

GENUINE NOBILITY

Monasticism and Sociability



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[TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL GREEK]

*Our Most Reverend Spiritual Father,
Holy Hierarchs, Reverend Fathers and Mothers,
Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:*

I call upon your prayers and patience, that I might address the main theme of this year’s “*Thanksgiving*” celebration [in honor of the Nameday of our First Hierarchy, Metropolitan Cyprian], which bears the title: “*Genuine Nobility: Monasticism and Sociability*.”

A noble demeanor, or courtesy, is one of the more characteristic traits of the Christian and must, of course, preëminently adorn those monks and nuns who have dedicated themselves to God. A monastic who is characterized by a brusque, harsh, and quarrelsome manner shows that he has fallen short of the purpose of his existence and that he is under the sway of passions and evil spirits.

Courtesy, in our Faith, does not consist of a merely outward display of smiles and formal, frequently affected, polished, and civilized conduct. Rather, it is an expression of holy inner experience, emanating effortlessly and naturally—like a breath of life—from the Grace-filled man of God, which makes fragrant, gladdens, arouses to compunction, refreshes, and serves as an example to all.

The biographer of St. Anthony the Great, St. Athanasios, Archbishop of Alexandria, tells us that even though the Saint would retreat for long periods of time into the inner desert, to be entirely alone with God, there was

nonetheless not even a trace of surliness to be seen in him. On the contrary, he was always “gracious” and his speech was “seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6), as the Holy Apostle Paul would have it. That is to say, when he would speak, one felt a sense of Grace, a joy, and a sweetness. That is why no one felt jealous of him; rather, everyone rejoiced and scurried to be near him.¹

Such is the true and genuine nobility of the sanctity which comes forth from the depths of the desert, from the man Divinely fashioned “in the image of God,” who has attained to the “likeness of God,” thereby becoming a chosen vessel of the Grace of God.

And this is not something which occurred only in the past, with the great Saints of old. A monk from Romania, an acquaintance of the contemporary ascetic and zealot, St. John the Romanian of Chozeva, who reposed in 1960 in the Holy Land and whose Relics are preserved in a miraculous condition of total incorruption even to this day, writes: “*He [the Saint] was a monk meek and calm in countenance. He was not perturbed by anything, never became angry with anyone, prayed much, and had a great love for everyone.*”²

Precisely his is our common calling—monastics and lay people alike. And in the attainment of this love and this holiness, monastics are called to be luminous guides in a world filled with the spiritual gloom of inhumanity, violence, animosity, pain, division, conflicts, and mutual laceration.

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But how can such a thing be achieved, one might ask, given that monastics withdraw from this problem-ridden human society, taking refuge in monasteries and convents?

The true monastic, St. Neilos of Sinai tells us, is “separated from all things, yet in perfect harmony with all.”³ How is this so?

In his monastery, struggling martyringly unto death in submission, humility, and love—those three virtues, as His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, our spiritual Father, emphasizes to us, that constitute the unshakable foundations of cœnobitic life—, the monastic gradually becomes a dwelling-place of the Holy Triune God; indeed, he begins to acquire pure prayer, wherein the mind, free from images and distractions, constantly remains lovingly attached to God, having unceasing remembrance of God and ultimately being united by Grace with the spiritual heart, the very “organ” of Divine knowledge in man. If the monastic purely and truly loves God in this way, then he unfailingly also loves other people—or, rather, *all* people. He is united, through prayer and in his heart, with the entire world,⁴ even though he has withdrawn from the entire world! He is thus able to

help the world in a substantial and beneficial way, serve as an example to it, and uphold it. And this is a great mystery of the Grace of God.

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In His Holy Gospel, the Lord teaches us that all of the Divine and salvific commandments are summed up in love for God and for our neighbor.⁵ We attain to true love for our neighbor by way of true love for God; and, conversely, we will be unable to attain to love for God, Whom we do not see, if we do not make the effort to love our neighbor, whom we do see.⁶

Indeed, our brother, our fellow man, constitutes the **foundation** and the **roof** of our spiritual edifice.

