

River of Gladness

St. Jacob of Alaska Orthodox Church, Northfield Falls, Vermont

November 2008

The Birth of the Christ Child

A short story by Father Caleb Abetti

“You told them they could go where?”

Miriam asked her husband.

“To the north cave.”

Then with some nervousness he raised his hands and said, “What? It’s warm with a fire, better a cave than the protection of the stars.”

“Philemon, for God’s sake she is pregnant.

“Mimi, darling, go look at the registry... where would you have me put them? In which room?”

“You could have asked somebody...you know people do sacrifice sometimes. You could have said a pregnant woman needs your room.”

“Sweetheart we run an *inn*, not a social service. People get what they get, first come first served...”

A little angrier now Miriam said, “She’s pregnant.”

“So are a lot of other people looking for a place tonight. I’ll tell you what. This census thing is going to turn into riots. The government should have planned better.”

“I’m going to go check on them,” Miriam announced.

“It’s midnight!”

“You know you can be a heartless (and Miriam said something adults say when they get really mad).”

“Alright, go check on them...take some food and another blanket. I saw their donkey. They had plenty of blankets but bring them another.”

The truth be told, things had gotten complicated between Miriam and Philemon. Work consumed them; the inn was tearing their marriage apart. Sometimes dreams should be left alone and it had always been Philemon’s dream to run an inn. But running an inn isn’t for romantics, everyone who has gotten out of the business with barely their shirt on their backs (most!) knows the financial roller coaster and ultimate disaster “a little place in town” will bring to a small family. It wasn’t always this way for innkeepers. Recently, the economy had experienced a downturn. Before the Great African Wars people loved to go to inns. In those recent, but now long gone days, people stayed in inns when they worked out of town, when they vacationed, when they traveled to visit others—the inn business boomed. The economy wasn’t in the same shape; now you could see its ribcage and most people blamed the wars. When the armies started marching every talent in every community was sucked out to make armor and swords for the soldiers, to drive the heathens from their territories.

“Wish some of the heathen would stop over here on their way out for a bite to eat,” Miriam said more than once, a repetitive jab at their ailing business.

The Inn wasn’t really making it, not withstanding the sudden surge for the census. That would help things this month but Philemon was forlorn about the debt they had accumulated, the gloomy and outrageous interest. The economy,

“My Lord,” he would say over and over, staring at bills.

Miriam put on her coat and went down the stairs. She went out the door carrying bread, cheese, and wine, wrapped up in one of her finest and warmest blankets. She stepped out of the inn and onto the rough stone pavement. It took her less than an hour to get out of the city and into the desert. Everyone knew the system of caves near the city and Miriam easily found the massive rock opening the young couple had settled in. The husband was standing outside.

“I’m the innkeeper’s wife, Miriam...I brought you more things.”

The man thanked her kindness but his eyes were full of concern. “Do you midwife?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you help us?”

“Of course.”

Miriam observed the cave in wonder. The cave, as caves go, was your usual...but the scene here was extraordinary-- a mother giving birth, on the road, in a cave, where shepherds feed their animals. Surely this had happened before. But what was extraordinary was that the two of them, Mary and Joseph, although they were anxious that everything should be right and safe, they were not afraid, not in the least. They were, in fact, serene, calmly looking to whatever was next. And what was next? Three men entered the cave. Not men from there or anywhere near there. Black men with capes and jewelry. As if Mary were the Emperor Caesar, they straightaway went up to her and bowed down before her saying “Hail, Queen”. Then they opened their splendid capes, revealing costly gifts including spices and gold. Afterwards, with the same dignity with which they had approached Mary, they left the cave and went outside. Joseph followed them out. He learned from them that, provided it was okay with the family, they would stay the “weekend” in order to give adoration to the child. After Joseph gave his blessing they began setting up their tent. Mary showed great joy at the presence of the visitors.

Suddenly her labor began.

Donkeys and sheep were scuttled along, hay redistributed, Miriam settled in.

“Your sons?” Miriam asked Mary between contractions, nodding to the young men.

