

The Necessity of Spiritual Fatherhood (*)

Our Most Reverend Metropolitan and
Much-Revered Spiritual Father:

I HAVE the special honor and blessing once again to represent our monastic Brotherhood on your Nameday.

Though I am profoundly aware that I am not the most suitable person to convey to you the good sentiments of your spiritual children and their heartfelt wishes, I nevertheless am obliged to thank them for the singular honor of entrusting me with this task.

And the honor is particularly salient, because this year's special tribute¹—which we have organized for the twelfth time since 1976 on the occasion of your Nameday—is magnified by the memory of one other great anniversary, and it acquires spiritual dimensions that only grateful hearts are able to approach and comprehend, by the Grace of our Lord, of course.

And we have diligently kept this very important and, at the same time, very moving memory in order to offer it to you today as a surprise gift.

It is the second surprise after the first surprise of the twenty-five year anniversary of our Monastery. It is the second very profound emotion after the first very deep emotion that we felt when, eight months ago, we were organizing the festal tributes for the twenty-five years—by the Grace of God—of our Brotherhood of St. Cyprian.²

I

I NDEED, I find it difficult to continue....

I call to mind the stirring expression of Blessed Augustine, that fervent lover of Divine beauty:

*“Before the Divine, I shudder, and at the same time I am aflame. I shudder insofar as I am dissimilar to it. I am aflame insofar as I am similar to it”!*³

And every disciple feels awe and is aflame before his spiritual Father.

He feels awe and senses quivers of holy emotion running through him when he gazes on his Elder, that instrument of Divine Providence for his salvation and that other Prophet Moses, who leads his soul from the Egypt of the passions to the land of dispassion, to the Heavenly Homeland.

But he is aflame and is set on fire by love and Divine eros; for in the person of his Elder, the well-disposed monk envisages the most-desired Bridegroom Christ.

Patristic Tradition teaches us, through St. Symeon the New Theologian, that when it is said that a monk sees Christ in the person of his spiritual Father, this does not amount to a merely **educational principle** for him. Rather, it is an expression of **profound conviction** that his spiritual Father has been transformed and transfigured in Christ; has been united with Christ; has Christ within him; has become *“all Christ,”*⁴ and constitutes a furnace of Divine fire and an incorporeal flame from which the disciple lights the lamp of his soul and is literally set aflame in Christ.

Feelings, then, of holy dread and awe possess us today, for apart from your Nameday we are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of your Priesthood.

This year marks twenty-five years of a brilliant priestly journey during which, participating in the **triple dignity**⁵ of our Theanthropic Savior, you have, as a **Minister of the Most High**, sanctified the people of God; as a **Prophet** of the new Israel of Grace, you have announced, through Divine preaching, the will of the Almighty Lord; and as an **anointed spiritual King**, you have securely led innumerable souls to the life in Christ and salvation.

Our Most Reverend spiritual Father,

Allow us to express tonight simply, but genuinely, our two-fold and manifold emotion and gratitude to your venerable person; and if, whether out of ignorance or misinformation, certain of the faithful do not comprehend the necessity of spiritual Fatherhood for the salvation of the Orthodox Christian, we have decided—apart from the other things that are to follow—to speak of this subject—with your blessing—in all possible brevity.

II

THE AUTHENTIC and genuine spiritual life in Christ is the charismatic life of the regenerated Christian. The wealth and beauty of the believer are the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit which, however, such a Christian will acquire only insofar as he places himself under the direction of an experienced spiritual Father.

Just as indispensable as a biological father is in natural birth is also the necessity of a spiritual Father in spiritual birth. And just as there are three stages to natural birth —**conception, gestation, and delivery**—, the same thing takes place in spiritual birth.

St. Symeon the New Theologian writes on the subject to a spiritual child of his:

*“We conceived you through teaching;
We delivered you through repentance;
We gave birth to you through much patience
and exceeding travails and pains
and daily tears.”⁶*

When, by the Grace of God, the strong bond of spiritual kinship is developed, apart from the many other benefits to the soul, the regenerated believer is spiritually secured.