Abba John the Short, one of the great Fathers of Sketis, in Egypt, said:

‘One cannot build a house beginning at the top and finishing at the bottom. He must begin at the foundation and work his way up.’ His disciples asked him: ‘What do these words mean?’ The Elder answered: ‘The foundation is your neighbor, whom you must win, and this you must do first; for on him depend all of Christ’s commandments.’⁷

About this St. Anthony the Great, too, said: *“From our neighbor come life and death. If we win our brother, we win God; and if we cause our brother to stumble, we sin against Christ.”⁸*

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The very life of the Church is structured precisely according to this perspective.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is sacrificed gloriously and in a God-befitting manner upon the Holy Table of the Eucharist, St. John Chrysostomos tells us:

*For whose sake was He slain, and for what reason? To bring peace to things in Heaven and things on earth..., to reconcile you with God, though you are His enemy and adversary.... **This sacrifice took place that you might be at peace with your brother.**⁹*

Organically and inseparably linked to this clear and pure Eucharistic vision is the ascetical vision: therein, to the extent that a man is beset by the passions and sins of love of glory, hedonism, and avarice, he is thought to become bestial and remains **“implacable”**;¹⁰ that is, **irreconcilable** with God, man, and creation. In contrast, to the extent that he redirects the faculties of his soul through repentance and godly striving, he acquires, among other things, a heart that is gentle, peaceable, good, calm, and full

of compassion and cheerfulness; and thus, his soul does not rebel against itself, but, instead, is “opened” to the rays of the Divine Spirit.

Hence, the **Eucharist** and **asceticism** naturally lead us to the therapeutic and reconciliatory notion of the **communion** and unity of all of the members of the Body of the Church with God and with each other.

For this reason, the Divine Chrysostomos characteristically concludes: “*Let us, therefore, meld ourselves into one Body, not mixing our bodies together, but joining our souls together through the bond of love.*”¹¹

Such is the ethos of the Church and the basis for the nobility and sociability of Her members.

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Monasticism is precisely a model society, with social members, in which love reigns as a Divine gift and a binding tie. Monasticism without love is inconceivable. Thus, monastics are social beings *par excellence*, since only through love can they do obedience, communicate with each other, and deal with the difficulties which arise in their lives.

My neighbor, my brother, is a member of my body, and mutual respect, mutual submission, self-abnegation, and self-sacrifice must predominate in our relations with each other.

In this way, we see our brother as an image of God, worthy of honor, attention, forbearance, forgiveness, love, praise, and justification, and we endeavor not to hurt him, not to disdain him, not to disparage him, not to despise him, not to condemn him, not to wound his conscience, not to burden him, not to take revenge on him for some evil that he may have done to us, not to make demands on him, not to lure him into any evil, not to scandalize him, and not to entertain base suspicions about him.

In our encounters, we should be “*occasions for joy*,” though, of course, with a sense of moderation and sobriety. We should be cheerful of countenance and speech, while preserving inner mourning. Our speech should be gracious and edifying. We should be distinguished by affability and not by brusqueness, and we should also be gentle even when it is incumbent upon us, by virtue of our position, to correct someone. It is good for us to be radiant and to have a smile on our face before we speak, and to show genuine joy over the successes and accomplishments of our neighbor and genuine sorrow over his afflictions and trials.

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Since all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, are inexperienced novices, the holy Desert Fathers give us guidance even in seemingly small and triv-

ial details regarding our relations with others, in order to aid us in a paternal and practical way. Their guidance represents a distillation of their authentic experience and is of inestimable value.

