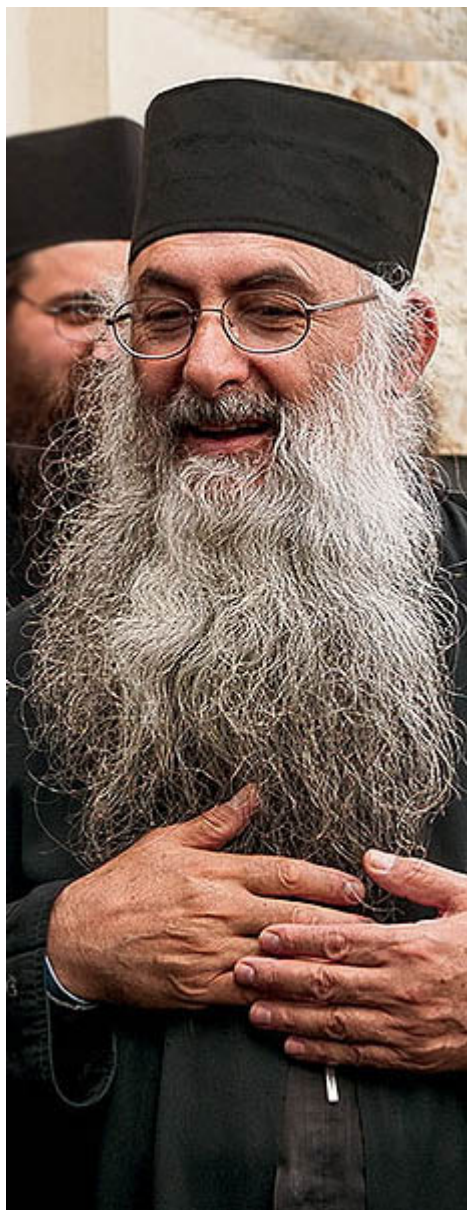


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The mystery of man's heart (Very Rev. Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou))

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)





Archim. Zacharias Zacharou

All the ordinances of the undefiled Church are offered to the world for the sole purpose of dis-covering the 'deep heart',[\[1\]](#) the centre of man's hypo-s-tasis. According to the Holy Scriptures, God has fashioned every heart in a special way, and each heart is His goal, a place wherein He desires to abide that He may mani-fest Himself.

Since the kingdom of God is within us,[2] the heart is the battlefield of our salvation, and all ascetic effort is aimed at cleansing it of all filthiness, and preserving it pure before the Lord. 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life', exhorts Solomon, the wise king of Israel.[3] These paths of life pass through man's heart, and therefore the unquenchable desire of all who ceaselessly seek the Face of the living God is that their heart, once deadened by sin, may be rekindled by His grace.

The heart is the true 'temple' of man's meeting with the Lord. Man's heart 'seeketh knowledge'[4] both intellectual and divine, and knows no rest until the Lord of glory comes and abides therein. On His part God, Who is 'a jealous God',[5] will not settle for a mere portion of the heart. In the Old Testament we hear His voice crying out, 'My son, give Me thy heart';[6] and in the New Testament He commands: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.'[7] He is the one Who has fashioned the heart of every man in a unique and unrepeatable way, though no heart can contain Him fully because 'God is greater than our heart'.[8] Nevertheless, when man succeeds in turning his whole heart to God, then God Himself begets it by the incorruptible seed of His word, seals it with His wondrous Name and makes it shine with His perpetual and charis-matic presence. He makes it a temple of His Divinity, a temple not made by hands, able to reflect His 'shape' and to hearken unto His 'voice' and 'bear' His Name.[9] In a word, man then fulfils the purpose of his life, the reason for his coming into the transient existence of this world.

