

Konstantin Serebrov

PRAY AND WORK
(ON YOURSELF)
PART I



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INTRODUCTION

I've written this work about ascetic practices on request of my Master to give the interested people yet another view on the essence of the spiritual Path. Namely, how man can come closer to God and let Him 'bring man up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay', and put a new song in man's mouth. (Ps. 40:2,3). Man can come closer to God through work on himself, that is working on purifying his heart and soul, his inner world, making through this work still more room available for Him.

Both ancient and modern history of Christianity prove that only outwardly following the rules of the Christian confessions and congregations, the monastic and sacerdotal vows, the long, richly decorated vestments, long prayer services, fasting and works of obedience do not guarantee protection from or endurance during temptations and ordeals. Often, on the contrary they increase passions and hypocrisy... Not seldom the scandals in life of all Christian confessions and sects without any exceptions, come to the surface...

On the path which my Master has been following the focus lies in one's work on oneself, so that you could call this path the 'path of the worker'. Work on oneself consists mostly of spiritual practices which wake up man's soul in this illusory world towards spiritual reality and keep it awake. This path doesn't demand vows and renunciation of the world, after Jesus' word: 'But I say unto you, Swear not at all' (Mt.5:34). It doesn't 'bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne' on the follower. It isn't demanded from man to be an exemplary citizen, family man or woman, spouse, son or daughter, but it is asked to 'take heed of yourself,' as St. Sergius of Radonezh says, that is study yourself and know what is in you, what comes in and what comes out of you.

'Pray and work,' says St. Benedict of Nursia. 'Work' must be understood not only as work with one's hands but as work on oneself, which helps to rid one's mind and soul from the consequences of committed deadly sins and to restrain one from committing them again, as the psalm commands: 'depart from evil'(Ps.34:14).

I've written this book with the help of the Philocalia, a collection of treatises by Christian holy fathers, which has been translated

from Greek into Slavonic by Saint Paisi Velichkovski and the group of monks from his monastery. I have translated / adapted their spiritual instructions into modern language, hoping to make them more accessible to the reader.

Konstantin Serebrov,
Moscow, June 2006

CHAPTER 1. A SUDDEN INTERVENTION OF THE SPIRIT

Michael, the twenty-year-old son of a wealthy couple of entrepreneurs from Voronezh, was a third-year student of the mathematics faculty Moscow University. He kind of liked his studies but his strongest wish was to find God – the Creator and Maker of all the worlds. Each day while attending the lectures, he continuously asked himself one and the same question: ‘Why am I sitting here and not in Voronezh seminary? My mind and heart are irresistibly aspiring to God, and not to the study of mathematical formulas. On the other hand, I do not feel like becoming a priest or a monk. I don’t want and I’m not able to renounce the world, I still want to learn and to experience so many things! More to it, it’s unlikely for me to become a respectable priest or a true monk. What should I do?’

‘You are up in the clouds again,’ his girlfriend Polina said laughing at him with her deep, velvet-black eyes. ‘Tomorrow I will have to explain to you once more what was said at the lecture.’

She put her hand on his shoulder and tousled his hair playfully.

‘I don’t like it when you express your tender feelings for me in public,’ said Michael as he took her hand off his shoulder.

‘Cad!’ said Polina blushing and moved away from him.

After the lecture Polina caught up with him in the corridor.

‘Will you visit me tonight?’ she asked blushing.

‘I’ll phone you this evening, as now I need to resolve a very important issue.’

‘To be or not to be,’ she giggled.

‘Imagine, precisely that,’ replied Michael.

‘You are such a serious and busy person,’ chuckled Polina.

Michael hurried into the dean’s office, trying to escape his girlfriend’s mockery. It worked: when he reappeared five minutes later, his pursuer had disappeared.

‘I did manage to shake her off,’ rejoiced Michael, and after leaving the building he headed towards the subway. He decided to attend vespers at the church near Paveletskaya station, where he hadn’t been yet. Its brick walls were a dark-brown colour. After crossing himself, Michael pulled open the heavy oak door and stepped inside.

Dark walls radiated a mysterious warmth. The atmosphere of the church felt so intense that it almost caused a pang in his heart. Michael looked at the ancient icons with reverence; the sun was go-

ing down, and the icons, glowing with golden light, made his soul tremble.