Unity in Christ with one's spiritual Father preserves him from temptations and dangers. We are able to ascertain this fact in the lives of the Saints.

For example, it is reported in the life of St. Symeon the New Theologian that his disciple and monk under obedience, Arsenios (who later succeeded him as Abbot), was at one point tried by the strongest temptation of his life.

His mother according to the flesh, having learned of the place of her son's asceticism after a lengthy search, went to the Monastery of St. Mamas and fell prone at the monastery's outer gate, insistently asking with tears to see her son, with the intention, to be sure, of moving him emotionally and prying him from the monastic life.

The monk Arsenios was informed by the monastery's gatekeeper of the event, but he refused to give in to the strong pull of motherly love, saying:

“How could I, brother, who am already dead to the world, turn back and look, as you tell me, at the one who gave birth to me in the flesh? I have the one who gave birth to me in spirit, from whom I suck each day the pure milk of the Grace of God: I mean my father in God, who is also my mother, who has begotten me in the spirit, as they say, and shelters me in the bosom of his tender compassion as a newborn child. I will never suffer to leave him and go to her, even if I hear that she has died.”⁷

After three days, having finally become discouraged, his mother left, empty-handed. In this way, the blessed Arsenios was delivered from a great snare of the Enemy, because he consistently experienced in his life spiritual kinship with his Elder.

Now, of course, it is not possible to characterize Arsenios as being uncompassionate towards his mother; but rather, he had put things in their proper order: first spiritual kinship and then biological.

When comparing biological to spiritual parents, St. John Chrysostomos says that the difference between them is as great as the difference between the present life and the next; for, while biological parents give birth to us in this life, spiritual parents do so in the future life:

“The difference between the two is as great as the difference between this life and the next. The former give birth in this life, while the latter in the next.”⁸

The necessity of a spiritual Father for our spiritual birth and rebirth is so great that the Holy Fathers exhort us to beseech God persistently to show us the spiritual Guide to whom—even if he is not perfect—we must submit ourselves with trust; for it is preferable for us to be called disciples of a disciple, rather than to live idiorhythmically and to be in danger of being led astray by the Enemy.

St. Symeon the New Theologion characteristically says the following:

“Brother, constantly entreat God that He might show you a man who is able to shepherd you well—one to whom you ought to submit yourself as though to God Himself and whose instructions you must unhesitatingly carry out, even if what he enjoins upon you seems to you to be unprofitable and harmful.

And if your heart is moved by Grace to have even greater confidence in the spiritual Father whom you already have, do that which he tells you and be saved. For it is better for you to be called a disciple of a disciple than to live idiorhythmically and to gather the useless fruits of your own will.

But if the Holy Spirit sends you to another, do not hesitate at all; for we hear that it was Paul who planted, and Apollos who watered, and Christ who gives the increase.

Do, then, brother, as we have said, and go to the man whom God—whether mystically, through His own Self, or manifestly, through His servant—shows you.

And, as if seeing and speaking to Christ Himself, in this wise must you revere him and be taught by him what is profitable.”⁹

Indeed, St. Symeon sets out for us a model of such a prayer by which it is possible for a disciple to turn to God:

“O Lord, Thou who desirest not the death of the sinner, but that he return and live, Thou Who didst descend to earth so that Thou mightest resurrect those who lie prostrate and are deadened by sin and make them worthy to see Thee, the True Light, as far as is possible for man, send Thou to me someone who knoweth Thee, so that, having worked for him as for Thee, and having submitted myself with all of my strength and doing Thy will in his will, I may please Thee, the only God, and be vouchsafed Thy Kingdom—I, too, the sinner,”¹⁰

III

WITHIN the Tradition of our Church there are two types of spiritual Fathers, which may coincide in the same person.

The Bishop is a spiritual Father who is regarded as a “*father after God*”,¹¹ but the same is true for every Priest who, through the power of his priestly office, begets the Faithful into a new life in Christ by means of Holy Baptism.