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Photo by Fr. Constantin Prodan

The great tragedy of our time lies in the fact that we live, speak, think, and even pray to God, outside our heart, outside our Father's house. And truly our Father's house is our heart, the place where 'the spirit of glory and of God'[10] would find repose, that Christ may 'be formed in us'. [11] Indeed, only then can we be made whole, and become hypostases in the image of the true and perfect Hypostasis, the Son and Word of God, Who created us and redeemed us by the precious Blood of His ineffable sacrifice.

Yet, as long as we are held captive by our passions, which distract our mind from our heart and lure it into the ever-changing and vain world of natural and created things, thus depriving us of all spiritual strength, we will not know the new birth from on High that makes us children of God and gods by grace. In fact, in one way or another, we are all 'prodigal sons' of our Father in heaven, because, as the Scriptures testify, 'All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.' [12] Sin has

separated our mind from the life-giving contemplation of God and led it into a 'far country'.^[13] In this 'far country' we have been deprived of the honour of our Father's embrace and, in feeding swine, we have been made subject to demons. We gave ourselves over to dis-honourable passions and the dreadful famine of sin, which then established itself by force, becoming the law of our members. But now we must come out of this godless hell and return to our Father's house, so as to uproot the law of sin that is within us and allow the law of Christ's commandments to dwell in our heart. For the only path leading out of the torments of hell to the everlasting joy of the Kingdom is that of the divine commandments: with our whole being we are to love God and our neighbour with a heart that is free of all sin.

The return journey from this remote and inhospitable land is not an easy one, and there is no hunger more fearful than that of a heart laid waste by sin. Those in whom the heart is full of the consolation of incorruptible grace can endure all external deprivations and afflictions, transforming them into a feast of spiritual joy; but the famine in a hardened heart lacking divine consolation is a comfort-less torment. There is no greater misfortune than that of an insensible and petrified heart that is unable to distinguish between the luminous Way of God's Providence and the gloomy confusion of the ways of this world. On the other hand, throughout history there have been men whose hearts were filled with grace. These chosen vessels were enlightened by the spirit of prophecy, and were therefore able to distinguish between Divine Light and the darkness of this world.

No matter how daunting and difficult the struggle of purifying the heart may be, nothing should deter us from this undertaking. We have on our side the ineffable goodness of a God Who has made man's heart His personal concern and goal. In the Book of Job, we read the following astonishing words: 'What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? And that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him? And that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment...Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself?'^[14] We sense God, Who is incomprehensible, pursuing man's heart: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.'^[15] He knocks at the door of our heart, but He also encourages us to knock at the door of His mercy: 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.'^[16] When the two doors that are God's goodness and man's heart open, then the greatest miracle of our existence occurs: man's heart is united with the Spirit of the Lord, God feasting with the sons of men.

We deprive ourselves of the feast of God's consolation not only when we hand ourselves over to the corruption of sin, feeding swine in a far country, but also

when we contend in a negligent way. 'Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully,' warns the Prophet Jeremiah.[17] In the feed-ing of swine, it is the devil, our enemy, who gives us work which is accursed. But if we do the Lord's work half-heartedly, we put ourselves under a curse, though we may be dwelling in the house of the Lord. For God will not toler-ate division in man's heart; He is pleased only when man speaks to Him with all his heart and does His work joyfully: 'God loveth a cheerful giver,' says the Apostle.[18] He wants our whole heart to be turned and de-voted to Him, and He then fills it with the bounties of His goodness and the gifts of His com-passion. He 'sows bounti-fully'[19] but He expects the same from us.

From the few thoughts we have mentioned, we now begin to see how precious it is to stand before God with our whole heart as we pour it out before Him. We also begin to understand how vital is the task of discovering the heart, because this allows us to talk to God and our Father from the heart and to be heard by Him, and to give Him the right to perfect the work of our renewal and restoration to the original honour we enjoyed as His sons.

