

The Gurus, the Old Man, and Elder Paisios

Thank you Fr. Marcus for asking me to speak today. For those who have not read, Dionysios Farasiotis' spiritual memoir, *The Gurus, the Old Man, and Elder Paisios*, I'll read from the description on the back cover: "This powerful memoir tells the story of a Greek youth who, out of a desire to know the truth empirically, began to experiment in yoga, hypnotism, and various occult techniques." During my first reading, at least, it seemed to me that this young man was set on a quest for spiritual power.

The cover continues, "Eventually drawn back to the Faith of his forefathers, Orthodox Christianity, he visited the ancient monastic republic of Mount Athos in his native Greece, where he was brought to a knowledge of the Truth of Jesus Christ by the saintly Elder Paisios (who reposed in 1994). Nevertheless, believing he had only found part of the truth on the Holy Mountain, he chose to give the same opportunity to Hindu yogis that he had given to Elder Paisios and other Orthodox monks."

While reading the book, it seemed to me that, while he had discovered and accepted "that part of truth" that had mostly to do with the Elder's power for unconditional love and acceptance of him, and even though that unique acceptance was deeply appreciated by the young man, it was not the only kind of power he was seeking. As the cover continues, "... at the age of twenty-five, he embarked on a trip to India, where he undertook his search in the ashrams of three famous gurus, one of whom was worshipped as a god. His experiences in India, along with his subsequent encounters with Elder Paisios on Mount Athos, are recounted in the present book in vivid detail."

"What stands out most in this book," the cover says, "is the radiant image of Elder Paisios, possessed of divine gifts, laboring in prayer for his fellow man, and overflowing with unconditional love. Through this, one sees the uncreated Source of the elder's love and of the author's spiritual transformation: the true God-man Jesus Christ, who honors man's personal freedom while drawing him, through love, into everlasting union with Himself."

It seems to me that this is true if you already have some knowledge or experience of Elder Paisios. If you meet Elder Paisios for the first time in this book, I'm not so sure that last statement is true. Because in this book Elder Paisios is a character, a figure, within the context of the life and experience of this young man, whose life has been about the occult. For me, at least during my first reading of the young man's book, Elder Paisios was a character in the young man's dramatic story of

himself. As such, the Elder did not stand out, in the book, nearly so clearly as the cover describes. Even though the Elder was definitely the only fixed point in the book. Since my first reading of the book I've read all four of the hard to get and expensive copies of the *Councils of Elder Paisios*, which are the result of his spiritual children, the nuns of a monastery that he founded, transcribed what he had said to them over the course of many years, and we have as a result, five books, four published so far, one as yet to be published – in those books you meet Elder Paisios. You hear his words. You come to an understanding of things that convicts you; that makes you question yourself, even though we are not anywhere near even beginning to be at the level of the man who is speaking to us in those words. You don't have that experience in this book because Elder Paisios' words are put in the context of the experience of the young man who is struggling to get out of this bondage to an occult vision of the world. If you read this book and simply use it as a dramatic and interesting spiritual story, you will follow along and understand things as the young man is understanding them at the time. That is the power of this kind of narrative. You have to take that into account, it seems to me.

Readers, it seemed to me, might or might not arrive at the message promised by the cover, depending on their kind of reading. The experience of reading the book again, it seemed to me, was similar to watching a movie that ends on the right note, but only after having taken us through all kinds of emotionally engaging darkneses and doubtful assumptions about the nature of spiritual life. While we are reading the book we accept, without question, because we are experiencing what *the young man* is experiencing. Elder Paisios' as the best guru in the book, the one who wins out, in the kind of contest between the Elder Paisios and the yogis of India, did lead me to investigate and read nearly everything said by or written about him that is available in English.

When I came back to the book and began to read it again I recognized Elder Paisios immediately. Not the first time, because I hadn't known Elder Paisios before. That last time (I read the book several times, but that last time), it is obviously Elder Paisios. It is an accurate book. It is an incredible book. It is a great accomplishment, but it needs not to be read naively, so that we are not drawn into this way of understanding that is being duplicated for us so that we can share in the told story of the writer. The cover's description of Elder Paisios is certainly accurate, once you do truly meet him on the page yourself, in his counsels. Unfortunately, none of those wonderful writings are nearly as available or popular as is this exciting blow by blow account of one young man's spiritual adventures among the evil gurus of India, and his salvation by way of the good Elder Paisios. We can

receive that, and not *meet* Elder Paisios. And *then*, we understand the Orthodox spiritual life within the context of the young man's experience of the occult. That's dangerous, it seems to me.