Because, however, most people are Baptized at a young age, they unfortunately do not activate the Grace of the Holy Spirit that they have received in the Holy Mystery. That is why that spiritual Father is necessary who—being in a charismatic position on account of his personal holiness—will literally regenerate the believer who has been deadened by ignorance and sin, and will lead him safely to the realm of Grace and the presence of the Divine Comforter.

Given that the entrance into the monastic life—and, more generally, into the life of repentance—is rightly considered a **second Baptism**,¹² it follows that he who initiates us into this second, regenerating **Baptism** is, certainly—and is called—a spiritual Father, even if he is a simple monk or a layman.

For Holy Tradition has passed on to us instances in which simple, but Grace-filled and God-bearing people (such as, for example, St. Anthony the Great) regenerated countless souls in Christ, transmitted to them the wealth of their spiritual gifts, and became spiritual blood-donors to souls dead to Grace.

They did not have the authority to provide the means of Grace—the Holy Mysteries—, but they experienced Grace, and they imbued the world with it; they exorcised from the world every profane and demonic element; and, as abodes of the sole and enhypostatic Truth, they offered to the people the regenerating truth of dogma put into practice.

IV

Our Most Reverend Spiritual Father,

WE CALL to mind the words of St. Basil the Great:

“He is most truly a father, firstly, the Father of all; and, secondly after Him, the one who is our guide in the spiritual life”; “for the guide is none other than the one who is in the place of the Savior and has become the mediator between God and man, and offers to God the salvation of those under submission to him.”¹³

And we call that to mind, feeling infinite gratitude to the All-Holy Lord our God, because He has vouchsafed us, in these so very difficult days through which we are passing, to have a spiritual Father in whose person are met **both** spiritual Fatherhood—

owing to his Priestly office—and charismatic Fatherhood, which is, of course, a rare gift of the Holy Spirit.

By means of the first—the **Priestly**—, you have regenerated us through the Holy Mysteries. By means of the second—the **Charismatic**—, you have regenerated us through the transfusion of the spiritual gifts with which Divine Grace has enriched you.

To be sure, your God-pleasing and blessed task—that we, your spiritual children, should be perfected in Christ and achieve spiritual birth-giving—is not an easy or painless one.

The Holy Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians:

“My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.”¹⁴

Temptations from us, owing to our weaknesses, but also temptations from the Devil and his instruments on account of his envy for the salvific work that you are accomplishing—these are your daily cross.

“We gave birth to you,” wrote St. Symeon, as aforementioned, *“we gave birth to you through much patience and exceeding travails and pains and daily tears.”¹⁵*

And just as much as your temptations and trials for our sake increase, so much and more does our gratitude towards your holiness increase.

We listen daily to the exhortation of St. Gregory of Nyssa to the Bishop of Melitine:

“Do not cease offering to God the usual prayers for us. For you are indebted, as a grateful son, to take care of the one who has begotten you in God through prayer, according to the commandment which orders one to honor his parents, that it might be well with you and that you might have long life on earth.”¹⁶

IT IS well known to everyone that the heliotrope—the plant commonly called the “sunflower”—is always turned upwards towards the light, towards the sun.

And we monks and all of your spiritual children, our Most Reverend Father, have need of your presence, just as heliotropes have need of the sun; your love makes us turn ourselves wholly upwards, towards the light, towards the noetic Sun of Righteousness: our Lord and God, Jesus Christ; your fatherly love kindles in our hearts the fervent anticipation of the sight of our Bridegroom.

A certain monk confessed to me that among the most beautiful moments of his life are those in which he feels his heart overflowing with sentiments of the deepest reverence and holy awe for the person of his spiritual Father.

When I asked him if that occurs regularly, he answered me more or less as follows:

“I pray to the Lord to grant me this gift permanently, because this condition is a charismatic one—a gift from the right hand of the Most High.

In general, feelings of reverence towards one’s Elder are cultivated and renewed by continuous prayer and the mysterious life. But sometimes, in order for the soul to be strengthened in its struggle and to not become negligent, the Mother of our Lord rests her Most Holy hand on the sweating brow of the struggling disciple, and the anticipated good change is miraculously brought about.

Then, the Elder acquires a mysterious transparency: within it the disciple, with his eyes now changed by Grace, sees Christ!