As long as man is under the dominion of sin and death, being given over to the power of evil, he becomes in-creas-ingly selfish. In his pride and despair, and being separated from God Who is good, he struggles to survive, but the only thing he gains is a heavier curse upon his head and even greater desolation. But however much he may be cor-rupted by the famine of sin, the primal gift of his having been created in God's 'image and likeness' remains irrevoc-able and indelible. Thus, he always carries within him the possibility of a rising out of the kingdom of darkness and into to the kingdom of light and life. This occurs when he 'comes to himself' and in pain of soul confesses, 'I perish with hunger.'[20]

When fallen man 'comes to himself' and turns to God, 'it is time for the Lord to work', as we say at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy; in pain, man then enters his own heart, which is the greatest honour reserved by God for wretched man. God knows that He can now seriously con-verse with him, and is attentive to him, for when man enters his heart he speaks to God with knowledge of his true state, for which he now feels responsible. Indeed, man's whole struggle is waged in order to convince God that he is His child, His very own, and when he has con-vinced Him, then he will hear in his heart those great words of the Gospel, 'All that I have is thine.'[21] And the moment he convinces God that he is His, God makes the waterfalls of His com-passion to flow, and God's life be-comes his life. This is the good pleasure of God's original design in that it is for this that He created man. God then says to the one who has succeeded in persuading Him that he is His, 'All My life, O man, is thy life.' Then the Lord, Who is God by nature, grants man His own

life, and man becomes a god by grace.

In the Gospel of St Luke we are told that the prodigal son 'came to himself' and said, 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.'^[22] This is a wondrous moment, a momentous event in the spiritual world. Suffering, affliction, and the menacing famine of the 'far country' compel man to look within himself. But a single movement of divine grace is enough to convert the energy of his misfortune into great boldness, and he is enabled to see his heart and all the dead-ness from which he is suffering. Now, with prophetic know-ledge, he boldly confesses that 'his days are consumed in vanity'.^[23] In pain of soul, he discovers that his whole life until then consists of a series of failures and betrayals of God's commandments, and that he has done no good deed upon earth which can withstand the unbearable gaze of the Eternal Judge. He sees his plight and, like the much-afflicted Job, cries out, 'Hades is my house.'^[24]

With such a lamentation of despair and, thirsting only for God's blessed eternity, man can then turn his whole being towards the living Lord. He can cry from the depth of his heart to Him Who 'has power of life and death: who leads to the gates of hell, and brings up again'.^[25] This is the turning point in our life, for God the Saviour then begins His work of refashioning man.

When man falls into sin his mind moves in an outward direction and loses itself in created things, but when, con-scious of his perdition, he comes to himself seeking sal-vation, he then moves inward as he searches for the way back to the heart. Finally, when all his being is gathered in the unity of his mind and heart, there is a third kind of movement in which he turns his whole being over to God the Father. Man's spirit must pass through this threefold circular motion in order to reach perfection.

During the first stage, man lives and acts outside his heart and entertains proud thoughts and considers vain things. In fact, he is in a state of delusion. His heart is dark-ened and void of understanding. In his fallen condition, he prefers to worship and serve 'the creature more than the Creator'.^[26] Because he lives without his heart, he has no dis-cern-ment and is 'ignorant of [Satan's] devices'.^[27] As the Old Testament wisely observes: 'The fool hath no heart to get wis-dom',^[28] and because his heart is not the basis of his exist-ence, man remains inexperienced and unfruitful, 'beat-ing the air'.^[29] He is unable to walk steadily in the way of the Lord and is characterised by instability and double-minded-ness.

In the second stage, man 'comes to himself', and he begins to have humble

thoughts that attract grace and make his heart sensitive. Humble thoughts also enlighten his mind; they are born within himself, and they help him in discerning and accepting only those things that strengthen the heart, so that it stays unshakeable in its resolution to be pleasing to God both in life and in death. During the first stage, man surrenders to a vicious circle of destructive thoughts, whilst in the second, inspired by Christ's word, he is led along a chain of thoughts, each deeper than the last: from faith he is led to more perfect faith, from hope to firmer hope, from grace to greater grace and from love of God to an ever greater measure of love. 'We know', as the Apostle Paul says, 'that all things work together for good to them that love God.'^[30] Indeed, this entry 'into oneself' and the discovery of the heart are the work of divine grace. And when man heeds God's call and co-operates with the grace that is bestowed on him, this grace summons and strengthens all his being.