Joseph answered for her, “This is Mary who was raised in the temple...these are not her sons. They are my sons by my first wife. This is her first child, and he was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

“Is that so?”

If Joseph had said this before the Wise Men ordeal, Miriam may have blinked, may have needed follow up comments. What was happening now, what seemed plain as day, was that she was a part of something beyond her reasoning it out. Joseph’s matter-of-factness about the situation made it easier for Miriam to settle in to these facts. She took the news of the mother and child and the Holy Spirit as simply good news, that the pregnancy had gone well, and the child would be in her arms in a short period of time.

She was right. The labor and delivery were swift, the Christ child came into His mother’s arms with less than the standard birth pangs, the fluid ejected from his lungs, cries burst forth as healthy as they were beautiful. Soft white cloth that Miriam had brought quickly lined his perfect body. Gratitude to Miriam went around from the family; their good fortune in her assistance was even better than having gotten a room in their inn.

“You’ll have to forgive my husband, he’s got this real rigid business mindset sometimes. I can’t tell you how mad I was when I found out he sent you packing...”

“Not at all. We will go and thank him for sending you.”

“Yeah, well.”

Philemon waited for two hours before he decided to go looking for his wife. He was suddenly aware, freaked out really, that she had gone at all. Two in the morning now, coming up on three!

The more he thought about it the more he sided with himself about what he had told the pregnant couple—he had not been callous—he had turned the unborn Christ child away because there was no room! You can’t make room when there isn’t room...the simplicity of his own reason overwhelmed him. It was irrationality, so he thought, that overflowed his emotions with guilt.

He was fairly certain where the family had taken shelter, where his wife should be at this moment if she was safe. *If she was safe*, where was that coming from? There is incredible treachery, lost and hell-bound emotion in the confused and ill-known schedules of family members.

From a small distance out from the cave Philemon could see by the light of the fire in the cave that things weren't normal in there. It wasn't that they were bad, just strange. Miriam was there and thank the Lord God that she was...who were the others? Shepherds? Yes, shepherds were there, strange they should be sharing this time with a new mother, and odd they should take to the caves in this

fair weather. But this was not the strangest of the company: fantastic and luxurious camels stood outside. Untied, the animals stood silently at complete attention, like human soldiers guarding palace gates. The beasts' sides were flanked with fine leather and buckles and their necks sashed with silk. The camels' owners, presumably inside the gigantic tent pitched right beside them, must be princes or high-ranking diplomats. What in the world were they doing here? It was about the most random gathering ever and he did not dare to approach it.

"Miriam! You in there?"

A few moments later Miriam appeared. "Yes, Philemon! You've come!...Come up here! The mother has given birth, to...to..." and she almost told him, almost told him who the child was, the Messiah, the Son of God. She almost screamed those words out.

"You think they want their privacy now? Maybe we should get back?"

"Philemon, you oaf! Get up here!"

Philemon wouldn't budge from behind his rock. At this point, had it *been* about something else, from here on in it was just about

embarrassment, about not seeing whoever there was up there to see because.... because...well, he had embarrassed them! No room and all! He had made them go through this here in a cave, outside. Because, how had he put it, better than the *protection of the stars*. Better they didn't have to see the guy who made things harder for them. He was a natural born sulker and this wasn't extreme or unusual behavior for him. One of the Wise Men came out. Philemon jumped back... "Your wife has received a great blessing, you must go see the Christ." The man from the East stood towering over the rocks, the shrubs, and Philemon. His gold earrings shimmered in the moonlight and even the stately camel seemed to have expectations.

So Philemon went. He left his holding position not out of intimidation, which would have been understandable. He left the rock because of the therapy in the word *blessing*, which he caught solidly in the palm of his mind as it tore through the night. *Blessing*, and the necessary status of the word in his life at that very point. Perhaps no other condition could have made his feet walk towards his wife in this way, this instinctually certain way, which turned into a jog, and then a run to be near her.



