

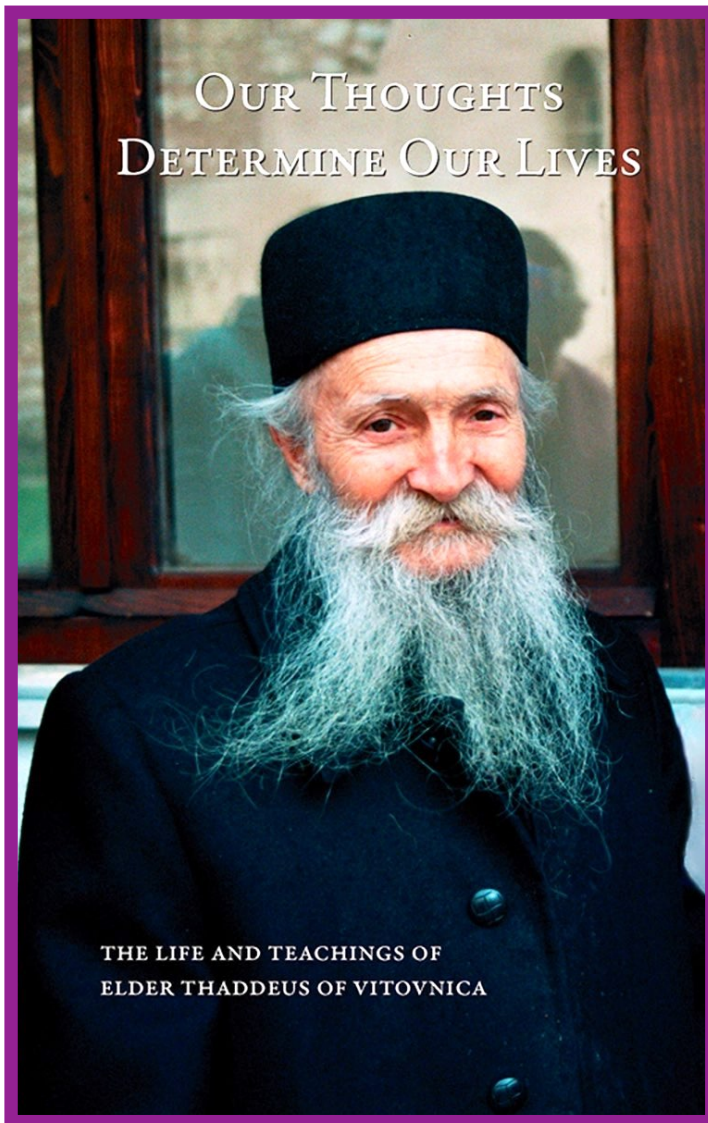
WITH THE BLESSING OF BISHOP JOHN, WE ARE RECOMMENDING THE FOLLOWING  
FOR OUR ANTIOCHIAN WOMEN BOOK CLUB SELECTION:



**OUR THOUGHTS DETERMINE OUR LIVES, by Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica**

*"Love little things, and strive for that which is modest and simple. The Lord watches over us, and He is pleased that you long for His peace. Until the soul is ready, He will only sometimes allow us to see that He is present everywhere and fills all things. At these moments the soul feels such joy!... But then the Lord conceals Himself from us again, in order that we might long for Him and seek Him with our hearts!"*

— Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica



THE ELDER THADDEUS OF VITOVNICA was one of the most renowned spiritual guides of Serbia in the twentieth century. As a novice he lived in obedience to Elder Ambrose of Miljkovo Monastery, a disciple of the Optina Elders. From him Fr. Thaddeus learned the Prayer of the Heart and the selfless love that came to characterize his whole ministry to the suffering Serbian people.

Born in 1914, Elder Thaddeus lived through all the suffering endured by Serbia in the twentieth century. Over the course of two World Wars, during the Communist takeover, and through the NATO bombings of 1999, he co-suffered with his people. He taught, counseled, and prayed for all who came to him in pain and sorrow. His words

of love and hope provided spiritual balm for people from all classes of society.

In 2002 Elder Thaddeus reposed, leaving behind a large collection of his teachings, preserved by his faithful spiritual children. His life, teachings, and spiritual conversations are here presented for the first time in English. ❖

## Life Events of Elder Thaddeus

Born and baptized October 6 (Old Calendar) 1914, Feast of Holy Apostle Thomas, weakly and sick, fearing he would die, in Serbia. Named Tomislav.