When the grace of mindfulness of death becomes active, man not only sees that all his days have been consumed in vanity, that everything until now has been a failure, and that he has betrayed God all his life, but he realises that death threatens to blot out all that his conscience has hitherto embraced, even God. He is now convinced that his spirit has need of eternity and that no created thing, neither angel nor man, can help him. This provokes him to seek freedom from every created thing and every passionate attachment. And if he then believes in Christ's word and turns to Him, then it is easy for him to find his heart because he is becoming a free being. His faith is salutary, for he now acknowledges that Christ is the 'rewarder of them that diligently seek him',^[31] that is, he believes that Christ is the eternal and almighty Lord Who has come to save the world and will come again to judge the whole world with justice. He has entrusted himself to 'the law of faith',^[32] and begins to believe in hope against hope,^[33] pinning everything on the mercy of God the Saviour. Such true faith can be seen in the Canaanite woman, who received the Lord's instruction as a dog receives food from its master, and she followed Him freely and steadfastly. As far as she was concerned, God remained righteous and forever blessed whether He were to rebuke her or praise her. Faith like this receives the approval of adoption because it grows out of love and humility, ever attracting divine grace which opens and quickens the heart.

When man believes and his spirit finds true contact with the Spirit of 'Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead'^[34] and Who lives and reigns forever, he is enlightened so that he can see his spiritual poverty and desolation. He also perceives that he is still far from eternal life, and this gives birth to great fear in him because he is now aware that God is absent from his life. Godly fear such as

this strengthens man's heart to resist sin and begets a firm resolve to prefer heavenly things to earthly things. His life begins to prove the truth of the words of Scripture: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'^[35] As man's heart draws to itself the grace of God, this gift of fear humbles him, and prevents him from becoming overbold; that he 'not think of himself more highly than he ought to think',^[36] and that he keep himself prudently within the limits of created being.

Another infallible means by which the believer finds his heart is in accepting shame for his sins in the sacrament of confession. Christ saved us by enduring the Cross of shame for our sakes. Similarly, when the believer comes out of the camp of this world,^[37] he disregards its good opinion and judgment, taking upon himself the shame of his sins, and thereby acquiring a humble heart. The Lord receives his sense of shame for his sins as a sacrifice of thanks-giving, and imparts to him the grace of His great Sacrifice on the Cross. This grace so purifies and renews his heart that he can then stand before God in a manner that is pleasing to Him.

There are many ideas, theories as well as practices that contribute to the heart's awakening, its building up, its preservation and enlightenment, and finally to its Christ-like enlarging, and we shall develop some of these in the days to come. For the time being, I would just like to mention two more – prayer and repentance.

In the Jesus Prayer, the invocation of the Lord's Name draws the believer into the living presence of the Personal God, Whose energy is imparted to the heart, transforming the whole man. When prayer is humble and accompanied by the practice of watchfulness, the mind is concentrated in the heart that is the dwelling-place of our beloved God, and He grants us a marvellous sense of His closeness that is beyond words.