While the psalm-reader was reading the Service of Hours, a silver haired priest was hearing confessions in the left chapel of the church. Michael quietly took place at the end of a small queue. For three years already, he confessed the same sins to the priest of the church near the flat where he lived and heard the words of forgiveness from him. The only thing that disturbed him was a suspicious whispering voice, coming from somewhere in the depth of his abdomen. The voice was repeating intrusively: 'There is nothing to repent of.' Michael tried not to listen, but the voice was still persisting. In order to distract himself, Michael started to peer at the icon of Christ the Saviour, which hung on the wall on his left, but the shining eyes of Christ suddenly filled his heart with remorse. Michael looked to his right and met a reproachful gaze of Saint Nicholas, painted full length. The voice inside Michael suddenly subsided, and a clear thought penetrated his mind instead: 'Your heart is full of passions, and your mind is full of proud designs.' The thought felt unpleasant, stinging, and Michael moved his eyes to the icon of Seraphim of Sarov, hoping to get support there, but met just a strict, piercing gaze of the great Saint. A shiver ran down his spine. At that moment his turn came. He approached the priest and bowed. When the priest covered his head with the stole, Michael said quickly: 'I repent of pride, greed and fornication,' and waited for the usual absolution. 'Are you married?' the priest asked suddenly.

'No, I'm not,' answered Michael.

'Why not marry?' the priest asked.

Michael got confused from this direct question and blurted out: 'Father, I don't want to marry. Tell me, how can I embark on the Path of salvation and find God? But if I marry then the Path will have to be forgotten...'

'How dare you request such a thing?' asked the priest and shook his head reproachfully, 'first purify yourself from carnal sins, and then go and plead to be admitted to a monastery to do the work of obedience for at least a month. And, if you will conclude that that is your calling, then go and study in a seminary.'

'But is there any other way to God?' asked Michael cautiously. 'I hardly can become an eager monk, or a worthy priest, to give up the conveniences of civilisation and lock myself up in seclusion. On top of that, I am studying at the university and I would like to graduate.'

'It is not possible to have one foot in the world, and the other one on the path to God. In this way you will never reach your goal. You will have to choose between life and death. If a man begins to seek God, then he has to be as dead to the world. And, if he chooses that broad way of life, then he will never find God. Because the quest for God is like a path of death with regard to life, while on the other hand to enjoy life means the path of death when it comes to the quest for God. Pray to the most holy Mother of God,' concluded the priest, 'maybe she will have mercy on you, and she will show you the right Path. And to keep you from fornication, and as a work of penance you will have to read the Canon of Repentance bowing to the ground ten times three times a day for a month. Then I will admit you to receive Communion.'

And he pronounced the absolution prayer, concluding it with the words: 'and I, unworthy, forgive you and absolve you, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.'

Michael left the church at a loss. 'Wow,' he thought, 'I invited this disaster myself. If I just had gone to my usual church, everything would be okay, and tomorrow already I would have received Communion. On the other hand, it's interesting how easily he caught me. And besides, it was quite interesting what he said. What should I do now: go and see Polina or go home and read the canon as the priest requested?' It was getting dark outside and he did not feel like going home. 'I will start repenting tomorrow,' he thought, comforting himself as he went to Polina. Within an hour he was impatiently ringing at her door.

'I knew you would come,' she said mockingly. 'Though you play the unapproachable ascetic during the day, sort of Father Sergy from Tolstoy, you cannot spend a single night without a woman.' Polina's mocking made Michael instantly angry and he hit back: 'I have come to tell you that I confessed my sins today in church, and the priest obliged me to do a work of penance and avoid intimate contacts with women. Otherwise, no Communion. So, I decided to obey this restriction.'

'Are you taking him seriously?' Polina flared up.

'Ask me something easier,' Michael blurted. 'Part of me wants to find God, while the other part wants to get into bed with you.'

'It is very stupid to exchange your beloved for the sake of the very doubtful prospect of entering the heavenly dwelling after your death,' said Polina and unbuttoned a couple of buttons of her silken blouse and beckoned to Michael. 'Don't take the priest's word

seriously: he also has a wife and children, and he is certainly not celibate.'