Orthodoxy in Kenya

St. Jacob Orthodox Church is supporting the missionary work of Father Chrysostomos in Kenya. The following is Father Chrysostomos' account of his life and work in Kenya which he sent to us recently.

About the priest and the family

My names are Father Chrysostomos Aggrey Wanjala Wanyonyi. I was born on the 29th October 1972 in the village of Mahanga, Lugari District in the Western part of Kenya. I went to school at Mahanga Primary School until 1986 when I did my K.C.P.E (Kenya Certificate of Primary School). I passed and joined Lukhokho Sec. School from 1987 to 1990. I did my K.C.S.E. (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) Examinations and passed. I worked as a teacher for two years after school then joined Makarios III Seminary, Nairobi in 1993 and trained as a priest for three years, graduating in Diploma in Theology in 1995.

I got married to Matushka Leonida and we have two children by now, Makarios and Cyril. The former is in Standard Five at Topmark Academy, Lugari and the latter is in Standard One at Mayoyo Primary

School.

Apart from priesthood I am also a peasant farmer. I plant corns and beans at the onset of rains and as the rains diminishes in the month of August onwards after the harvest of corns and beans, I do plant sweet potatoes, vegetables and sunflower. At part time too, I have been working as a registration officer during voter registration exercises and as presiding officer during elections. All these activities have aided me earn a living. Matushka Leonida has a village kiosk. She sells basic items though this is a small business, but also supplement the family.

The other members of the family includes my two brothers, James and Titus, and my niece Joan. I have been a guardian of them all. I used to pay school fees for James in secondary school and also in college. He has finished his Diploma in Early/Middle Childhood

Education and he is teaching in Bignet Academy, in Nairobi. Titus is in form two at Mahanga Secondary School of whom I am assisting pay school fees. Joan is in Standard Three at Mayoyo Primary School. She is a child of my elder sister who died a couple of years ago. The family is big, but I struggle to manage though with difficulties, but God blesses us and we live in happiness by His grace.

The First Step...

My father was the first to become an Orthodox Christian. He was initially a Quaker, but at his first encounter with the Orthodox priest at a burial service he was impressed with the Orthodox faith. He inquired where the Orthodox Church was in the next village and in turn started attending the Orthodox worship. He was baptized in 1984. He told my mother about the new faith, who then joined him becoming also an Orthodox faithful. After one year he requested us also to join them and we were baptized in 1985. Although the church was far apart, I never got tired to attend the services. I learned the hymns which comprises both the Martins and the Divine Liturgy services. The hymns sounded difficult but slowly by slowly I learned until I was acquainted with them. I was much accustomed to our Orthodox worship and never to miss our worship unless when ill.

The second Step...

When I was in secondary step, I was facing problems of fee payments as my father was too poor to pay the fee. In fact while I was in Form One my elder brother is the one who used to pay the fee. He was working as a cowboy and his master used to send the fees as he slashes meager wage of about two hundred Kenya Shillings at that time. He persevered to pay for a long period as agreed.

In one given Sunday we received a visitor from the Mission Headquarter, Nairobi: the Very Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Jonah (now Archbishop of Uganda). He performed the Divine Liturgy together with our parish priest. After the Liturgy service, we went out to take photographs and as children we observed his vehicle. Reading the inscription on the vehicle: HOLY ARCHBISHOPRIC OF IRINOUPOLIS. We did repeatedly and repeatedly. Something came in my mind and I noted down the address of the Mission Headquarter. When the master of my elder brother delayed to pay the fees of the next term, I was sent home. I stayed home for a week studying and making prayers for God to open

the ways to get the fees. In that situation my conscience told me to write to the Director, Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupoliis for fees assistance and I did. The replies came that I was accepted for scholarship through our parish priest. The parish priest came to our home to intervene and see if I am needy as he was sent to do so by Father Jonah. After he replied that I was, Fr. Jonah requested Fr. Johannes Eko to start giving me scholarship from the Finnish Orthodox Scholarship Fund that was coming through him. We were having correspondence with Father Eko who was sending Father James to pay for my fees. He did so timely and I finished my secondary school successful. I thank God for such a blessing.

