

## Growing Spiritually

In the prayers of the faithful said during the Divine Liturgy a special petition for the faithful is offered, that they “*grow in faith and life and spiritual understanding.*”

The line that separates growth and stagnation in our endeavor of faith is often difficult to discern. The devil, whose malice towards the human race is from the beginning of time, knows that the best approach to frustrating spiritual growth is to distract us, little bit by little bit, from the task. What makes this especially difficult is the fact that this temptation to stray away from “the one thing needful,” though relentless in nature, is barely imperceptible.

Like a boat unleashed from its moorings that slowly but surely floats away from a safe harbor, so does the soul gradually lose its vitality and strength by turning its “inner eye” from uncreated light of Christ to the vanity of the world. Christ speaks of this in His Sermon on the Mount. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Mat. 6:22,23).

So the point here is that growth in faith involves keeping watch over the heart. We must discover a deeper awareness of what the hidden movements of the heart are, of how such movements are at any one time inclined towards good or evil, and of where these hidden movements are leading - towards the light or the darkness.

The holy fathers say that this kind of inward sensibility and sensitivity is the essence of the spiritual life, and that those who are lacking it are those who live not as human beings, but who live “like the beasts.” Or in St. Basil’s words, are “even worse than the beasts” because the beasts at least, in their simplicity, live according to the purpose that God had in mind for them when they were first created. Conversely, the “carnal man” is the one who lives “for the flesh,” and judges the inner experience of the spiritual life as nothing more than the fanciful imagination of religious idiocy.

Which here proves that the question is really all about how to enlighten, enliven, and enlarge the heart of man that lies hidden, as “a pearl of great price,” beneath the physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional dimensions of our existence. The greatest poverty of the postmodern world is the fact that there are few who truly know the greatness of the gift that lies so incredibly close to us. It’s as St. Augustine says, “*Men go forth to wonder at the heights of mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of the rivers, the vast compass of the oceans, the courses of the stars: but they pass by themselves without wondering whatsoever.*”

May God help us to perceive the “inner man” of the human heart as the greatest of all wonders, so that we might continue be always moving forward “from one degree of glory to another.” (2<sup>nd</sup>. Cor. 3:18).

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