'He is in a different situation: he has been married in the church and therefore living with his wife is not considered to be a great sin.'

'Why don't you marry me and make love to me legally every night?'

'Dear Polina, I am not ready for a happy family life with pots and pans, I have other objectives.'

'I do know your objectives only too well. You see, I'm well informed of all your past adventures: you are certainly not indifferent to women.'

'I tried to fight these temptations, but I could not resist.'

'In my eyes, not only you didn't fight them, but rather chased after all these 'temptations' like a tomcat in March,' Polina hissed acidly.

'Let's stop this useless argument,' Michael said. 'A trick question to you: what are your life's objectives, what do you want and what do you strive to gain?'

'At least, I'm not obsessed with the quest for an invisible God. I love you, I want to be loved, I want to be happy, I want a child. Don't I have the right to this?'

'I told you already that I'm not ready for a family life. First, I want to save my soul, I want to find what is hidden behind seven seals.'

'Then what are you doing in my bed? You will never find God there! I'm a beautiful woman, why can't I be really happy, why am I not allowed to cuddle up to my beloved at night and feel protected from all problems?'

'If you are not going to accompany me on the quest for God,' said Michael, 'then it will be difficult for us to build a common existence.'

'I never thought that you would be able to sacrifice our love for the benefit of a dream!' Polina cried out. 'And what if you never find God? Maybe He exists only in that sore imagination of yours and the other bullheads, just like you,' she said, clinging to him fondly.

Michael coldly freed himself from Polina's embrace and headed for the door.

'Go then!' she flared up. 'Don't think that I will cry and beg you to come back!'

'More likely, you will try to find a more appropriate man for your needs,' answered Michael.

He walked out, took a full breath of fresh air and headed towards the subway. A bitter sadness hung in his soul, but Michael was aware that his relationship with Polina had been binding his soul to the earth, thus hindering his upward striving.

‘There are many beautiful women,’ he soothed himself, ‘but there is just one God.’

At home Michael read the Canon of Repentance three times, standing in front of the icons, and fell asleep from time to time. But after the reading, his soul unexpectedly brightened, and in his thoughts, he thanked the priest for imposing the work of penance on him.

During the next three days, he read the Canon and the prayers to the Holy Virgin before going to bed. On the fourth day, after his lectures at the university, his friend Alexander remarked: ‘I noticed that for some days you and Polina have not been on speaking terms.’ ‘Our objectives differ,’ Michael frowned, ‘she wants to start a family, but I want to find God.’

‘I heard from my friends recently about a wise man called Nicodemus who lives in Kupavna, near the lake by an old mine; they say he is a man of profound knowledge and has helped many people. I know you are interested in such people, therefore I noted down his address,’ and he waved a page from a notebook with a few carelessly written lines, in Michael’s face and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt.

‘Okay, I have to go now... I’m going to the theatre with my girlfriend, will you join us?’ and he moved away, without waiting for an answer.

CHAPTER 2. MEETING ELDER NICODEMUS

'Maybe I should go and visit Nicodemus right away?' thought Michael, heading towards the exit. He took the underground and reached the Kurskiy terminal, jumped into a departing train and forty minutes later he had reached the station Kupavna. He walked joyfully along the country road to Nicodemus' house. It turned to be a two-floored wooden house, surrounded by an overgrown garden with apple trees and blackcurrant bushes and a fence. To the right of the house was a small garden house and the doors were open. Michael didn't have time to knock at the gate as a sturdy man with short cut grey hair, a short grey beard and keen deep eyes emerged in the doorway. His face was almost an exact copy of the countenance of Saint Sergius of Radonezh which Michael saw in the church, where he got his work of penance from the priest. He was about 60 years old.

'Who are you looking for?' he asked and looked sternly at Michael. Michael felt uneasy as he seemed to look right through him.

'I'm looking for a man called Nicodemus,' he replied hesitantly and stepped back.

'May I know what you need from him?' the man asked.

'I believe he'll be able to help me in an undertaking which is of extreme importance to me.'

'Come in then, if you managed to find me, have a cup of tea, and we'll look into it,' replied the man.