After secondary school as I had mentioned early I became a teacher shortly and I joined Makarios III Seminary through the invitation His Grace Bishop Makarios (now Archbishop of Kenya). I enjoyed seminary life and studies. We had daily services both morning and evenings. We lived a unique life both sacramental and liturgical. I was blessed even to attend a youth international Syndesmos assembly in Kykkos Monastery, Cyprus, in 1995. This was my first time to have a flight to Europe. We alighted at Greece, spent a few hours in Athens; then took another flight to Cyprus; alighted at Limassol airport. It was a joyous time for me to learn more about Greece and Cyprus.

About the church

I was ordained as a priest in 1998 by Archbishop Seraphim, co-celebrated the service with Archbishop Chrysostomos of Kition, Cyprus. I was given the name Chrysostomos after the ordination. I was sent to serve St. Jacob Chekalini, St. Nectarios Lwandeti, St. Andrew Lugari, Mlimani/Moi's Bridge chapel, St. Dimitrios Mlimani among others, just to mention but a few.

St. Dimitrios Mlimani Parish

This is the church that is in the centre of other churches. It is under construction. Initially we started worshiping under gum trees a few years ago with a few families. This borrowed ahead (sic) of gum trees from the good neighbour enabled us to perform our services outdoor. Through God's blessing we moved from borrowed field to our own field. The owner of the field sold it to the church. The other next neighbour sold another piece to the church and now we stand at about one acre piece of land. The Orthodox families have been increasing gradually

The Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos onto the Temple

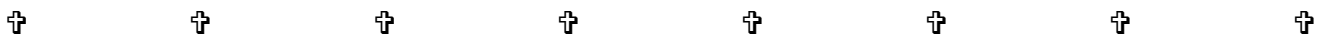
The history of God's dwelling with men is traced through the ages. In the Book of Exodus, Chapter 25 verses 10 and following, we read of the Lord's instructions to Moses regarding the building of the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat was to be constructed with one cherubim of gold placed at each end of the mercy seat. The mercy seat and the two cherubim were to be placed above the Ark, within which were to be placed the testimonies (commandments) that God would give to the Israelites. Then God says, "There I will make Myself known to you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of testimony, about everything I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel." (Ex. 25:22)

The Ark and the tabernacle (tent) which surrounded it where the physical and moveable dwelling place of God (although this did not circumscribe His presence; as Almighty God He is everywhere present and fills all things). In time the moveable tabernacle in the desert was replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem. In the time of King David, the Ark of God was brought to Jerusalem and placed in the tabernacle that David had built for it. (2 Kg. 6) It was Solomon, David's son, who built the first Temple in Jerusalem (3 Kg. 6-8) in which was

placed the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. When the priests had placed the Ark in the Holy of Holies and "when the priests came out of the holy place, the cloud filled the house, so the priests could not stand there ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house. (3 Kg. 8:10-11) The Temple in Jerusalem was the physical and permanent dwelling place of God.

The **Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple** (Nov. 21) celebrates her entrance as a child into the Jerusalem Temple. While the feast is without direct Biblical or historical reference, it is a feast of great spiritual significance for Orthodox Christians. Living in the Temple, Mary herself became the "living temple" whose womb would be filled with the presence of Christ who would be born of her. The Theotokos' entrance into the Temple then commemorates the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies: that every Christian will become a tabernacle, a spiritual and eternal dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In this feast we celebrate that we too are the dwelling place of God.

For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' (2 Cor. 6:16)



A Story of Healing

by Alexis Kyriak with David Brosell

Alexis is a single woman in her late 50's with a broad beautiful face and a beautiful spirit. When she chants in the choir, her voice is deep and resonant and full of the spirit of prayer. At the meals following Divine Liturgy, Alexis tends to be reserved and quiet, but there are moments when she speaks to you, when she says something seemingly out of the blue, that you know this is the word of God coming to you.

