspiration for us as spiritual fathers, a person that was truly a friend, the Holy Prophet and Forerunner, John the Baptist. He is truly the greatest example of a spiritual father, for he said: "He must increase and I must decrease," and he thereby revealed himself to be a true "friend of the Bridegroom," for his entire life revealed an example of what we must do as spiritual fathers: we must work to humble ourselves and become nothing, so that Christ might fill us and be revealed in our words and in our actions. The grace of God which fills our heart is a gift from on high, and our concern should be to prepare ourselves to be fit receptacles for that grace.

Saint John the Baptist is the greatest of the prophets because he not only pointed to Christ, but his whole life was a prophecy of him, even through his death and his own descent into Hades to proclaim there the coming resurrection. It is our responsibility as spiritual fathers to reveal Christ to our faithful through our effort in prayer and repentance. Saint John the Baptist is a true physician for he preached repentance and was often very direct in his call to repentance. But his directness was for the purpose of crushing the hearts of those who came to him. And we as spiritual fathers must lead our children to humility, not by trying to control them, but by crushing their hearts while respecting their freedom.

Conclusion

The title of this evening's presentation was "Spiritual Fatherhood", and in those two words we see the double nature of already contains this double application, theological and practical. The word "Spiritual" brings to mind such things as "mystical theology", "vision of God", "Noetic Prayer", and the like. The word "Fatherhood" brings to mind "crying babies" "dirty diapers" "teenage rebellion" and other such things. The difficult task we have as bishops and priests is to bring these two levels together, to operate on both levels at the same time.

And this means that we must be able to recognize that the concerns of a peasant woman for her turkeys, or the sorrows of a woman for her dead dog, are real concerns and real sorrows that reflect the tragedy of fallen human nature. But this means that we, as spiritual fathers, can, with the help of God, offer consolation and healing for all those who suffer and are heavy laden. We can do this, even though we may not have reached the stature of Saint John of the Ladder or Saint Ambrose of Optina, or any of the Great Saints of the Church. For though we may be small and of no significance, yet the grace of God is with us and will help to lead us all into the direction of the Heavenly Kingdom. If in all things we look to the Great Prophet, the Divine Physician and the Teacher of us all, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gives all things to those who ask.

1 - Zacharou, Archimandrite Zacharias, Christ, Our Way and Our Life, Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2003, page 142.

2 - Ibid., page 144.

3 - JOHN CLIMACUS, To the Shepherd, 4.

4 - JOHN CLIMACUS, To the Shepherd, 5.