

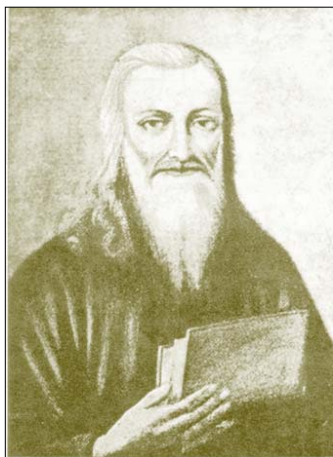


On the Occasion of the Commemoration of St. Zosima of Siberia († October 24, 1833)

It is Ruinous for a Monk under Obedience to Diverge from the Mentality and Approach of His Elder*

In order for one to arrive at perfect spiritual knowledge, he must first wall himself around with both humility and wisdom.

This twofold wall is usually built with the materials of trials and temptations. And Elder Zosima of Siberia, who at that time was living in asceticism with his Elder, Father Basilisk, in the wilderness around Lake Ladoga, near the Monastery of Konevits, had to pass through yet one more temptation.



Hitherto, the demon of vainglory had not fiercely battled against him, but now his time had come. This demon craftily approached him from the right and sowed in his mind ostensibly good thoughts, which the unwary struggler of Christ accepted. Thus, he said to his fellow ascetic and Elder, Father Basilisk:

“Why do we waste so much time on handiwork, and especially on gathering blackberries? Since our Lord has vouchsafed us to lead a life of solitude, we should spend our time in prayer, reading, and contemplation of God. The monastery brothers are in want of nothing; they do not need our handiwork. And as for the blackberries and mushrooms, there are so many others who could gather them. Why should we do such work?”

“In their love for us,” Father Basilisk soberly replied, “the Elder and

the Fathers have released us from the obligation of living in the monastery, they have granted us stillness (*ἡσυχία*), and they provide us with everything we need. Should we not then also exert ourselves a little in return for what they give us? Moreover, bodily labor and handiwork are, as the Fathers tell us, indispensable means for the spiritual progress of monastics, and especially of desert-dwellers. All of the holy ascetics would combine prayer with work. Apart from that, I believe that my own prayers are not as pleasing to God as the prayers of the brothers on my behalf. Thus, when they eat of the fruit of my labors and pray for my sinful soul, I am confident that the Lord will show me greater mercy.”

* * *

Thus, Father Basilisk would devote a little time each day to gathering blackberries and mushrooms, without ever breaking off his unceasing inner prayer. Every Saturday, when he would bring these things to the monastery, the joy and gratitude of the Fathers were indeed turned into prayer for the Elder, which strengthened him in his struggles.

Father Zosima, on the other hand, not only mentally judged his Elder and spiritual Father, but from time to time even reproved him to his face for supposedly being a failed hesychast, distracted by cares.

Father Basilisk, however, did not cease from benignly advising him: “With the Lord’s help, a person can pray mentally and keep his mind on God even when he is gathering blackberries. The cell is not the only place for prayer, but also the forest and the field—wherever we work. When we have finished our work, we once again close ourselves in our cells and continue our prayer with increased zeal, after this beneficial break for bodily labor.”

By these and other similar counsels, the Elder cautioned Father Zosima not to trust his own judgment, but rather the experience of the Holy Fathers, of his spiritual Father, and of the other experienced brothers.

“Likewise,” he added, “we should regulate our life in such a way that we are in harmony with the conditions and place in which we live. Since, then, though hesychasts, we have spiritual ties to a cœnobitic monastery, we would do well to participate in one way or another in their collective work. Next, as you know, this place produces a large quantity of blackberries. If we did not gather them, they would go to waste, since the brothers have to travel quite some distance to come here, and they also have no time, occupied as they are with their monastic duties. Zosima, we must avoid worldly disturbances, yes, but not monastic chores!”

“For all that,” Zosima later noted, “I, the wretch, trusting my own thoughts more than the wise arguments of my Elder, stopped going with him for blackberries. I would shut myself in my cell, fast more strictly, and pray and read more.

“But the consequences of my ‘ascetic zeal’ (a zeal ‘not according to knowledge’) and of my self-willed course, which was at variance with that of Father Basilisk, were not long in making their appearance: I began to feel utter indifference towards prayer and every spiritual work; my mind was darkened and my thoughts became confused; I fell into depression and mental alienation from my Elder, and my conscience was smothered under a tremendous weight. I began to break down and to despair.

“If God’s mercy and the prayers of my Elder had not helped me to understand my error, I would have fallen into complete delusion and been led to spiritual death. But at some point, when I was in this lamentable state, my mind was as though enlightened. My heart was moved to compunction; contrition and repentance overwhelmed me. I began to condemn myself bitterly. I understood how ruinous it is for a monk under obedience to diverge from the mentality and approach of his Elder.

“Shortly thereafter, Father Basilisk came to my cell. I made a prostration before him, confessed my error, and tearfully begged him to forgive me, which he gladly did. Then it was that the gloom of my spiritual state was dispelled like smoke, and I entirely came to my senses. Tranquility, joy, zeal, and love and obedience to my Elder once again took their place in my heart.

*Source: Abbess Vera Verkhovsky, *Γέροντας Ζωσιμᾶς τῆς Σιβηρίας (1767-1833)* [Elder Zosima of Siberia (1767-1833)] (Oropos, Attica: Ekdosis Hieras Mones Parakletou, 1995), pp. 83-86. Presentation and layout ours.