

Is there spiritual life and sanctity today?

My immediate answer to both parts of this question is a very affirmative 'Yes'. God does not change. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and for ever. And the nature of human beings has not changed either. Since Adam, humans are dignified with such a power over their own destiny that they can to a great degree turn their backs on God, on spiritual life, on the quest for holiness. But until the end of the world, there will always be people who, even if they are in the minority, will call down God's grace upon the earth and their fellow humans. That the world continues is proof that there is holiness today. Saint Silouan said, 'I tell you that when there are no more men of prayer on earth, the world will come to an end.'



Elder Sophrony (+1993) with Elder Efraim the abbot of Vatopaidi Monastery

In other words, spiritual life, and holiness, which is its fruit, do not exist only in the past. We can see holiness in our predecessors and learn from them, but we are not examining spiritual life like an exhibit in a historical museum. It is a living reality to which we are all called. Every human being has a spiritual dimension. God is not partial: He calls each one into existence with personal love, and endows each human with the potential to share His own life. St. Peter using the terminology of his time said that we are called to 'become partakers of the divine nature' [2 Peter 1:4]. And that is what holiness is: 'Be holy, for I am Holy, and I will that you have all that I have, unreservedly.' This is God's invitation to us all, whatever our place in society,

or our rank in the Church: the rank of the laity, or that of the clergy. St. Silouan writes: 'Everyone in this world has his task to perform, be he king or patriarch, cook, blacksmith or teacher, but the Lord Whose love extends to everyone of us will give greater reward to the man whose love for God is greater.' And again: 'Not everyone can be an emperor or a prince; not everyone can be a patriarch or an abbot, or a leader; but in every walk of life we can love God and be pleasing to Him, and only this is important.'

Spiritual life is life which takes into account the spiritual dimension of human beings. Working at our relationship with God is not like a hobby for a certain category of person, as people say, 'He or she is the religious type'. It is not an optional extra. It is what makes our life really human. Biology and psychology, when they exclude the divine input into the human make-up, give an incomplete picture. Secular man is merely a superior animal, and actually sub-human. Without spiritual effort we will not cultivate our spirit. It cannot be obliterated, but it can be stifled and atrophied, ignored or denied. Only if we live a life which is spiritual will we ever be fully ourselves, fully reintegrated as persons. Spiritual life includes our psychological and our physical aspects. What I think and do on every level of existence affects my soul. And when my soul is touched by God's grace, my thinking, my feeling and my body are also blessed.

Especially in Western countries, many people have abandoned Christianity. An English author (G.K. Chesterton) wisely said that where people stop believing in the truth, they do not start to believe in nothing, they start to believe in anything. Thus although belief in God may remain when Christ is abandoned, in every country nowadays one can meet all kinds of spiritualities. This is not surprising, because 'man cannot live on bread alone', and spiritual hunger exists even where ideas about the Absolute Being are confused. Furthermore, many differing spiritual paths have features in common. There is, for example, a core of ethical teaching common to the major faiths. The radical differences between religions do not always show at the beginning of the path: only when people go further do the divergences become clear. Some of our contemporaries teach that the further you go in any religion, the closer the paths converge: but actually the opposite is true. So those who are seeking must seek for truth, and find the path which is based, on right theology, on a true vision of God as He Himself has revealed Himself to us. Then our deepest intuition will confirm that indeed Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The fullness of life in God is only accessible in the God-man, that is, in the One who shares our human nature as well as having Divine Nature, as One of the Holy Trinity. The Orthodox Church gives us a true Prototype: we can see, and hear, and touch, and taste, the Absolute Being; we can experience the fragrance of God's actual Being. Thus we can go to the end of the Church's path with confidence. No other path, however noble its practices, its morals, and its aspirations, goes safely to the very end. Though nobody is totally bereft of grace, fullness of sanctity presupposes

orthodox doctrine. Our teaching is unsurpassed; it is not out of date. It has borne fruit in many different ages and circumstances and cultures. Orthodoxy is for everyone; we can understand why Tertullian said that 'every soul is innately Christian'.