Then the heart is illumined, fills with joy, and is freed from the work of creation. Its desires and wishes coincide with the Elder’s and, through him, with Christ’s. It sees all

things in Grace and feels that the source of all of its previous misfortune was its own will, opinion, and judgment.

Afterwards, of course, this blessed state recedes; but the good memory and the desire for the continuation of the struggle remain.

In any case, only through the prayers of his spiritual Father, by means of him and together with him, does the disciple see Christ.”¹⁷

That is what the monk told me, and he left me literally speechless; but he also rekindled my desire for that Divine gift, which may Christ grant to us, through your holy prayers.

VI

Our Most Reverend and beloved spiritual Father,

I HAVE tired you by now, which is why I will conclude, conveying the heartfelt wishes of all of us that Christ grant you many years, so that we might be vouchsafed to celebrate the golden jubilee of your Priesthood: the fifty years of your Priestly path of the Cross and Resurrection.

And, finally, may the love for mankind of the Great High Priest vouchsafe us to find ourselves in the next life all together around the supercelestial Altar, in front of which may you stand with uplifted hands, repeating the words of the Prophet:

“Behold, I and the children that God hast given me.”¹⁸

3 October 1987

+ Fr. K.

Notes

(*) This work, entitled “The Necessity of Spiritual Fatherhood,” was delivered as a panegyric, in 1987, at the special “Thanksgiving” tribute, “Honor Thy Father in Deed and Word,” which the

Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Fili, Attika, organized in honor of the Nameday of its spiritual Father and Abbot, His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili.

1. Beginning in 1976, the Brotherhood of the Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, Fili, Attika, has held “Thanksgiving” celebrations—a special tribute—on the Nameday of its spiritual Father and Abbot.

2. On Sunday, 9/22 February 1987, our Monastery’s Brotherhood carried out a series of tributes on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary, with the general title: “1961-1986: Twenty-five Years of Service to the Greek Orthodox Tradition.” (For a full description, see the periodical *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 218 [May-June 1987], pp. 157-196, special edition.)

3. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, ch. 9, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. XXXII, col. 813.

4. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love*, XV, l. 209: “Such came to pass even now in the last times/ Symeon the Saint, the pious Studite/ ... for he had the whole Christ; he was all Christ/...” (ll. 205-210).

5. Prophetic, Hierarchical, and Royal; See Exodus, 19:6; 1 St. Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6.

6. St. Symeon the New Theologian, “Epistle III,” ll. 1-3, in B.C. Christophorides, *Ἡ Πνευματικὴ Πατρότης κατὰ Συμεῶν τὸν Νέον Θεολόγον* [*Spiritual Fatherhood According to St. Symeon the New Theologian*] (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis “P. Pournara,” 1977), p. 26 (Doctoral dissertation).

7. Nikitas Stethatos, *The Life and Conduct of our Father Among the Saints, Symeon the New Theologian*, §46, ll. 21-32, ed. Archimandrite Symeon Koutsas (Athens: “Akritas,” 1996), pp. 138-139.

8. St. John Chrysostomos, *On the Priesthood*, Discourse III, §6, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLVII, col. 644).

9. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Catecheses*, XX, ll. 45-62.

10. *Idem*, *Ethical Discourses*, VIII, ll. 437-445.

11. *Apostolic Constitutions*, Book II, ch. 26, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. I, col. 668A: “He [the Bishop], your Father after God, has regenerated you through water and the Spirit into sonship.”

12. The Service of the Great and Angelic Schema, from the “Catechesis”: “Behold, child, what sort of promises you are giving to the Master Christ...” (See the *Great Evchologion*).

13. St. Basil the Great, *Ascetic Constitutions*, ch. XX, §1 and ch. XXII, §4, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXI, cols. 1389D, 1409A.

14. Galatians 4:19

15. St. Symeon the New Theologian, “Epistle III,” ll. 1-3 (See note 6).

16. St. Gregory of Nyssa, “Canonical Epistle,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLV, col. 236BC.

17. The confession of a monk known to us.

18. Cf. Isaiah 8:18.