Michael followed him to the garden house which turned out to be a small kitchen.

The old man gave him a cup of tea.

'Tell me all about it,' he asked.

Michael looked around. In the left corner hung a large icon of the Holy Mother of Vladimir, in the right corner one of Jesus Christ. In other corners were icons of Michael the Archangel and Saint Sergius of Radonezh. Below the icon of the Holy Mother burned a small oil lamp.

On the wall hung a poster with a copy of Da Vinci's painting 'Lady with an ermine'.

Michael took out a bottle of brandy from his bag and a diet sausage and placed it on the table.

'I want to find God,' he said, 'but at the same time I don't want to renounce the world. I was told by a priest that this would be impossible. 'Pray,' he said, 'to the Holy Mother of God, she helps every-

one.' I prayed for several days, and, by a strange coincidence, I was advised by a friend of mine to come to you. I don't like unexpected changes, but for several days it is as if someone else steers my life, and to my surprise I seem to accept it. I was told that you are a man of wisdom.'

'And who was this person who told you about me,' Nicodemus said crossly.

'Don't send me away,' said Michael, 'I need your help badly.'

'And what are you ready to sacrifice for the sake of finding God?' asked Nicodemus suddenly.

'Whatever is needed,' answered Michael.

'Don't talk idly,' frowned Nicodemus. 'Many of those who come here tell me the same thing, but still do not even lift a finger for the salvation of their souls. I am not impressed by these slack students, they promise easily but never carry out their promises. Hopefully you are different.'

I could accept you as a novice, but I'm not sure if you will be able to stand it.

Let me tell you about the path of the monk. To become a monk, you must be on a high level of renunciation. One may call oneself a monk, but to be a monk is quite another thing. One should renounce the world and dedicate one's life to the quest for God. If a monk really wants to find God, then he must renounce his parents, his wife and children, if he has any and his home. A monk must renounce his worldly ambitions and material conveniences. He also should stop caring about his kinsmen and relatives, and all the people whom he left behind in the world. You will be obliged to dedicate all your time to the quest for God. The path of the monk is narrow and constraining and full of suffering and deprivation. The monk has to conquer all his passions, bodily as well those of the soul, and for this reason a monk should fast, and when not fasting also eat very little. Then our insatiable belly shrinks and just a small amount of food in the morning and in the evening will do. The monk must pray incessantly, continuing at the same time his work of penance, and he should also hold nightly vigils. A monk must retire from the world and live in a solitary place, where he won't be disturbed by the worldly life.'

'I'm afraid I won't be able to meet the demands of the path of the monk,' Michael said. 'Is it possible to find God without leaving the world, by continuing to live in a flat in the city?'

'It is possible to find God without being a monk or a priest,' replied Nicodemus. 'We do not know with certainty who, from all the living people, is vouchsafed to receive God's grace. Just a passer-by walking towards you, whom you won't give a second glance, might be a holy man, conversing at that very moment with God. The path to God may lie in the very thick of things, as well as in the hermit's hideaway, or in a prosperous and famous metropolitan monastery, but on every path many sacrifices are required.'

'Try me,' Michael said quickly, 'and I'll prove that I am capable.'

'Sure, you have daring,' said Nicodemus thoughtfully, his eyes half closed.

After a minute of silence, he said:

'In order to find God in your heart, you should strive even more than you would for your life.'

An ascetic finds God by means of inward prayer. An inward prayer is pronounced mentally. There are many such prayers, but the most important is the Jesus prayer. At first it sounds easy: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, sinner.'

However, when an ascetic starts saying it, he faces many difficulties. The more he tries to say it, the heavier it feels, just like a stone slab pressing onto him. Finally, he might conclude that the most difficult thing in the world is to continue to pray to our Lord Jesus Christ, as the fire of purification starts to burn him from within. But at the same time, he knows that if he stops pronouncing the prayer, he won't be able to find God in his heart. An ascetic is obliged to say the mental prayer incessantly. No matter what he does, whether working or talking, the mental prayer must go on inside his heart. Are you capable of doing that?'

'I find it difficult to answer you straight away,' said Michael.

'Then why are you here?'

'I want to ask you to become my spiritual mentor.'