Alexis told me that she would like to write something about the process of healing, based on her own life experiences. I thought that this was a wonderful idea and encouraged her. After writing some things, she asked if I could edit it for her. I

suggested instead that I come to her home and talk with her about what she had written. What follows is an account of this discussion interwoven with Alexis' writings. Alexis' words are in *italics*.



Alexis' home is filled with canvases, with paintings that she has completed, with paintings in progress. She says that creativity has been a large part of her healing. "*It was the light of my gift, my way out through what I love to do. The ladder that God provides out of darkness...I have never been so happy, or stable, or creative as I*

am now.” Alexis tells me that she has been diagnosed for many years with the symptoms of schizophrenia, a mental disorder involving distortion of perceptions and thinking which makes it difficult to function socially and occupationally. There is a strong genetic/hereditary component to schizophrenia. Alexis tells the story of taking an hallucinatory drug mescaline in 1966 when she was in her late adolescence. She believes that that drug trip was the end of any hope that the hereditary schizophrenia would not surface. While she does not talk about the details, Alexis says that over a period of eight years she had several psychiatric hospitalizations including two years on the chronic ward of a State psychiatric hospital. At one point, when she was taken from the streets to the hospital, her only possessions were a quilted coat and a brown paper bag.

Alexis recites with profound but contained emotion a poem she has written about her descent into schizophrenia:

*Every time I closed my eyes
The darkness was disrupted
By reality so magnified
That consciousness distorted
And I was forced to light my room
To recognize dimensions.
I lost my sleep
And soon began to compensate
By dreaming in a waking state.
The darkness so begrudged by night
Crept into my days
To veil the light
That anchored me to my little peace of
mind.
I died of a dream in the middle of noon.
I dreamt the streets turned into sea
And covered me.
I couldn't swim-
And quite so.
In reality,
I couldn't.*

Alexis knows that the beginning of healing is the recognition that one is not well.

He who is well does not need a physician.

“...the low estate of His handmaiden.” She said that with joy, knowing that another dignity belonged to mankind.

The ‘low estate’. We are fallen. We are wounded. And do not know it. We struggle for ‘happiness’. In that struggle I am wounded. When I gave up my struggle to raise myself, to will myself into happiness...into health, to healing, my eyes opened. I could see my own suffering I could finally see the suffering of those that stood by me, my family, my close friends. “My loved ones stand afar off. I can count all my bones.” And most of all, I could see the suffering of others. Somehow, when my eyes were opened to that, I surrendered and became open to healing.

Although Alexis had been raised in the Orthodox faith, attending Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Flushing New York, she had left the Church and had looked towards other Eastern religions because she felt there was spirituality there. Alexis started coming back to the Orthodox Church one night in 1972, although she says that it was a slow process of coming back. She says, *“I made a choice to turn to spirituality. I just turned to the Light. I don’t know how that happened.”* Alexis tells the following story.

In 1972, when she was on a pass from the psychiatric hospital, she decided not to return. She had six or seven dollars in her pocket and went into Manhattan. She found a friend there, stayed one or two days and then was on the streets again. She went to Holy Trinity Cathedral in which are kept the relics of Saint Nicholas. She decided that she would hide there, spend the night, and pray to Saint Nicholas. She laughs as she recalls that there was a party being given at the Cathedral for a gathering of people from Constantinople. “Are you from Constantinople?” she was asked. In truth she answered “Yes”. Her grandparents were from Constantinople. Being very hungry, Alexis ate with the members of that gathering and she was the one that got the dime baked into the loaf of bread. Later on, she hid in the bathroom of the Cathedral and waited until night had fallen and no one would be around. She went up the steps to the sanctuary of the Cathedral and found that the door of the church had been locked. For eight hours that night she knelt and prayed for help from Saint Nicholas.

Morning came and she left the church. She had decided to return to the State Hospital. While switching trains outside of Manhattan, she ran into a woman she knew from her parish church. Alexis went with this woman to this woman's mother's house. The mother had Father Thomas Hopko's telephone number. A call was the beginning of a long term relationship with Alexis' spiritual father.

