

Fighting the passions

A “How To “ manual is available!

by Fr. Seraphim Holland

A young man wrote:

I believe that God is calling Christian men—including myself—to get their act sorted out in that Satan is trying to break those of us who are prone to “sin” in this area of sex. It’s a big thing to come out with it, but many men who are Christians are falling. What we need is some prayer and mutual support. Please, if God is calling you to it, mail me . . .

You are not really saying anything earth shattering. The important thing is—how do we avoid falling into unclean thoughts, which left unchecked may lead into unclean activities as well? This is actually part of a larger issue—how do we expel and uproot our “passions” (many of which have little or nothing to do with sex, by the way), and lead lives that are pleasing to God?

As Christians, we should want to please God in all things. If we love God, we will want to keep his commandments. How are we to do this? Intuitively, we know we cannot do this on our own power, but there is another piece of knowledge which is crucial to our success.

Those who are Orthodox Christians, and live their lives in accordance with the “mind of the church”, which is nothing less than the mind of Christ, have many “resources” to fall back on. We

understand from our hagiography (lives of the Saints, many of whom had intense struggles with lustful thoughts), our services (which are quite extensive, and didactic) and our pastoral theology, how we are to combat these sins of the flesh. The road map is actually quite plainly marked—it only remains for the Christian to walk on this road!

This road is, plainly, the path of obedience to the teachings of the Church, which are nothing less than the teaching of Christ. I am only referring to the Orthodox Church in this case, which we believe and confess as the one true church and body of Christ; some know it as “Eastern Orthodox.”

The most important things, in the context of fervent, correct belief in God and love for Him, from the perspective of the Church are prayer, fasting, and repentance.

If a man is not praying, he can fall into any sin. We could spend a long time talking about this, because not all prayer is efficacious. One must pray correctly—in spirit and truth. Heretical or self-serving prayer is not pleasing to God. I will pass over this to discuss a long neglected topic—fasting.

The church prescribes fasting for its children. This is known by Orthodox Christians to be the will of God for all Christians, and a necessary thing. We understand the verse (paraphrased) “This kind comes out, not but by prayer and

fasting” to refer to the passions which are deeply rooted in a man, and not only the demon the Lord was explicitly referring to. This has been the understanding of the church from the time these words were written.

We are not referring to demon possession here, which is usually a result of a long indulgence in particular sins, because the passions are not *caused” by the demons. The “passions” are those inherent weaknesses in a man which entice him to sin. They increase when they are “fed”, which happens when a man capitulates to the temptation, and they wither away (slowly), when they are starved. A man can starve the passions by continual effort against them, with the help of God, according to the “tried and true” methods of the church. We already mentioned one “method”, the foremost one, prayer. An incalculable aid to our prayer, and an empowerment to our will against the passions, is another *critical* practice of all Orthodox Christians, fasting.

Fasting is almost forgotten among those who call themselves Christians. This is a great victory for Satan, as there are beneficial spiritual and physiological effects from fasting. The church knows by experience that some foods incite passions more than others. Meat is foremost among these foods. Orthodox who are obedient to Christ’s divine and perfect law (“if you love me, you will keep my commandments”) abstain from meat (beef, pork, lamb, poultry, etc.) , as well as other animal products (eggs, milk, cheese, etc.) on all Wednesdays and Fridays during the year, as well as during four yearly Lenten periods, these being the fast before Pascha (Great Lent), the fast before the Nativity of the Lord, the fast before the Dormition (falling asleep) of the Theotokos (the word means “bearer of God -”, and refers to Mary the mother of Jesus. This word

has been used by Christians for over 1500 years, and has only recently fallen in disuse among all except the Orthodox —so much so that some wrongly think it to be idolatrous!), and the fast before the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. On most of these days, fish, olive oil and alcoholic beverages are also abstained from.

Why do we do this? The simple answer is that we are Orthodox Christians, and therefore children of God, and like obedient children, we do what our Father tells us to do! The benefits of our obedience to this revealed will of God for us are incalculable. Our passions are subdued, and we are strengthened to do battle. We can pray with more fervor. I cannot eloquently describe the benefits —I can only be like the Holy Apostle Nathaniel and say “Come and see”! what fasting can do for you.

It is important to note that our fasting is done in obedience to God. It is not some “work” we do, because we think it would please Him. It is merely obedience to His Divine will, because we trust Him and love Him. Our nature demands that we fast, and this is one of the reasons why God demands it. We therefore do not make up our own fasting rules, because we are a community, being grafted to Christ. We act in true unity with one another, since the head controls the entire body. “Let all things be done in good order”. It is simple to fast in an orderly, beneficial way: We merely follow the rules of the church, as obedient children, and heirs of the promise.

If we fast in this way, we receive all the benefits of fasting, and avoid the pitfalls of striking out on our own, such as pride, despondency (when we fail to meet our own artificial standards), laxness, and self delusion, which is known in Orthodoxy by the technical

word “prelest”. our fasting is no different from all the other things we do or do not do because we are Christians. We look to the church as our guide, and we follow. there truly is “safety in numbers”, when those “numbers” are the sheep in the sheepfold, being shepherded by Christ!

The third important item I mentioned above is repentance. It grows out of (correct) prayer, and is strengthened by fasting. We can only repent when we know something about ourselves. We must know where we “fall short” of the divine image of God which we bear. We learn this through the Holy Spirit, Who

“enlightens the world concerning sin”. This enlightenment is not personal only, but has also been revealed to the entire church. Since there *is* a “public” standard we can know of, we can measure our own personal enlightenment against it. We must discard any views, opinions or practices which are not sanctioned or known by the church. Obviously, there are many things in life that are not “black and white”, and we must have some way of dealing with those things. We can help ourselves by obtaining good, sound counsel from someone we trust, who knows the teaching of the church, and has the wisdom to apply them.