Such marvelous counsels were left to us sixteen centuries ago (!) by Abba Isaiah the Anchorite. We have succinctly singled out the following pertinent exhortations, from among a large number, as being indicative of the benefit that they confer on all of us, monastics and lay people alike:

- *Be serious when you are alone, but joyful when brothers arrive.*
- *Do not stretch out your hand before others at table.*
- *Do not yawn in front of others.*
- *Do not gape (guffaw) when you laugh.*
- *Do not sit in a careless manner.*
- *Do not make noise when you eat or drink.*
- *Do not give orders to others.*
- *Do not boast.*
- *Do not regard yourself as being superior to others.*
- *Do not grieve anyone.*
- *Do not drive away peace.*
- *Be obedient to everyone.*
- *Give preference to the interests, comfort, and will of your brother in*

all things.

- *Do not say unprofitable things and harm another.*
- *Do not walk in front of one who is older than you.*
- *Do not remain seated when he stands up to talk to others.*
- *Do not allow one who is older than you to carry things when you are*

with him.

- *Do not quarrel over prices when buying and selling.*

• *If you have been given something on condition that you return it, return it as soon as you have finished with it, without waiting to be asked; but if you have lent something, do not ask for it when it is not given back, and especially if you have no immediate need of it.*

• *If the food set before you is not well prepared, do not mention this to the one who prepared it—that will be death to your soul. Think how you would feel if you were told something of the sort.*

• *If you are chanting, and someone makes a mistake over a word, do not tell him immediately, lest you upset him.*¹²

That Hesychast and devotee of the desert, St. Isaac the Syrian, adds:

- *Do not interrupt or contradict one who is speaking.*
- *Avoid familiarity.*

- *Do not expectorate or cough in front of another, but first turn your face aside.*
- *Wherever you may find yourself, do not look around with curiosity.*
- *Do not enter suddenly into someone else’s room without first knocking on the door.*
- *Speak with meekness and look with modesty.*
- *Do not enter into judgment with anyone, but endure being condemned, even when you are not at fault.*
- *Prefer to be despised than to despise, to be wronged than to do wrong.*
- *Avoid loquacity and do not get involved with irascible, contentious, and arrogant people.*
- **“Pour mercy upon all and be detached from all”¹³**

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Observing these commandments brings the Christian—monastic or layman—to great and lofty heights of virtue, because progress in the virtues is achieved through the observance of details, to which most people ascribe no significance. All of the above presupposes a profound inner spiritual work and cultivation and show that meekness, humility, and love exist within a person. Wherever compassionate love for others exists—a love which makes the burdens of one’s neighbor his own and which constitutes a most lofty expression of inner mercy—the Divine fragrance of **universal love** is then diffused, outwardly and inwardly, as a foretaste of the Heavenly Kingdom and as an image of the Divine life in communion of the Holy Trinity:

[A]s the three persons of the Godhead ‘dwell’ in one another, so we must ‘dwell’ in our fellow humans, living not for ourselves alone, but in and for others. ‘If it were possible for me to find a leper,’ said one of the Desert Fathers, ‘and to give him my body and take his, I would gladly do it. For this is perfect love.’ Such is the true nature of theosis [union with God by Grace—Trans.].¹⁴

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Here is the eloquent and captivating portrait of a contemporary monk who achieved deification, St. Silouan the Athonite (†1938), as painted by his disciple, the late Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov):

The Staretz was possessed of real, profound humility—humility before God and other people. He liked to give preference to others but to be unconsidered himself, to greet others before being greeted. He set particular store by the blessings of bishops and abbots, and, indeed, of all in Holy Orders, but he was never obsequious or ingratiating. He had a gen-

uine respect for people of rank and education but no feeling of jealousy or inferiority—possibly because of his profound realis[z]ation of the transience of worldly position or authority, wealth or even scholarship. He knew ‘how greatly the Lord loveth His people,’ and his love for God and man made him really value and respect everyone.

Simplicity stamped the Staretz’ outward manner but his demeanour[or] did not mask his aristocracy of spirit. Even the most perceptive intuition brought into contact with Father Silouan, whatever the circumstances, could have found nothing ignoble in him. He did not know what it was to spurn or disregard. He was a stranger to affectation. He was a really noble spirit in the way only a Christian can be noble.

