

Love as the Essence of Orthodox Asceticism (Protopresbyter Georgios Schinas)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



You might ask why it is that we today, who are less ascetic as Christians, are overcome with fear and trembling when we hear about asceticism. It makes us feel somewhat uncomfortable. This is because we've lost sight of a great truth of our faith. It's summed up by Saint John of the Ladder: 'love is conquered by love'*

What is it that binds us to our passions? We've fallen in love with them! In our fall, in our malice, we've fallen in love with them and embrace them tightly. We love our passions fervently: our gluttony, our debauchery, our pride, our egotism, our vanity and all the rest.



How can we be cured of this? Only with commandments of a legal order? You shouldn't be a glutton; you shouldn't be a slave to your belly; you shouldn't be debauched; you shouldn't be proud. That's all very well, but I have the feeling that that's not enough to fill people with the noble intent of casting off these passions.

So, along comes Saint John of the Ladder and he tells us that in order for us to stop having these strong feelings for earthly passions, we need to have in our heart something we love even more fervently. Then, suddenly, our ascetic struggle isn't merely the avoidance of certain passions. It's not even, we might say, the imitation of certain good actions, certain virtues. Rather, our ascetic struggle changes on the inside and it's no longer quite so 'obvious' what it's all about.

Our ascetic struggle, I'd say, begins to resemble the effort people make when they've fallen in love- to approach the object of their affections. There's nothing scandalous about using this example. Say a man falls in love with a woman. What does he do? He walks round and round her house, goes and talks to her. Timely or untimely, he basically besieges her. This is precisely what our struggle becomes, when we do it out of love. Out of fervent love and generous gratitude for Christ.

Our struggle then acquires a dynamic character. It's no longer merely doing good and abstaining from wickedness, it's more than that: an attempt on the part of our soul to besiege Christ, to draw Him into it, to enthrone Him in our heart. And it's this that changes our outlook.



Imagine somebody telling you: 'Do this. Do that. Don't do this. Don't do that'. This provokes a spontaneous reaction and often makes us do exactly the opposite of what we've been told. But if somebody you love comes and says: 'If you love me, don't upset me. Do that, please', your mood changes straight away. This is the truth that Saint John of the Ladder tells us. This is the truth that our Lord, Jesus Christ, tells us, in different words: in the Gospel of Saint John, He says: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'. So, love for His Person will defeat the false loves which draw us away from the path of His commandments. This is how we Christians must live our asceticism: we must live our spiritual efforts as a struggle for love. A struggle for love!

This is why the ascetics of our Church aren't anything like idiosyncratic people, like 'weird' people. The ascetics of the Orthodox Church are perfectly normal. Why? Because basically they're people of love. They're lovable and loving. They're people who love and from this overflowing of the heart, this love for Christ, they dedicate themselves to even greater efforts, greater asceticism, a more intense siege of Christ. May we, also, besiege Christ in this frame of mind.

***The word for love that Saint John uses for 'love' here is 'eros', which does not necessarily have the sexual connotations of its English derivative 'erotic'. A better translation would be 'passionate love', though this would not be appropriate here, since we have to use this love to conquer the passions! [WJL].**