

America's Prototypical Missionary

From the Treasury of Saint Herman's Spirituality

A compilation of Saint Herman's teachings on spiritual life drawn from his letters and conversations.

The Way Of A Christian

Without exalting myself to the rank of teacher, nonetheless, fulfilling my duty and obligation as an obedient servant for the benefit of my neighbor, I will speak my mind, founded on the

commandments of Holy Scripture, to those who thirst and seek for their eternal heavenly homeland.

A true Christian is made by faith and love of Christ. Our sins do not in the least hinder our Christianity, according to the word of the Savior Himself. He said: I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance; there is more joy in heaven over one who repents than over ninety and nine just ones. Likewise concerning the sinful woman who touched His feet, He said to the Pharisee Simon: to one who has love, a great debt is forgiven, but from one who has no love, even a small debt will be demanded. From these judgements a Christian should bring himself to hope and joy, and not in the least accept the torment of despair. Here one needs the shield of faith.

Sin, to one who loves God, is nothing other than an arrow from the enemy in battle. The true Christian is a warrior fighting his way through the regiments of the unseen enemy to his heavenly homeland. According to the word of the Apostle, our homeland is in heaven; and about the warrior he says: we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph.6: 12)].

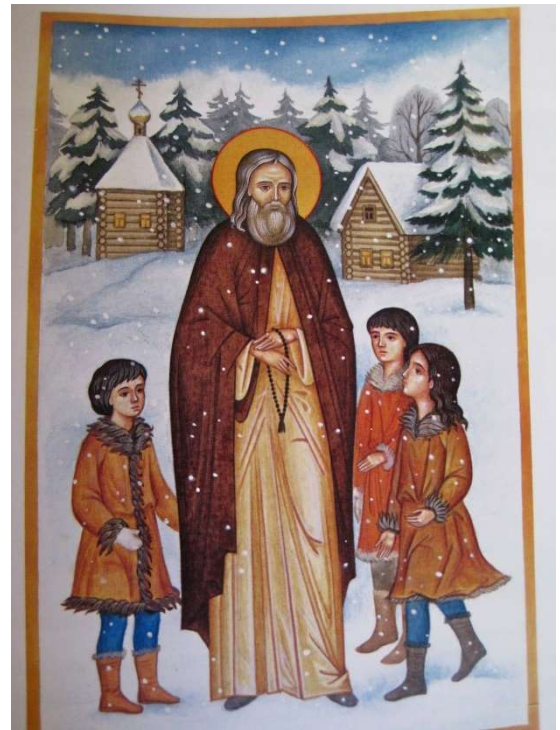
The vain desires of this world separate us from our homeland; love of them and habit clothe our soul as if in a hideous garment. This is called by the Apostles the outward man. We, traveling on the journey of this life and calling on God to help us, ought to be divesting ourselves of this hideous garment and clothing ourselves in new desires, in a new love of the age to come, and thereby to receive knowledge of how near or how far we are from our heavenly homeland. But it is not possible to do this quickly; rather one must follow the example of sick people, who, wishing the desired health, do not leave off seeking means to cure themselves.

(From a Letter of June 20, 1820)

Love Of God

Once the Elder was invited on board a frigate that had come from St. Petersburg. The captain of the frigate was a man quite learned, highly educated; he had been sent to America by Imperial command to inspect all the colonies. With the captain were some 25 officers, likewise educated men. In this company there sat a desert-dwelling monk of small stature, in an old garment, who by his wise conversation brought all his listeners to such a state that they did not know how to answer him. The captain himself related: "We were speechless fools before him!"

Father Herman gave them all one common question: "What do you, gentlemen, love above all, and what would each of you wish for his happiness?" Diverse answers followed. One desired wealth, one glory, one a beautiful wife, one a fine ship which he should command, and so on in this fashion. "Is it not true," said Father Herman at this, "that all your various desires can be reduced to one - that each of you desires that which, in his understanding, he considers best and most worthy of love?" "Yes, it is so," they all replied. "Well, then, tell me," he continued, "can there be anything better, higher above everything, more surpassing everything and in general more worthy of love, than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who created us, perfectly adorned us, gave life to all, supports all, nourishes and loves all, who Himself is love and more excellent than all men? Should not a person then love God high above all and desire and seek Him more than all else?" All began to say: "Well, yes! That is understood! That speaks for itself!"



"And do you love God?" the Elder then asked. All replied: "Of course, we love God. How can one not love God?" "And I, sinful one, for more than forty years have been striving to love God, and cannot say that I perfectly love Him," answered Father Herman; then he began to show how a person should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always think of him, strive to please him, day and night our heart is occupied with this subject. Is it thus that you, gentlemen, love God? Do you often turn to Him, do you always think of Him, do you always pray to Him, and fulfill His holy commandments?" It had to be acknowledged that they did not! "For our good, for our happiness," concluded the Elder, "at least let us make a promise to ourselves, that from this day, from this hour, from this very moment we shall strive to love God above all, and fulfill His holy will!" Behold what an intelligent, superb conversation Father Herman conducted in society; without doubt this conversation must have imprinted itself on the hearts of his listeners for their whole life!

(Yanovsky, in Life of Monk Herman of Valaam, 1868)

The Providence Of God

A terrible accident has a power to awaken us to the realization of the existence of various calamities and dangers surrounding us, from which the Providence of God preserves us. At the same time it convincingly persuades us to acknowledge our own infirmity and weakness and to seek the Father's protection and His most powerful defense, which affirms us in the Wisdom and the Word of God, which came down from above by the will of the Heavenly Father under a curtain of flesh like ours, woven by the Divine Might from the Immaculate Virgin, for our salvation. He became man and taught us to pray that we be not led into temptation. This reminds us from what Father we have our existence, and this in turn should make us seek our heavenly Fatherland and our eternal inheritance.