I was suffering, and knew nothing but the illness, trapped in my illness, because I knew nothing else. How does one find a self one has never been? How do you go to a place you have never been to?

In answering that question for herself, Alexis points to the importance of her baptism as an infant. In baptism, death and rebirth in Christ is effected in the one baptized; it is the real possibility of a new life in Christ. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His." (Rom. 6:3-5)

Alexis says that "knowing the place you have never been" is latent in all who have been baptized.

The thing is, my deepest self knew a place where this suffering was not. Knew a dignity and health...Mary sang a song about the 'low estate of His handmaiden'. In that low estate we find our dignity. She knew where God and the angels wanted us. A dignity that very few, if none but she, knew. A High Place. Suffering is a result of our not being in our right place. I was brought to know that there is something better than this.

Alexis also talks about the importance in her life of surrendering and dying to self as part of the process of healing

It is in acceptance of suffering that I became ready to be healed. And the only way I could accept was to know that Life, Christ God did not try to explain away the suffering...He confronted it in every part of Himself. And the surrender to suffering is each moment, each breath, a dying to myself, and a resurrection to be joined to all my

loved ones because I died to that (unless a seed falls and dies).

When the resentment of what I could sense was not my true self was opened, when the floodgates were opened up..."Open and be ye opened ye Ancient Gates that the King of Glory may enter therein." Tears are the highest form of prayer. The warmth of surrender...

And she knows the importance of patience and of looking beyond oneself.

"No. This is wrong. But bear with it, because I have in mind an incredible secret, and you shall see other healing, that no one knows yet...but in My Heart are you. And bigger things than these have been ordained. In patience possess ye your souls."

I think the worst part of sickness is the isolation, the alienation, but when I accepted it, my illness became a means by which God reached others...I was united to all, caring, because my suffering became less important than that of others, because I had found myself by losing myself.

To recognize the depth of one's soul's illness and brokenness can be a daunting thing. But "perfect love casts out all fear." (1 John 4:18)

And all this because I could rest on Christ. Christ is Rest. Christ is Healing. Christ is the utter fulfillment of my soul whether in joy or pain, and the two are united...

When I knew, when I had tested and seen and experienced His Heart, His fidelity, I knew I could open the doors to the illness within me. My utter trust meant that I could be that ill, and not be judged but healed...I could be my worst.

How can I find a self I have never been? All I knew was my illness. "The King of Glory enter in..."

The Heart of God, and Mary's heart, have loved me from before time. And the Virgin and incarnate Christ are my Mother and Brother, both being the Truth about what I am, and hope to become. Seeing the obedience of the Son, I'm captured. His Beauty is our being. One just thinks of Jesus' simplicity and we are captured.

And trust in God. In His Life. In His Strength knowing me under the fig tree. In His eminence, and His presence, and His time resting in me, everywhere present and filling all things.

“What do you want Me to do?”

“Lord! That my soul be healed.” That my eyes be opened. That my legs be reclaimed. That my son be healed, that my daughter be raised from the dead, that You might love me, even in this mortal, mortal place where I am, and with all the sorrow of illness...

That even though I am leprous: You might love me. Remain, Jesus, remain. Stay with me...

“Come and see someone who told me all I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”



Book Review

Turning the Heart to God

by St. Theophan the Recluse

St. Theophan was born George Govorov in 1815 in the village of Chernavskoje in the province of Orjol, Russia. He was tonsured a monk in 1841, with the name Theophan, in honor of St. Theophan the Confessor of Sigriane. That same year he was first ordained a hierodeacon and then a hieromonk, and graduated from the Kiev Theological Academy with a Master’s degree in Theology. For the next 25 years Hieromonk Theophan served the Church in administrative and educational positions in Russia, as well as six years in the Holy Land as a member of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission to Jerusalem. He was raised to the rank of archimandrite in 1855 and was made Bishop for the Diocese of Tambov and Shatsk in 1859. Four years later he was transferred to the larger Diocese of Vladimir and Suzdal.