The Staretz never laughed aloud, never expressed himself equivocally, never derided or made fun of people. Occasionally a faint smile would cross his quiet, serious face but his lips did not move unless he were speaking.

Anger, as a passion, had no place in his heart, yet for all his astonishing gentleness, rare unassumingness and docility, everything that was false, evil, ugly he opposed absolutely. Backbiting, pettiness, narrow-mindedness and the like found no place in him. When he encountered them he would show himself inflexible, yet contrive not to wound the man guilty of them, either by a visible reaction or, more importantly, by an impulse of his heart—for a sensitive man would feel that, too. This he attained through inner prayer, which kept him serene and unreceptive of any evil.

*A rare strong will but devoid of obstinacy; simplicity, freedom, probity and valour[or] together with gentle goodness; humility and obedience without a trace of sycophancy—**Father Silouan was a man in the original sense of the word, made in the image and likeness of God.**¹⁵*

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Our Most Reverend spiritual Father:

We thank you, for you have always cultivated for us, in deed and word, the spirit of genuine nobility and sociability, through obedience, humility, and love, and through insistence on the small details of everyday life. Forgive us for having brought forth such meagre fruits. We beseech you to continue your holy work, for we are all in need of it. We wish you many years, replete with mercy and good works, and a rich and manifold recompense from the Lord!

Εἰς πολλὰ ἔτη, Δέσποτα! [Many years, Master!]

I thank you.

Notes

1. **St. Athanasios the Great**, *Life and Conduct of Our Holy Father Anthony* (§73), *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXVI, col. 945B.
2. **Monk Damaskenos Gregoriates**, Ὁδοιπορικὸ τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ρουμανικῆς Ἐκκλησίας [*Travelogue of the Romanian Orthodox Church*] (Piræus: Ekdoseis “Athos,” 1986), p. 109.
3. **St. Neilos of Sinai**, *Discourse on Prayer* (§124), *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXIX, col. 1193C.
4. **Metropolitan Hierotheos of Navpaktos and Hagios Vlasios**, Ὁ Ὁρθόδοξος Μοναχισμὸς ὡς προφητικὴ, ἀποστολικὴ καὶ μαρτυρικὴ ζωὴ [*Orthodox Monasticism As a Prophetic, Apostolic, and Martyric Life*] (Pelagia: Ekdoseis Hieras Mones Genethliou tes Theotokou, 2002), p. 146.
5. St. Matthew 22:37-40.
6. I St. John 4:20-21.
7. Εἶπε Γέρον..., “Τὸ Γεροντικὸν” σὲ νεοελληνικὴ ἀπόδοση [*An Elder Said... The “Gerontikon” Rendered into Modern Greek*], tr. Vasileios Pentzas (Athens: Ekdoseis “Aster,” 1974), p. 114 (Abba John the Short, §10).
8. *Apophthegmata of the Fathers*, Abba Anthony, §9, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXV, col. 77B.
9. **St. John Chrysostomos**, “Homily I ‘On the Betrayal of Judas’” (§6), *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIX, cols. 381-382.
10. **St. Niketas Stethatos**, *First Century of Practical Chapters* (§14), in *Φιλοκαλία τῶν Ἱερῶν Νηπιτικῶν* (Athens: Ekdoseis Pan. Tzelate, 1893), Vol. II, p. 176.
11. See note 9.
12. **Abba Isaiah**, *Twenty-Nine Discourses* (Volos: Ekdoseis S. Schoina, 1962), pp. 186-192.
13. **St. Isaac the Syrian**, *Ascetic Discourses*, “Discourse VII” (Athens: Ekdoseis Ch. Spanos, n.d.), pp. 32-36.
14. **Timothy Ware** [Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia], *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 237.
15. **Archimandrite Sophrony** (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, tr. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of the St. John the Baptist, 1995), pp. 53-54.