

# The secret life of grace

Stepping through a monastery portal for the first time, one realizes that this ultimate hope of the Christian life — union with God — is not just an ancient prayer of the Divine Liturgy but vivid reality for those who seek it.

**HOLY LIGHT OF SINAI**



Sister Joanna

The venerable stone arches themselves attest to the triumphant experience of so many generations, whose miraculous saints proved the promise of life in Christ.

Through struggle for freedom from the sinful passions, their souls were transformed into the abode of the Holy Spirit. Geronta Pavlos of St. Catherine's Monastery emphasizes that Christians throughout the world succeed in the same struggle even today.

"In the cities, in America, Australia, Canada, everywhere, living in stillness — they don't make noise, the world doesn't know them," he says.

One reason the world does not know them is because their holy struggle is concealed far from its gaze. Hidden within the secret reaches of the heart, it neither entertains our neighbors nor garners their commendation. Indeed, in a society occupied with good works the greatest good work of all remains almost unknown in the popular consciousness.

It is called "guarding of the heart" or "watchfulness" by the Church Fathers. It is a ceaseless vigilance to keep the heart pure of every thought not pleasing to Christ — every thought that could drive away Divine



Photo by Bruce M. White Photography

**Covered stone passageways lead from the pilgrim's entrance of St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai directly to the main church, the symbolic and literal center of the monastic life.**

Grace, leaving inner turmoil in its place.

Inner turmoil quickly becomes "outer." Unless individuals address the war going on in their own soul, can anyone look for the end of warfare among peoples?

"Find inner peace," St. Seraphim of Sarov famously said, "and thousands of souls around you will be saved." Not "benefitted," not "inspired." "Saved."

It is a great thing to contribute to a brother's materi-

al need, and even greater thing to contribute to his eternal salvation. The first may not be possible. The second is always within our reach, for, like turmoil, our holy peace goes out to others.

The Son of God saves the world, and Christ called the peacemakers "sons of God." Consequently, simple watchfulness of the thoughts has the power to do infinite good.

Conceivably, poverty itself

would disappear, as its causing ceased to be tolerated in the hearts of man. Who can practice injustice or greed who has learned to recognize and reject the first thought of evil from his mind? The greatest sin began with a tiny thought, the desert Fathers teach.

From the earliest centuries of Christianity, these saints identified the subtlest nuances of the human psyche and their effects on psychological and physical health.

"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Through the prism of a monastic lifetime within this tradition, Geronta Pavlos of Sinai shares his personal insights on how guarding the heart draws the grace of God. For, as he stated in his general overview of the struggle for freedom from slavery to the passions (The Hellenic Voice, November 18, 2009, January 13 and 27, 2010), "Without the Grace, nothing is possible."

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**Geronta, what is the Grace of God that will enable us to arrive at freedom from the passions?**

Divine Grace is the help of God which comes upon us. But what happens? God does not force our will, our freedom. This is very basic. If we do not wish for Divine Grace to come, it does not enter within us strongly. If we close the door, God does not open it. He does not force it. That is the mystery. Therefore, it is with our own effort — with the struggle, the good thought, with hope — with all of these we must work for Divine Grace to enter us, in our heart.

**You said previously that Christ tells us in the Gospel that serious sin takes place in thought alone, for instance by thinking something bad**

**about another.**

Yes, one must be extremely careful about that... Giving in to sin begins in thought. That is where the heart draws the grace of God. For, as he stated in his general overview of the struggle for freedom from slavery to the passions (The Hellenic Voice, November 18, 2009, January 13 and 27, 2010), "Without the Grace, nothing is possible."

But a thought can also be from the "righthand" side. The saints said we should cultivate not the bad thought, but the good one, to see things in a good light. Good thoughts exist as well as bad.

For instance, we see an unknown person hurrying somewhere, and immediately the bad thought says, "Where is he going? He's on his way to steal, to do something bad." However, we won't allow that thought to enter inside us; instead we'll apply the good thought, from the "right." "No, he's hurrying to help someone in need, in sickness or poverty" — that's the "righthand" thought.

**How can one tell the difference?**

Whether a thought is in agreement with the will of God is the criterion: Does God wish us to do that thought? If He wants it, it's a good thought. He doesn't want it? We don't do it — it's a bad thought.

**Where do bad thoughts come from?**

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