'Well, as you are asking, I can try to prepare you so that at some time you will be able to walk on the path of the ascetic. But it will not be easy. You will have to learn how to follow Christ's commandments and for this you must learn to wage a spiritual war: to struggle against yourself, to curb your pride, not to allow yourself idle talk and self-will, to fulfil the tasks which you will be given and to do charity. You will have to go to church as often as possible, confess your sins to the priest, and receive Communion. It is not easy to defeat yourself, but it is even more difficult to defeat our enemies, the demons, who prevent us from coming closer to God. The first thing

you must do,' continued Nicodemus, 'is to purify your soul from the sins which you have committed since the day of your birth. This process will take quite some time. When you have completed it, we will talk about the next step.'

'I believe I will manage quickly,' Michael said resolutely.

'Festina lente, as they say in Rome,' grinned the elder.

Michael gave him a puzzled look.

'Hurry up slowly,' Nicodemus translated.

CHAPTER 3. THREE TYPES OF WILL FOUND IN AN ASCETIC

'According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the great miracle worker,' Elder Nicodemus said, 'there are three types of will which can be active in an ascetic:

The first is God's Will, which is perfect and salvatory.

The second is our own human will which may not be evil but isn't salvatory either.

And the third is the will of the devil, and thus pernicious.

The devil's will, will try always to convince the ascetic not to do good deeds, or to do good only out of vanity, not for the sake of finding Christ.

The human will prompts the ascetic to do everything for the satisfaction of his own passions, undermining the value of God's grace gained by the spiritual struggle.

The Divine Will teaches and guides the ascetic to wage the spiritual struggle for the sake of acquiring the Holy Spirit, without expecting praise of fellow men. The Holy Spirit is an eternal and imperishable treasure, more valuable than any earthly wealth. The ascetic's soul is revived by the Holy Spirit, and by means of His purity is elevated to contemplation of God. 'It is the spirit that quickeneth', Jesus said. (Jn. 6:63) The Holy Spirit descends into the ascetic's soul at the command of the Lord Himself. However, the ascetic must prepare his soul through constant inner work which is also called 'work on oneself'.

If he relies only on his own will, he will never be able to find God inside himself because God reveals Himself only to those who are chosen by Him and who are worthy of His grace. The ascetic's own will might lead him to his downfall.

The will of darkness is always active in human beings, but the manifestation of God's Will has to be earned by long term efforts, that is long term work on oneself.

I hope you are able to understand at least something from what you have heard.'

CHAPTER 4. BECOMING AWARE OF ONE'S SINS

'And now I want to know,' Nicodemus continued, 'how much you have sinned in your life.'

'I do not fully understand the idea of sin,' answered Michael.

'Sins are those deeds which pollute the person's body, mind and heart, and do not allow the Divine light to penetrate his soul,' pronounced Nicodemus. Jesus said: 'The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' (Mt. 6: 22)

'But I don't really know,' said Michael confused, 'which deeds have darkened my soul, and which not.'

'It seems to me that you have never, ever read the Gospels,' Nicodemus remarked.

'I have read them, but I did not understand them really.'

'Today I will not be able to explain much to you, but little by little you will learn about sins.' At this moment a short stout man entered the kitchen. He had a beard and a small bald patch on his head which resembled a monk's tonsure.

'Brother Peter,' Elder Nicodemus turned to him, 'try to help this young man to become aware of his sins, as he earnestly asked me to accept him as a student. For my part, I will go and pray to God, for the sake of the salvation of lost souls.'

Elder Nicodemus left the kitchen and went towards the house. Unintentionally Michael followed him with his eyes and saw the elder cautiously climb the shaky stairs to the attic. He was just trying to imagine how the attic looked inside when Brother Peter's voice made him wince.

'Well, Michael, as I understood, you don't really understand what sin is? Then, what is sexual contact, from your point of view? Have you really never made love to a woman without being married to her, according to the church rites?'

'Of course, I have,' said Michael blushing. 'I was not married, but then, is making love really a sin?'

'You should know that even if your marriage has been blessed by the church, sex is and remains a sin, as it deprives your body, heart and mind of its purity.'