In 1866, he petitioned the Holy Synod for retirement in order to live at Visha Hermitage in the Tambov diocese. His request was granted and he arrived at Visha at the age of fifty-one. In 1872, he gave away all of his possessions to the poor and began the life of a recluse. From then until his death in 1894, he received only the Father Superior of the monastery, his spiritual father, and his cell-assistant. Bishop Theophan died on the feast day of the Theophany, January 6/19, 1894. He was canonized St. Theophan the Recluse in 1988



In *Turning the Heart to God* St. Theophan presents in an engaging manner the stages of the Christian life. From a lifetime of experience of turning his own heart toward God and of guiding others in their journey toward divinization, he combines Scriptural knowledge with the wisdom of the Church Fathers. .

St. Theophan’s manner of writing is clear and organized. The plan of the book is to explore the stages of spiritual growth: 1) turning to God, which is conversation; 2) purification or self-amendment; and 3) sanctification. Beginning by describing the state of the sinner, St. Theophan describes the emptiness of the mind, the emptiness of the will, and the emptiness of the heart inherent in such a state. After describing the sinner’s involvement in ‘excessive knowledge, many possessions, and diverse pleasures’, he explains that ‘(t)his inquisitiveness attracts and entices the mind; the heart hopes to taste sweet things; and the will is carried away.’ In a matter-of-fact, straightforward manner typical of his writing, St. Theophan adds, “Anyone can verify this by putting the movements of his soul under his own observation for just a single day.”

In looking at the action of God’s grace in our conversion and repentance, St. Theophan describes 1) awakening from the sleep of sin; 2) rising up, with the determination to leave one’s sin and dedication to pleasing God; and 3) the clothing of the sinner with strength from above for this matter of pleasing God in the Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist.

There follows a look at the actions of spirit-awakening grace in breaking the fetters of self-indulgence, of the world, and of the devil. Solid, practical advice is given regarding our tendency to procrastinate once moved by the grace of God, postponing cooperation with divine grace.

As the book moves into the process of purification and self-amendment, St. Theophan first looks at those “coverings of sin” which prevent us from seeing our true state before God and gives recommendations for their removal: the blindness and self-delusion; the deadness of heart; the slumber of carelessness. Further advice follows on how to use our reason in this work of salvation, and how to integrate reason with prayer.

The chapters that follow, “The Ascent of a Sinner” and “Dedicating Oneself to God”, are filled with examples and suggestions from one who had been a “correspondent-confessor” for very many people during his years of seclusion: on deciding to leave sin; on working against the inciters of sin; on exerting oneself; on turning the heart; on knowing and acknowledging one’s sins; on stirring up feelings of repentance; on correcting what is incorrect. With the love of God for his fellowman, St. Theophan encourages us in many ways to cooperate with the grace of God. He gently and without condemnation draws us from the examination of our “actions, words, particular thoughts, desires and feelings” into a deeper understanding of the constant dispositions of the heart.

The final two chapters bring us to the Sacraments

of Confession and of the Holy Eucharist, on the preparation for and the disposition of our spirits towards these Sacraments. Throughout the reading of this book, one feels as if one were in the presence of a loving spiritual father, someone concerned for one's soul and its ultimate goal. No matter where one is in the journey towards God and divinization, there is much in this treasury of wisdom that will be an encouragement and aid to further growth.

St. Theophan concludes: “Everything depends on the initial zeal with which one begins this work of self-perfection, and on one’s conviction of the fact that what is necessary must be done. Whether now or later, it must be done, and better now. When he starts working, he soon settles into his way. And getting settled is the main purpose of conversion.” (p. 126)

Schedule of Services	
Great Vespers	Saturday 5:00 pm
3rd and 6th Hours	Sunday 9:10 am
Divine Liturgy	Sunday 9:30 am
Daily Vespers	Wednesday 5:30 pm

Upcoming Events	
11/15-12/24	Nativity Fast
11/21 Fri	Entrance of the Theotokos
12/6 Sat	Feast of St. Nicholas
12/25 Thurs	Christmas