As for repentance, this all-embracing practice builds and keeps the heart more than any other undertaking. Repentance has a wondrous and holy purpose. The person who repents bears witness to the living God of our Fathers as a God Who is righteous and true in all His desires, all His ways and judgments. But repentance also acknowledges the fact that man is a liar,^[38] deluded by sin, and therefore deprived of the honour and glory which God gave him in the beginning. And this is where the person who would repent must begin: he confesses his sinfulness, taking his sin upon himself in humility and self-condemnation. There is no trace of audacity in his conversion, and he becomes true and attracts the Spirit of Truth, Who cleanses him from sin and justifies him.^[39] As St Silouan used to say, the Holy Spirit bears witness in his heart to his salvation.^[40] But the Lord too is justified, for He is true Who confirms the words of His Prophet: 'The sacrifices of

God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.’
[41] For when man comes to himself and freely says from his heart, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son’, the voice of heavenly goodness then sounds in his soul: ‘All that I have is thine.’[42]

To begin with, man repents of his sins. But as the grace of repentance increases, his estrangement from eternal life is healed and the wisdom of God’s pre-eternal design with regard to man opens up before him. The image[43] of his Archetype, Christ, is gradually formed in his heart as he perceives ever more clearly his calling to become like Him, ‘after the image of him that created him’[44] and he no longer compares himself with mortals, but with the eternal God. This vision leads him to the fulness of repentance, that is, repentance on the ontological level, which, according to Fr Sophrony, has no end upon earth.

In the early stages of repentance, the believer carries the small cross that God’s Providence, in His discernment and love for mankind, has foreseen in the life of each one of us. Our personal cross is shaped according to our specific need to be liberated from every form of passionate attachment, and unless we carry it we will never be able to love God our Creator and Benefactor with a free heart and run His course faithfully and steadily. In other words, we take up our cross in response to the commandment to repent, and it becomes the key to our entry into the great and eternal inheritance, which Christ gained for us through His Cross and Resurrection.

But there are no limits to man’s repentance. The highest form of repentance for which God bestows an exceptional measure of grace is when man who offers up a cry of repentance for the whole human race and, like another Adam, perceives the cosmic consequences of his own fallen state. We see examples of this kind of repentance in the three Holy Children in Babylon, in the great Apostle Paul, in the humble intercession of all the Saints, and last but not least, in St Silouan’s prayer for the whole world: ‘I pray Thee O merciful Lord for all the peoples of the earth, that they may come to know Thee by Thy Holy Spirit.’[45] The depth of this deceptively simple prayer can be discerned in Adam’s Lament, his personal portrait of universal repentance.

How, then, does repentance become universal in its content? If we prepare the soil of our heart with the plough of repentance and continually irrigate it with the living water of grace, a time will come when ‘the day will dawn, and the day star will arise in our hearts’.[46] At some point, the energy of the Spirit of Truth, which will have

accumulated in the heart, will open and enlarge the heart infinitely, and it will embrace heaven and earth, and all that exists. On this day, man will enter into Truth and thus be regenerated as true man. Then, according to the prophetic words of the Psalmist, 'True man goeth forth unto his true work and labour until the evening of his life.'[\[47\]](#) He will then know how to 'perfect holiness in the fear of God',[\[48\]](#) to think upon 'whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report',[\[49\]](#) undertaking only such things as will contribute to his spiritual perfecting. The peace of Christ, the Prince of Peace[\[50\]](#) will reign in his heart, and his every word will echo the treasure of perfection which he contains within himself. He will offer whatsoever overflows from the good treasure of his heart out of love for his fellows, and his enlarged heart[\[51\]](#) will not exclude anyone. His spirit will scale eternal heights and survey the depths of the judgments of God's compassion. He will offer up his prayer, bringing every soul before the Lord, and praying that God may fill the heart of each with the in-corruptible consolation of His Spirit.

When the heart is thus given fully to the Lord Jesus, He overshadows it with His messianic power, for He possesses the marvellous key of David, which, with a single right turn, 'brings into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ'.[\[52\]](#) The humility of his thoughts generates intense spiritual energy within him, fuelling the soul's inspiration and endurance in following the good Lord 'whithersoever he goeth',[\[53\]](#) even to hell. Then again, a single left turn of this key opens the way for all the thoughts of the enemy to return to man's bosom. Should this happen, he will acquire spiritual watchfulness, which will be carried out with angelic precision, making the believer a sharer in the supra-cosmic victory of our God and Saviour. From this point on, his struggle is essentially positive in character, and only rarely negative. The ascetic now labours with ever greater longing 'to be clothed upon with our house which is in heaven...that mortality might be swallowed up by life',[\[54\]](#) and he witnesses the powerful and infinite 'increase of God'[\[55\]](#) in himself.