'Well, my, now former girlfriend, used to tell me that after your wedding you can make love all day long and it won't be a sin,' Michael said.

'C'mon, big dreamer! You had better spit it out, with how many women have you sinned?'

'Is this really relevant?'

'Very much so,' remarked a person who appeared in the doorway. The newcomer resembled Brother Peter but was lean. After examining Michael from head to toe with his strict gaze, he said: 'My name is Gouri. See what sort of clay our new student is made of! The Gospels say: 'if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. (Mt 5:29).As I see, you look at women with lust, thus you also sin with each of them in your heart. Don't you know Christ's words: 'if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. (Mt. 6:23).'

'Speak out then, how many women have you been with?' asked Brother Peter, 'And consider this: the devils in hell will question you in quite a different manner.'

'Nine,' said Michael mumbling.

'How old are you then?' enquired brother Gouri.

'I will be twenty-one soon.'

'If you had not come here, you would have collected almost a hundred by your thirtieth birthday,' Brother Peter remarked reproachfully.

'With the seventh and the ninth I have only sinned once,' said Michael trying to defend himself, 'and only because I was very drunk.' 'Drunkenness aggravates the sin of lechery,' said Brother Gouri, 'as immoderate drinking is a sinful deed in itself. But in combination with fornication it doubles the term of stretch in the underground dungeons in the afterlife.'

Michael paled slightly and started to fidget in his chair.

'So, what should I do now?' he was seriously scared.

'Tomorrow go to church, and confess all your sins of fornication,' said Brother Gouri. 'We will try to teach you how to prepare yourself for the Path of the ascetic.'

'I'm not sure that he will ever step on this path,' remarked Brother Peter. 'This path is difficult and narrow and this fellow misses natural firmness against women's seduction. As soon as he sees a fashionable skirt, his eyes leap from their sockets!'

'I confessed my fornication just a couple days ago,' Michael said.

'And what exactly did you tell the priest?' Gouri enquired.

'Just like I said: I repent pride, greed and fornication.'

'And was that all?'

'Why, should I have said anything more?' Michael was confused.

‘That’s the point! Your confession was purely mechanical, and it scarcely brought relief to your soul,’ answered Gouri.

‘Then how do I properly confess my sexual sins?’ asked Michael.

‘During confession you should tell the priest the place, the time, and the name of the woman with whom you displeased the Lord.’

‘And how exactly did I displease the Lord?’ wondered Michael.

‘By doing what you did, you negligent student!’ said Brother Peter.

‘If you want to step on the path of truth and salvation, you should purify your soul from all those deeds which have darkened it in the past. Now it should be clear to you, I hope.’

‘Anyway, I don’t understand, why would intimacy with a beloved woman pollute my soul?’ asked Michael feeling irritated.

‘It does, and even more than with someone you don’t love,’ answered Brother Peter. ‘Because with a beloved woman man might sin up to several times a day, while with the one he doesn’t love just once a week.’

‘Do you think I believe you?’ Michael was filled with indignation.

‘Everything inside me revolts against your words!’

‘See what a bold novice we’ve got,’ remarked Brother Gouri.

‘Haven’t you heard, Michael,’ frowned Brother Peter, ‘that in the Middle Ages a knight never went to bed with the lady of his heart, as he considered it an insult to her noble fineness, and he did not want to desecrate the elevated love by lust. And a knight of a higher rank observed an absolute celibacy and dedicated the love of his heart only to the Holy Virgin. And you, God’s servant Michael, will also have to reach such a level.’

‘Don’t frighten him with these stories,’ remarked Brother Gouri, ‘as he might run away; Nicodemus will never forgive us for that.’

Having climbed to his room in the attic, Elder Nicodemus bowed to the icon of the Holy Virgin of Vladimir and prayed to her. A light wave of grace poured upon his soul, and he prayed for a long time in the inner silence, asking the Holy Virgin to plead for those who were lost on the path of life and were not able to find God in their heart. The space around him was illuminated by the invisible light which was coming from Our Lady. With tears in his eyes he started to pray passionately to Our Father in heaven, the Creator of all worlds, and then he heard a heavenly voice, coming from the depth of the created world.

‘I will always be with you if you will keep My commandments and fulfil My will.’