

The Orthodox Spirit and the Nativity Fast

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia (also known as Saint Porphyrios the Seer, +1991) recounts, in the context of narrating events from his life, his experience as a spiritual father with the sacrament of confession. He was a mere fourteen years old when he fled to Mount Athos. There, he lived in the company of two hermits who were brothers according to the flesh. His illness compelled these hermits to send him down from the sacred mountain in search of medical treatment and recovery. Upon returning to his village and regaining his health, the metropolitan of the archdiocese ordained him a priest and granted him the blessing to be a father confessor, all while he was a young man of just twenty-two years, and he only knew the spiritual direction of ascetic monastic life.

In reflecting on that experience, he mentioned that he kept the book of Saint Nicodemus of Athos by his side. This book, rooted in the realities of the 16th and 17th centuries, meticulously cataloged sins one by one and established rules for repentance and discipline for each sin. The canons contained within this book may seem excessively stringent to the modern person.

Saint Porphyrios' unwavering commitment to his faith and his monastic education compelled him to consult this book after every confession. He would assign penitents a regimen that corresponded to their particular sin: three hundred prostrations daily, weeks or months of fasting, and so forth. However, he soon realized that these rules exceeded the capacities of the faithful and did not contribute to their spiritual growth. On the contrary, they led to a sense of despair regarding the possibility of overcoming their sins, and this despair often caused them to return to their sins.

He thus made the decision to close the book and place it on the shelf. Instead, he began to inquire of the penitents regarding the number of prostrations they could reasonably perform and the duration of fasting they could sustain, providing them with an obedience tailored to their abilities.

The example of Saint Porphyrios teaches us the distinction between the spiritual teachings of the Church and their practical application. Spiritual growth is a gradual process in which believers ascend toward their desired spiritual state. The Church's role is to provide personal support and guidance to individuals on their spiritual

journeys, helping them climb the ladder of salvation. Pastors or spiritual fathers draw from living spiritual experiences, not just static texts, to offer spiritual care that considers the individual's capacity, readiness, and circumstances.

Father confessors accompany the faithful on their spiritual path and tailor their guidance to the unique needs of their spiritual children, focusing on what is most beneficial for their growth in Christ. The Gospel serves as a general spiritual guideline, but the specific application and embodiment of the Gospel's teachings depend on the spiritual father's experience and the individual believer's abilities, circumstances, and state of being. This principle forms the foundation of Orthodox spiritual guidance.

A story from *The Garden of Monks (The Paradise of the Desert Fathers)* illustrates this concept. It tells of a young man from a wealthy family who sought monastic life in an Egyptian desert monastery. The monks of the monastery slept on the ground, following the customs of their time. However, the abbot granted the young man the privilege of using a pillow while sleeping. Some of the other monks saw this as special treatment and complained. The abbot responded by saying, "My sons, you used to sleep on the ground in your homes, and when you came to the monastery, your sleeping conditions did not change much. But he used to sleep on a bed with a pillow of ostrich feathers. Whose monastic sacrifice is greater?"

This incident, along with countless others in our spiritual heritage, emphasizes the importance of tailoring guidance to each person's abilities, circumstances, and potential to help them progress to higher levels of spiritual growth. As the Apostle Paul says, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11).

"The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6) yet going beyond the letter and reaching the Spirit requires deep spiritual experience and profound humility, which enables pastors to be receptive to the experiences of those more spiritually advanced and benefit from them. Often, stubbornness and excessive rigor are rooted in hidden passions such as self-righteousness or vainglory. History has witnessed the downfall of many who, in their strictness, stifled and overwhelmed those under their guidance.

Our Orthodox spiritual heritage teaches us to be rigorous in self-discipline while being compassionate and merciful towards others. This message is especially

relevant since some priests considering abstinence from oil as a central aspect of the Nativity Fast. The Nativity Fast in the Orthodox Church is observed as follows:

- Abstention from food and drink until noon is not required.
- Fish and seafood are allowed until December 12, which coincides with the feast of Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker.
- The strictness of fasting increases as Christmas approaches.

Abstaining from oil is a monastic tradition blessed for those who desire it, with the blessing of their spiritual father, but it is not obligatory. Some individuals justify abstaining from oil based on references in the Great Horologion. The Church's response is that the influence of monastic practices became more widespread with the growth of the monastic movement and the guidance provided by monastic fathers. Our liturgical books were formulated under this monastic influence. The Church does not prohibit these practices, but it does not impose them on everyone. Thus, such practices remain optional and contingent upon the willingness of the believer to live a more ascetic life, guided by a spiritual father who understands their potential and spiritual condition. It is crucial to be aware of the potential pitfalls associated with what our heritage refers to as the "devil of excessive zeal."

The spiritual father's role is to accompany his spiritual children, nurturing their spiritual growth and development, rather than burdening them with practices that exceed their capacity and lead to despair, ultimately causing them to abandon the Christian path leading to salvation. The arrangements within our Church order (the Typikon) are designed to help believers engage with and experience the salvific events they commemorate. These arrangements aim to facilitate spiritual growth, purity, and holiness rather than serve as additional burdens. In the words of Jesus, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).