The heart is now purified by the grace of God, and the intellect can establish itself there with ease, through the invocation of the Name of Christ. Whereupon the heart, quite naturally, begins to cry unceasingly with 'groanings which cannot be uttered'.[\[56\]](#) From this time forth, the Lord is ever present, dwelling in our heart, and being 'taught of God',[\[57\]](#) we learn to discern which thoughts are in harmony with His presence and which ones hinder His coming and abiding in us. In other words, we are initiated into the prophetic life. The heart is instructed to indite good matters,[\[58\]](#) to understand the language of God and with holy determination to cry ceaselessly, 'My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready: I will sing and give

praise' to my Re-deemer.[\[59\]](#) We are taught how to become signs of the Spirit, witnessing to the truth of Him Who has come to save us and Who will come again to judge the world with justice and goodness. With all our strength, and in all our en-deavours, we try to meet the expectations of our Lord, knowing that 'the Lord loves holy hearts, and all blameless persons are acceptable with him'.[\[60\]](#)

I have not said much, but I hope it is clear that man's principal work, which alone gives worth to his life, is the effort of discovering and purifying his 'deep heart', that it may be blessed with the indescribable contemplation of our God, Who is Holy.

Source: Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *The hidden man of the heart*, edition Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex 2007, pp. 11-26.

NOTES

1. Cf. Ps. 64:6.

2. Cf. Luke 17:21.

3. Prov. 4:23.

4. Prov. 15:14.

5. Exod. 34:14.

6. Prov. 23:26.

7. Matt. 12:30.

8. 1 John 3:20.

9. Cf. John 5:37; Acts 9:15.

10. 1 Pet. 4:14.

11. Gal. 4:19.

12. Rom. 3:23.

13. Luke 9:15.

14. Job 7:17-18, 20.

15. Rev. 3:20.
16. Luke 11:9-10.
17. Jer. 48:10.
18. 2 Cor. 9:7.
19. Cf. 2 Cor. 9:6.
20. Luke 15:17.
21. Luke 15:31.
22. Luke 15:18-19.
23. Cf. Ps. 78:33.
24. Cf. Job 17:13.
25. Wisdom of Solomon 16:13.
26. Rom. 1:25.
27. 2 Cor. 2:11.
28. Cf. Prov. 17:16.
29. Cf. 1 Cor. 9:26.
30. Rom. 8:28.
31. Heb. 11:6.
32. Rom. 3:27.
33. Cf. Rom. 4:18.
34. 2 Tim. 2:8
35. Prov. 1:7 LXX.
36. Rom. 12:3.

37. Cf. Heb. 13:11-12.

38. Cf. Rom. 3:4.

39. Cf. 1 John 1:8-10.

40. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Patriarchal Stavro-pegiic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), p. 304.

41. Ps. 51:17.

42. Luke 15:18-19, 31.

43. Cf. John 5:37.

44. Col. 3:10.

45. Cf. Saint Silouan, p. 274.

46. Cf. 2 Pet. 1:19.

47. Cf. Ps. 104:23.

48. 2 Cor. 7:1.

49. Phil. 4:8.

50. Isa. 9:6.

51. 2 Cor. 6:13.

52. 2 Cor. 10:5.

53. Rev. 14:4.

54. 2 Cor. 5:2-4.

55. Col. 2:19.

56. Rom. 8:26.

57. Cf. John 6:45.

58. Cf. Ps. 45:1.

59. Ps. 56:7 LXX.

60. Prov. 22:11 LXX.