The first great shock in the life of many a young man is discovering that he is not the center of even his own world. Others do not exist only to be useful. It may even be that that discovery is the central story of this book. Now initially, I responded very negatively to this book. I had known of it for some time, but had passed over it by choice. It was discovered by an independently minded parishioner, who liked it, and recommended it to others, including one inquirer. So I was forced to look into it for pastoral reasons. Now I have some academic background in the analysis and evaluation of texts. Analysis of messages and the proper use of them can be, and what the improper use of them might be, is my academic study. I read it, did not entirely trust it, and could not recommend it to others, for pastoral reasons. At the January Clergy Conference, I buttonholed any other priest who would listen for their opinion, and freely offered my own. As a result of my efforts, I find myself speaking here today.

Why did I react so negatively? The writer must be close to my own age by now. As young men we read the same books, he and I, and I had had, though in a different way, experiences similar to his before my own conversion to Orthodoxy. But the turns of direction and specific choices that he made did not parallel my own. The choices and directions I had had that were comparable to his, I had avoided as death and darkness, and turned away from them, and counted myself as fortunate, and guided to turn away from them. By his experience, he would seem to agree, after the fact, to agree that that that is the proper way of doing things. In fact, he hopes in his introduction, that by reading his book you will avoid traveling the road that he did. The problem is, it is so dramatically engaging that it's easy for us to grab hold of this exciting way of understanding the spiritual world, and having combined it with our own passions and desires – and now we start interpreting spiritual life as the young man did – within the context of these occult experiences. We have to read critically.

It was only by the special intervention of the Elder Paisios that this young man survived. And I, as a pastor, could not help seeing his journey as the kind of quest for power I had avoided. It would have been a natural direction for me. But I didn't go that way. I ended up Orthodox and a priest, only because I avoided those directions. I did not want to see others relating to that quest, fascinated by it, and thereby encouraged to follow him. We have to read critically. In his introduction he says that one of the reasons he wrote the book was exactly to warn others off of his mistakes, and to indicate what ought to be affirmed. Pastorally and as a father of boys, I am not sure that that can be done.

Because, as a father, I told them what not to do. And yet they go out and do the same things that I did – because they're boys – they're young men. They have to mature by going through those experiences.

At any rate, here we have it: this is an unusual book in our tradition, but we do live in a time when foolish self-directed spiritual questing is about the only positive sign of any interest of spiritual life there seems to be. Since reading the book I've read all of Elder Paisios own Spiritual Counsels so far published, and several biographies and accounts of his life. Look for Paisios the man, whenever you read. He is available, and you can know him. Herman Middleton once told me he chose to write *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit, The Lives & Counsels of Contemporary Elders of Greece*, rather than translating a book about the elders from Greek into English, because the Greek cultural context of understanding can't help but be left behind. We will read books as Americans. We will read books according to our own understanding of the world. It would take an enormous effort – it can be done, but it would take an enormous and conscious effort to do anything else.

With most books about Elder Paisios, it does seem to me that that kind of problem is there to a certain degree, and must be allowed for. It seems to me that few readers will be able to do that. Americans read far more literally than is good for our own deeper understanding. We are used to reading for information, and we accept or reject what we read as that: I will be the judge; I will take the way I am, and I will decide what is true and what isn't. Yes, and you will fall exactly into the context of the experience of this young man, because your arrogance is the same as his arrogance. And as you experience this dramatic narrative – that's what you'll get from the book. But when you're finished, you won't realize that, because there hasn't been a ripple of disagreement between the arrogance of the young man and your own arrogance. We're used to reading for information and we accept what we read based on our own self-confidence. By doing this, we think we are making critical evaluations – according to my own spiritual point of view, according to the spiritual level that I'm at – pretty low, folks – we're not Elder Paisios. And instead, we are more susceptible to messages presented as information, including messages that are far more than that, than that than most of us realize. Most of us read naively.