As young boy, mother died. Father remarried twice. Step-mothers abusive. Father didn't stand up for him. Different from other kids because of dietary issues. No one thought he'd be good for anything. Found solace in God, and his own thoughts.

Realized early in life that life consists of serving others and that he must patiently bear both sorrow and pain in serving.

Was apprenticed to be a tailor rather than a farmer because physically weak. Not successful.

At 18 years old, desire arises to become a monk. Writes letter to Gornjak monastery. While awaiting reply, he falls gravely ill, decides to forgo treatment. Told has 5 years to live.

1932 Goes to monastery against parent's will. At Gornjak monastery, told and guided to go to Miljkovo monastery instead, to find the kind of monasticism he seeks. This monastery is coenobitic, meaning life in community. Strict prayer rule: Daily liturgy, strict fasting, full cycle prayers, pray in cell.

1932 At Miljkovo, becomes a Novice. He is given several obediences all of which he failed at, but his Abbot covered his failures with love and patient forbearance. As he thought he had only 5 years to live, he confessed all thoughts, and gave himself over to constant prayer of the heart. Once he became a monk, the battle with his thoughts intensified. Abbot counsels him to pray with contrition of heart. He starts zealously to read the Holy Fathers.

After one year, Abbot Ambrose dies in 1933. Monastery starts to break up. He's thrown into deep sorrow, and loses prayer of heart. His soul is torn by sadness. Finds consolation in a book called The Path to Salvation by St. Theophan the Recluse.

1935 He goes to Gornjak monastery. Tonsured a Monk. Takes name of Thaddeus. From there, sent to school to learn iconography. Learns the mystical theology of icons, but cannot continue because of paint fumes.

1937, the supposed last year of his life, ordained Heiromonk and sent to Pech in Kosovo until 1941, when has to flee from violence at the outbreak of WWII. Back to Belgrade where he is accepted into Radovica monastery.

1941 Arrested by Nazis. Questioned whether he is a communist. Returns to Vitovnica where SS demands that he be at their disposal, he refuses.

1943 Arrested again, thrown into prison without charges, and sentenced to death. With his soul in anguish, has first vision of an Angel as a soldier, showing him a map of Serbia and all whom he must comfort.

1949 Becomes Abbot at Pech. Monastery in ruins, communists giving trouble. Suffers two nervous breakdowns as a result of fear, anxiety, and worry. Learns to leave his cares, and those of neighbors, in the hands of God. Bears the cross of serving as abbot for next six years.

1955 Briefly serves parishes.

1956 Back serving as Abbot at Pech.

1957 Back to Belgrade as Abbot of Gornjak until dies in 2003.

1959 Desires, and given blessing to go to Mt. Athos to Hilandar monastery where he is not well received. Later, learns that it was because he followed his own will. Comforted by the Mother of God while there, he learns from her that "his nerves are worn out."

1962-1972 Abbot of Vitovnica. During this time has two visions:

First: "This is how you must ease all tension. Do not take on the worries of this world too much, but guard your peace and live with God!"

Second: "The Savior told him to fall down before His Most Holy Mother, the Protectress of Monastics."

During this time, he realizes that he never wanted to be an abbot because it took him away from a life of silence, vigilance, and prayer. He wrestled with God for always sending him back to a flock and duties as an abbot. Lesson learned that if you don't have humility, God will not stop at humbling us.

1972 Sent into retirement, then installed as Abbot of Pokajnica monastery. Another vision from God asking: "Why do you fight the good fight when you have no obedience? Whenever you were assigned to serve at a certain place as abbot you complained about it, asking to be excused. You must not do so anymore! Know you must carry out every obedience with much love, earnestly, and with zeal, without paying any attention to the envy and malice around you...this is the cross you must bear."

1978 he has vision of his own death with judges accusing him of not getting along with anyone. A man on his right says, "Do not be afraid! It is not true that you cannot get along with anyone. You just cannot get along with yourself!" At that moment, the words of St. Isaac the Syrian came to him, "Make peace with yourself, and both heaven and earth will make peace with you."

1980s people around Serbia start to stream to him. From then on, he gave talks, lessons, spiritual advice, and prayers to all who came. It was his cross to bear.

1992 first heart attack.

1996 second heart attack.

November 2001 Ill. Said that "Holy Fathers say the perfect Christian life is extreme humility, meaning patient long-suffering is what we most need in this life. We must bear everything patiently, and forgive all. If we have good thoughts and desires these thoughts give us joy and peace, even in this life, and even more so, in eternity. Then, we will see, there is no death."