Thus spiritual life could be defined as 'life in Christ'. Let us dwell on this for a moment. This phrase has been used as the title of a book by St. Nicholas Cabasilas about the Sacraments. Echoing him, the great wonderworker, St. John of Kronstadt, who was a married priest living in Russia and who reposed in 1905, gave a similar title to his 'spiritual diary' when he was asked to publish it. An almost contemporary author called one of the books where he shared his spiritual insights His – that is, Christ's – Life is Mine. To be 'in Christ' means to be incorporated into His actual Body, and to be anointed with His Spirit – Christ means 'the Anointed One' – and adopted as a child of His Heavenly Father. Christian faith is not only saying 'yes' to the Creed. It means 'putting on Christ' [Gal. 3:27]. How? By Baptism, which, precisely, is preceded by a confession of faith. We easily take this great gift for granted, but those who are converted in the mission field or as adults can tell us from their experience that it is a passage from darkness to light, from death to life. We sometimes forget that at Baptism the priest said over us, 'Thou art washed, thou art sanctified, thou art justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.' These magnificent words, borrowed from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, can seem like a mere ritual formula if we neglect to actualize the divine gift of grace in our life. The seed of spiritual life has been sown in us. We 'are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints' [1 Cor. 1:2]. That is our task.

If we are certain that we 'have found the true faith', we have nothing to fear from the plethora of spiritual paths around us, even though it seems confusing. 'For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind' [2 Tim. 1:7]. If we remain faithful, and continually enrich our experience and knowledge of the Church's life and teaching, we will be all the better fitted to help our contemporaries. The basic question is always: What do you think of Christ? St. John reminded his correspondents that 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ is [the divine Lord] come in the flesh is not of God: [1 John 4:2].

Of course, our exposition of what we think of the Lord will be humble, not arrogant with self-assurance; it will be full of love and gratitude. Saint Silouan says. 'God is love, and therefore the preaching of His word must always proceed from love. Then both preacher and listener will profit. But if you do nothing but condemn, the soul of the people will not heed you, and no good will come of it.' Certainly, not everyone is called to be a full-time preacher, but whoever witnesses to Christ will be speaking of one who has made it possible for all humans to become true persons. Spiritual life is,

according to Orthodox doctrine, a collaboration between our free will and the will of God. The best ambassadors of Christ will be those whose spiritual life in Him has prepared them to speak prayerfully, so that others will want them to explain their belief. 'Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear' [1 Pet. 3:15].

If we conform to the path on which alone we can acquire what St. Paul daringly calls the mind of Christ, it does not mean that our individuality gets lost. Our God is One in Nature and Three in Persons. Our Fathers teach us that we do not divide the Nature or confuse the Persons. And so it is to be when humanity is one as God is one. If the world lived in Christ, His commandments would be the first goal of each person: love for God and for each other. Therefore each person would be, not dissolved, but affirmed and fulfilled in loving relationships.

It is very instructive to read about holy people, canonised saints and others, such as the twentieth century holy elders, Iakovos, Porphyrios, and many more. I mention those from the last century because it is almost 'today', and a century of great suffering. I have in mind recognised holy men and women, because saints do not wear a self-advertising label: 'Look at me! I'm a saint.' The path of Christ is one of humility, and some were honoured as holy while on earth, while some were not. Our Church wisely does not bestow official recognition on someone until they have passed through the gates of death, and even then usually not quickly. So it is too soon to speak of 21st century saints. But if we only look at the 20th century, there is such a variety of personalities, educational levels, degrees of piety in youth, religious backgrounds, and so on. Then there are many different life paths that led to holiness. Mount Athos has given the world many great saints such as Silouan, who reposed in 1938; but not all the 20th century saints were in monasteries. There are the millions of martyrs and confessors – men, women and children – from the Soviet Union; there is a parish priest such as St. Nicholas Planas, and the new Parisian saints, Maria [Skobtsova] and Dimitri [Klepinin]. There is St. Nectarios whose astounding miracles show that our God is a living God and is at work until now. There are many who bore suffering with faith, and even if they are not famous, they are now reaping their reward and praying for the world. All of these holy people went to the same services and accepted the same Creed. Yet they vary like a garden with many kinds of flowers. They present us with proof that God is with us and accessible to us all here and now.

Those with a scientific training know that proofs come mainly through experiment. The best way for us all to answer the question posed by His All-Holiness to us today is to experience for ourselves that 'if you live after the flesh, you shall die, but if through the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live.' 'The flesh', and 'the deeds of the body', mean here the sinful energies such as hatred, pride, lust and

other passions, which cause disintegration and close the door against the Spirit of God. Spiritual life will involve some 'mortification' for all of us. One example of this is the Fasts that we undertake together at certain periods of the Church year, precisely to help us to pray and to cleanse our heart of sinful passions. St. Paul goes on to say that 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, "Abba, Father". The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God [Rom. 8: 13-16]. When 'the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us' [1 Pet. 4:14], then it will be evident that there is spiritual life and sanctity today.