Having done my homework, and having read all of the other things that I've read, I do now recognize the Elder Paisios of the young man's book as the same one whose Counsels I've read. For those who can take the reference, after meeting Elder Paisios, at length, in his counsels, the Young Man's book no longer reads for me like an Orthodox version of Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of*

Don Juan – that's what I mean by taking the reference – if you don't know what that means, then you're too young, or maybe you didn't go through a phase when you read those old '60s books. Carlos Castaneda, it's all I could think of when I first read this book. The sorcerer's contest – the young man who is going to be the sorcerer's apprentice – that's where his head was at! And that's the condition he was in when he met the Elder Paisios, and was barely saved from the flames. So it's not a book that you can, without thinking about it, or without dealing with things within yourself, just read as though you were watching an interesting spiritual movie.

Even so, Elder Paisios is, by any way of reading, only the fixed point in the book, and that is how it should be. That is part of what the young man is witnessing to. As a card-carrying old man who is at least somewhat trained in reading critically in this kind of way, I would like to try and offer some of that critical perspective. Problems lie, it seems to me, in the several unhighlighted messages that slip by us as readers, during the drama of this exciting and engaging spiritual memoir.

In his book *Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis makes a distinction between using a book as compared to receiving a book. One of Lewis' publishers summarizes what Lewis means like this: "Professor Lewis believed that... books should be judged by the kind of reading they invite." Imagine. Apply that to this book, and think about it. Lewis "defined a good book as one which can be read in a certain way, [and] a bad book as one which can only be read in another." Now the point he is making here is that, if a book can be read in only one way – it's a bad book. You're being read down the primrose path. It could be pornographic. You follow it. You go along with it. That's its only purpose. It's one-dimensional. Now it's possible that a good book can be read in that kind of way, but it can also be read in a good way. It depends on how you use the book. This book is this man's experience as someone who is completely immersed in occult life – and he meets Elder Paisios. Instead of immersing yourself in what he was immersed in at the time – if you know Elder Paisios – you can see what is actually going on – and this book is a witness to that. And it's a valuable book for that reason, but it's also very dangerous – depending on the reader. Not all books are for all readers.

Unlike a rational account of why I became Orthodox – and we've read many of those – a dramatic narrative programs a series of events for us to either use or to receive and learn from. Lewis says that, "when we 'receive' [a book], we exert our senses and imagination, and various other powers. *according to a pattern invented by the artist.*" Well, the pattern of this book wasn't invented, this was his experience, but if you go through this pattern of experience without questioning it, you're in for some difficulties. The pattern of the young man's journey is received largely uncritically. I have

spoken to them after they've read the book, and I know that they have not been critical readers. If you let yourself be carried away by the narrative, then you really experience the drama of the book. That's the nature of narrative. And the reason is, if we don't read uncritically, we cannot continue to participate in the excitement. If you don't do that you can't continue to experience the excitement of the book. In the end, it is for the critical reader to evaluate where we have been taken, what we have been shown by the writer, and why. If we do that, then we can go beyond using the book and receive the book as an account of the experience of another person – our experience of life as it has been lived by another person has been enlarged. We may take it or leave it, but our experience about life as it has been experienced has been enlarged by reading the book. If we read to simply use the book though, no evaluation takes place. We enjoy the ride and arrive, and may or may not end at the publisher's hoped for conclusion. Meanwhile, everything that has gone on in the book has been taken at face value. Our essential purpose in that case was spiritual entertainment. Not a good purpose for this book. "Using," Lewis says, "is inferior to 'reception' because if used, rather than received, [a book] merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it" [*An Experiment in Criticism*, p. 88].

I'm going to read this book, it's going to make me feel spiritual, it's going to make me feel wise, it's going to make me feel all kinds of things, and we are doomed. We have shared the delusion of the young man, and not tested it. He was tested! What's happening to *us* as we read the book? Are *we* going to meet the Elder Paisios? Or are we going to be tested, and fail – because we've followed along, and we haven't met Elder Paisios yet. You have got to read these other books – the ones that are transcriptions of Elder Paisios own words. They are wonderful. Just wonderful.