2002 Has stroke. Long illness follows. Saw illness as an aid to perfection. Endured it with love, obedience, and humility.

2003 Death on Feast of St. Mary of Egypt. March 31 Old Calendar.

## How this book is Organized

This book was compiled from transcribed talks, audio taped conversations and written texts, and sermons. It is organized by subject matter with a sermon at the end of the book that gives a complete view of how the elder presented his teachings.

Each chapter has within it, numbered, stand-alone paragraph(s) of thoughts, reflections, stories, advice, and counsel that can be a springboard for our discussion.

### **“OUR THOUGHTS DETERMINE OUR LIVES”**

1. **ON THOUGHTS:** How would you respond to people if your thoughts were evil and troubled and how would you respond if your thoughts are peaceful, loving and kind? Practice this when talking to your family and friends and acquaintances. Our Heavenly father wants all His children to have His Divine properties. He wants us to be full of love, peace, joy, truthfulness, and kindness.
2. **ON FAMILY LIFE:** Think about the time you had to spank your child to get obedience but failed. How would you approach your child differently? Expect Obedience from your children but it should be done with love. Practice love to achieve what you want; their obedience becomes part of their character. Therefore, they will be obedient to God.
3. **ON HUMILITY:** Think of the times that you were provoked day in and day out by your manager at work or by a coworker or a family member. If we can stay calm and keep our inner peace despite that person’s rudeness our soul will become meek and humble. We should be able to cure our outward and inward pride.
4. **ON SERVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR:** How often do you feel resistance to the work you do, or don’t fully listen to people when they talk to you? If you see that every type of work on earth and in all the universe is God’s work and should be performed from your heart without reservation. This will help us free ourselves from our inner resistance and this action will serve God and our neighbor. When talking to people give them your full attention.
5. **ON MONASTICISM:** How often do we think that a Monastic life is easy? Monks must learn to live with each other and learn to be peaceful and quite meek and humble. Monks are there to pray for the salvation of all mankind.
6. **ON REPENTANCE:** Think about a habit you have that you are trying to get rid of, you pray about it and stop it, but then fall into it once and again? We need to repent and change our way of life. Repentance is a change of life, a change of direction and turning towards the Absolute Good.
7. **ON PRAYER:** How often do we pray to God when we are distracted, we pray with our bodies and lips and not with truth and spirit, our minds and our hearts are not present? When we pray or do anything in our lives, we should do it from our heart. To achieve salvation, we always need to transform our minds and lives in remembrance of God.

8. **ON LOVE:** Think about your life and how much love you need in your life? Keep God in your everyday life because God is Love. When we love certain people or things there is a little bit of love but mostly it is enslavement. Give your heart to God because whoever we give our hearts to this person can harm us or abandon us.
9. **ON THE FALLEN WORLD:** Look around you and your life and see how much is the Holy Spirit part of it? Mankind prefers evil to good. Such is the result of our fallen Nature. It is easier for us to think evil than good. But when we think evil, we have no peace or rest from such thoughts.
10. **ON SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE:** What in your life creates an inner resistance? We have acquired a habit of always opposing one thing or another, we have to learn to be obedient to God because he has put us in the position where we find ourselves, and we will get the most out of it when we learn to be humble.
11. **ON THE FAITH:** Can we live without faith as the atheist say? We should believe that nothing ever happens either in the world or in the universe without the will of God or His permission. We should love one another, repent and have positive thoughts to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, if we receive communion when we are breeding hateful thoughts towards a neighbor, we are receiving him not unto our salvation but unto judgement.
12. **ON INNER PEACE:** Think about situations you were in when you want to oppose evil with evil? When we are attacked with evil we should learn to pray "Lord, help me to preserve my inner peace, teach me how to be calm and peaceful and kind, just like Thine angels."
13. **ON THE SPIRITUAL REALM:** Have we spoken to a materialistic person, how people cannot understand each other because of materialism? We Christians have been called to spread upon the earth the atmosphere of heaven, eternity, love, peace, truth, and stillness. It is difficult because we have accepted much evil into our hearts, and now we need to get rid of it.
14. **A HOMILY ON THE DORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD**
15. **REPENTANCE IS A CHANGE OF LIFE:** Please see questions and answers at the end of this part.
16. **COLLECTED SAYINGS OF ELDER THADDEUS**