(From a Letter to Baranoff, 1809)

Spiritual Power

I was thirty years old when I met Father Herman. Here it should be said that I was brought up in the naval corps, knew many sciences and read much, but unfortunately, of the science of sciences, that is God's Law, I scarcely understood the surface, and that theoretically, without applying it to life, and I was only in name a Christian, while in soul and in deed I was a freethinker, a deist, as are nearly all who are brought up in the military corps and in public institutions. How unfortunate that no attention is given this: that God's Law is everywhere taught superficially, even in the seminaries; yes, and even from the theological academies there come out students, even Masters, who are very learned, but do not have an active faith in their heart, and thus do not live in a Christian way.

All the more did I fail to recognize the godliness and sanctity of our religion, in that I had read many atheist writings of Voltaire and other philosophers of the 18th century. Father Herman immediately noticed this and wished to convert me. But this was not easy! I had to be convinced, to be shown the sanctity of our religion; and, therefore, much time, knowledge, and the ability to speak well and convincingly was required.

To my great amazement, the simple, uneducated monk, Father Herman, being inspired by grace, spoke and argued so wisely, powerfully, and convincingly that, it seems to me, no kind of learnedness and earthly wisdom could withstand his words. In actual fact Father Herman had a great innate intelligence and sound thinking, had read many spiritual patristic books; and most important, he had the grace of God! But since in a short winter's day I had no time at all to devote myself to him, he therefore came to me every day for evening tea, and sometimes also for dinner, and we conversed with him until midnight, and sometimes after; he never stayed the night. Neither rain nor snow nor storm kept the zealous Elder from visiting me and returning the half mile home alone at midnight! He came to me regularly every day in an old ryassa, without a coat; I warmed him with tea and I conversed with him without ceasing: on God's Law, on eternity, on the salvation of the soul, on Christian life, and other things. A sweet discourse flowed from his mouth in an unceasing, enthralling torrent . . . !

Then at midnight, or after, the Elder went home alone with his staff in every kind of storm and cold weather; no one accompanied him on the slippery rocky path; but angels accompanied him and supported him: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (Ps. 90:11). And Christian love warmed him, with which he was penetrated for the salvation of his neighbor.

By such constant conversations and by the prayers of the holy Elder the Lord completely converted me to the true path, and I became a real Christian. For all this I am obliged to Father Herman. He is my true benefactor.

(Letter of Yanovsky, November 22, 1865)



Converser with Angels

At the end of the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's, when the Russian Orthodox Church in America was under the Synod Abroad, I spent more than three years as a pastor in Alaska, where right and left I heard a great number of stories about Father Herman, the Wonderworker of Alaska. People told of his ascetic life, of his miracles, many cases of miraculous help from the water of his spring, from placing earth from his grave on diseased places, cases of sight restored to the blind, of the healing of every kind of cripple, and so on. Of course, one doesn't remember everything. It was a long time ago, and for some reason I didn't write anything down then. I remember very well that a great deal was said. I myself spoke with those who had received miraculous help by the prayers of God's saint.

While I was serving in Kodiak as a priest, the Aleuts there also told me much about Father Herman, and of this the following two incidents stand out sharply in my mind; as I recall, I've never come across them anywhere in print, but they seem nonetheless quite authentic.

The Aleuts related that when Father Herman was still alive and lived on Spruce Island, the local inhabitants used to go to the Elder for some reason or other. And more than once it happened thus: They approached the chapel where he celebrated divine services, and they heard superb choral singing, a multitude of voices singing. They wondered where the people had come from. And all this time the singing was clearly audible, and such harmonious, sweet singing . . . They opened the door into the little chapel, and there Father Herman stood alone reading, chanting half aloud, celebrating the Lord's service. And of course he was alone and there was no one there with him. Father Herman was not a priest, and he could only read and sing as on the cliros. And such a thing was noticed more than once. It was angels of God who sang praises to the Lord with him. The biography of Father Herman records the following incident. The Elder was asked: "How do you live alone in the forest, Father Herman? Don't you become bored?" He replied: "No! I am not alone there! God is there, as God is everywhere. Holy Angels are there. How can one become bored with them? With whom is it better and more pleasant to converse, with men or with Angels? With Angels, of course!"

Archpriest Prokopy Povarnitsyn



A Miraculous Feast

He answered and said unto them, "Give ye them to eat"... And they all ate and were filled (Mark 6:37,42).

The Aleuts told me also the following incident, which took place on Spruce Island not long before Father Herman's death. Two American natives came to the Elder on the island, either hunters or fishermen. In any case, they came to look at the Elder, because much was said about him even during his lifetime. They were very hungry and, having greeted the Elder, asked him to feed them. The Elder readily agreed, but told them that they would have to wait a little, to which they agreed. Father Herman went to the little canal not far from his cell, which flowed into the creek, and that into the ocean. The Elder went down to the water and caught a little fish with his hands. He brought it to his cell and began to prepare it. The natives, seeing that one such little fish would hardly satisfy their hunger, called the Elder's attention to this. But the Elder only replied that they should not worry. And what

happened? When the meal was ready and the Elder served it to them, he not only fed them until they were full, but there was a great deal left over from this little fish. Astonished and miraculously fed, they left and told many people of this. This story came down to me.

Everything set down here I personally, being three years in Alaska, heard from the local Aleut inhabitants.

Archpriest Prokopy Povarnitsyn