That is to say, the book can serve as a spiritual diversion. All of this is fine. Nothing wrong with it. What Charles Williams, friend of C. S. Lewis, he wrote books that are really entertaining and scary, and make you think about things; you could use this book that way, but this is an actual account. You have to be more serious with this book, it's not just for entertainment. All of this is fine except for those unhighlighted assumptions that have slipped into our uncritical acceptance. Now there are several messages in this book that I want to highlight, and I'll spend the rest of my time doing that.

I – First message: Hinduism is evil

Let's get this one out of the way quickly as the others are more related to one another. The fact is that "Hinduism" is *not* simply reducible to the worship of evil. Now for more than a decade I've taught a course in World Religions, so I admit, my perspective is far more academic than that of a young man's bold quest for spiritual experience in India. But the fact is that evil men like Babaji, the worst of the gurus in the book, can be found within the tradition of any religion, even including Orthodox Christianity. We are not evangelical fundamentalists, however, who can feel comfortable thinking of non-Christian religions in this way. Doing that departs from our tradition. In fact, at the 16th All-American Council in Seattle, one Working Group focused on our need for Cross-Cultural Education in the OCA. Fr. Michael Oleksa's book, *Another Culture, Another World*, was a touchstone for that group. Fr. Michael explains that a human culture is a shared context of experience. How do we relate to those who live within the shared context of experience of another culture? It was noted at the session that our laity (and many priests too, really), are used to getting validation in their isolated American-style individualistic ways of thinking, and that we are not responsive enough to other shared contexts of experience. And incidentally, that isolated American-style individualistic way of thinking, you read this book that way, you've got problems.

We were asked the question, at that council, "What other cultures are there in your parish? In the area your parish serves? In your diocese? How effectively do we reach out to them in words and concepts they understand, and how well do we know and address their particular needs?" Now there are Hindu families from India even in our little town of Toccoa, Georgia. Parishioners interact with them. One reader of, I'll call it the Young Man book, has told me that the book confirms for him that Hinduism is evil. Is that true? Hinduism is, no doubt, an unusual religion. There is no founder. Hinduism is unique among World Religions for its degree of continuity from its primal religious origins, down to the present. Orthodoxy has had no reformation since the beginning of the Christian faith. Hinduism has had no reformation since the beginning of primal religions. Were in some pretty earthy rooty stuff here. It is, in fact, simply the ethnic religion of the people of India. The word *Hindu* is a reference to the culture of the Indus, the *H*-indus or Hindu River valley, a culture older than the Semitic empires of the Tigris and Euphrates. The term Hindu-*ism* was applied to the religion of the people of India by their Islamic conquerors in the Eighth Century. It is comparable to using the term, "Native American Religion." It's not a body of doctrine or teaching.

At the Seattle workshop, it was explained to us that, in order to evangelize people of other cultures, we must make the effort to learn how they experience the world. We must, it was said, develop a cross-cultural communication ability. Otherwise we will become a self-enclosed enclave incapable of cross-cultural evangelization. Capable even, of across the board condemnation of entire human cultures as evil by nature. The entire sub-continent of India – washed away: evil – all those people.

Fr. Michael Oleksa describes how, when St. Innocent first came to Alaska his arrival had been foretold by the local shaman. He was received and heard by the native people. To quote Fr. Michael: "Some Westerners have always taken a very negative view of those shamans and their abilities, and they have either said, well, it was all fake, it was like magic tricks; slight of hand, or, it was all demonic, it was all evil. But I come from a tradition" – that's us folks – "I come from a tradition that says, that may be, but certain shamans, if they're in touch with spiritual reality" – yes! Is the young man? Are you? Are we when we read the book? We have to check! – "... if they're in touch with spiritual reality, might have been in touch with good spiritual reality. Not just demons, but angels. You've got to take it on a case-by-case basis. There's no way to tell in advance." The Young Man's book is a personal spiritual drama that does not have that responsibility. He is doing something else. That book is doing something else. Demonization of the culture of an entire ethnic sub-continent, ends any hope of genuine Orthodox evangelization by many readers of this book.

II. Second Message: Life is my spiritual drama

Before I became Orthodox – this was like, 1977, I was in my late twenties – like many young people, I lived my life as my own spiritual drama. And within myself of course, I always played the lead. Part of my conversion to Orthodoxy in my late twenties, was the realization that I am not the lead character in my own life. That part must be played by the Son of God. Only He is capable of fulfilling the role, which I had chosen as a teenager for myself, of the source of my own values and criteria of judgment. At the point of my conversion to Orthodox Christianity, suddenly my life was no longer, "my story." It was no longer, at least not by conviction (I say that because, just by realizing this does not completely change us)... It was no longer, at least by conviction, an ever-ending soap opera

peopled by others who played the roles of either adequate or inadequate extras in my own inner drama. We all still fall into that. Even though we know better, it happens to us all the time.

The Guru, the Young Man, and Elder Paisios is something very much like what used to be called a *bildungsroman* – a drama about the moral and psychological growth of a young man. It is the book's romantic drama that gives it such a strong appeal for so many. The drama enables the reader to identify with its naïve hero and, as Lewis would say, "use" the book as our own spiritual fantasy. Like any scary movie, as we read we find ourselves thinking, "don't go down there," "don't open that door!" Don't leave the Holy Mountain for India, you idiot! That is the kind of spiritual drama found in this fascinating book. In the end though, I must admit, life is in fact a spiritual drama, though few of us realize that fact, and we need to be more serious about it instead of letting it be created into my own fantasy. This is not the natural context of Orthodoxy – to understand things from an occult point of view. And plug in things from here and there as "roles" – the guys in the white hats. That's unrealistic. That's delusion. So we must put that down as one of the strengths and weaknesses of this book: the fact is that life is a spiritual drama, but then on the other hand, we can't just participate as "avatars" of some kind of vision of ourselves as heroes.

III. Third Message – Christian elders are simply the best gurus

Reading *The Gurus, the Young Man, and Elder Paisios*, introduces Elder Paisios to us as a character in the spiritual story of the young man. But Elder Paisios' own words are available to us in abundance, though unfortunately not yet as readily available books. Most of these books are quite expensive. Maybe we need them in our parish libraries. There are, so far, four volumes of his transcribed words. A final fifth volume will eventually appear. The second in the series, *Spiritual Awakening, especially*, taken along with the third, *Spiritual Struggle*, reveal the humanity and accessibility of a man, who is obviously one of the great saints of our time. He was and remains a source of spiritual wisdom and guidance directly relevant to our own spiritual life. If we are seeking more than spiritual diversion, if we seek guidance by confrontation with the spiritual realities of life – so we can deal with spiritual reality. If we are seeking spiritual reality. If we are seeking guidance by confrontation with the spiritual realities of life – Elder Paisios is there for us.

In contrast to the dramatic parade of evil in the Young Man's book, though, Elder Paisios' own practice, was never to use the name of The Tempter. His mother taught him to do this. Following her

advice, he says we should avoid even *naming* the enemy of our salvation, much less dramatizing his works. Instead we should refer to *tangaalki*. Which Fr. Peter Heers says can most easily be translated into English as, "the troublemaker," or "the one who should be out of here." This refuses to give the enemy the honor of being directly referred to. This term was uniquely Elder Paisios' own. Another aspect of this term is captured from a similar Greek word meaning, "a rancid stink." You don't want to lift evil up and make it seem magnificent. In Alcoholics Anonymous terms, the words of the Enemy, then, could be rightly called "stinking thinking." Elder Paisios' own practice here is quite unlike the Young Man's writing, which dramatically evokes our experience of evil and its power. The Elder refers guardedly, yet disrespectfully to the evil one by calling him "a stinking thought" in the mind. He does not even give him the honor of naming him – acknowledging him. Instead of seeking him out to test his power, he calls him, "the one who should be out of here"

And here is another important thing to keep in mind: when we are dealing with a holy person we ought no longer to be dealing with our own thoughts about holiness. This I think is really important: when you meet Elder Paisios it's about meeting Elder Paisios – and you will meet him in his writings. At that point, we probably find ourselves confronted by the most Christ-like person we have ever known. It is important for us to meet *them*, and to try and escape the filter of our own ideas. We don't want to take them and make a place for them in our own imagination – make them into an idol. Take ourselves off the hook as far as dealing with our own spiritual life. We ought not evaluate them according to their usefulness to us, as if they were some holy object, rather than the real persons they are. We are dealing with a *person*.

It may sound surprising, but for some or even many of us, that can be a new experience. Here, at once and for all, is a person who *cannot* simply and easily be dealt with as an object among other objects in a world where I am at the center – the hero of my own drama. He is obviously not a minor character. A holy man or woman is not "some-one-thing," for my own use, satisfaction or frustration. This is a person who, at least not without our own self-chosen willfulness, *cannot* be objectified – treated like an object. He can escape any attempt of ours to do that – if its for our own best interest. And he will know that, and deal with us accordingly, as he did with this young man.

A holy man, I deeply suspect, is more particularly and specifically themselves than the rest of us are – and that is almost exactly the opposite of what our secular minds would expect. "I want some holy guru." This is very important: a saint is always a specific person. Criminals, or those who define themselves by missing the mark, are become more and more the same as one another. But each

saint is themselves. They fulfill the fact that God created human beings as particular individuals, but all with a shared nature in common, and a common human destiny: for each of us to become more and more like Christ-God.

So what do we do when we are confronted by a holy person? Unfortunately what many of us may try to do is to act inwardly in order to objectify the holy person anyway. We may try to make them serve the purposes of our own self-oriented piety. We treat the man or the woman, as a living holy object. It is a kind of self-defense mechanism. The result is that we give the elder pain by treating them as holy *themselves*. No longer referring us to Christ. No longer referring us to God. Charlatans of course, will love this, but a true elder will try to unbalance our inappropriate reaction and refer us to Christ. And, if we cling to our inappropriate reaction, our inappropriate and idolatrous worship can seriously unbalance our faith and disorient it from God. So then, what response *is* appropriate? What will *not* unbalance us?

We might choose this way of thinking: This is the first time I have been given the grace to see a human person as they truly are. This humble and saintly man or woman cannot be treated as I have habitually treated others all my life. We might here recall what C. S. Lewis said about what this would be like – that it would be all we could do to keep from falling down before them; if not outwardly, then inwardly. Has this person given me any *encouragement* to do such a blasphemous thing. No? Then it comes from me, not them. They well know well how there is something in us that can shift into a focus on them, however much they might protest. Their protestations themselves might only serve to encourage many of us.

For some of us, it may be a danger to our faith to be confronted by a holiness we are not ready to know and accept rightly. A man like Elder Paisios – the man, the woman – will protect us, but that's all we've got to depend on. A man like Elder Paisios, fortunately, is wise enough to deal with someone like the author of our book. But, why is it that some of us may be like this when meeting holy people, while others seem not to be? Why *is* it that not all books are for everyone? It may be that for those who are not in danger of idolatry in the presence of holy persons, seeing others as they truly are is not so novel an experience as it is for others of us.

Those, for example, who already love the poor and the weak, and those the world thinks of no account, are better prepared than the rest of us to meet a person who is not just poor and meek as the consequence of an unchosen and world-imposed poverty, but instead, a person who has freely chosen the "better part," and has meekly lived at the feet of Christ for a lifetime. But those who

habitually use other persons, or even the images of other persons; perhaps in church or on perhaps on the internet, are likely to fall into a new, and at first seemingly acceptable, idolatry. First comes the fall into idolatry, and then our pride is somehow suddenly restored. So meeting genuinely holy people, even in books, is dangerous. We dare not judge them by their usefulness to us. They will not *make* any judgment on us, but even so, we are judged by how different we are from them. That will be the reality. One day that it is how it will be when we meet Christ and meet Him inescapably.

IV. Ethnic Americanism: individualism & the monastic antidote

The highest accomplishment of *The Gurus, the Young Man, and Elder Paisios*, is its honesty as a memoir. The storyteller does not spare himself. During the story, he presents himself as the fool he was. The book's appeal to Fr. Alexis Trader, who translated the book into English, may I suspect in part have been its accuracy as an account of the young man's cognitive *maladaptive schemata* – what, back in the day, we used to call the mental tape recording of past experiences that we play, over and over again. In this book it is the repeated "tape" of the young man. This man's tape had, after all, been about the pursuit of occult power. The book is, from that point of view, a story of the young man's struggle to respond to Elder Paisios in a new way. That's why it's so difficult... and to abandon his old pattern of thinking, along with its fixation on power. In his *Spiritual Counsels*, though not in this book, Elder Paisios talks about making the mind a machine for good thoughts.

Your thoughts *do* determine your life. So be careful about what repeating "tape," what schema, what typical way of thinking, guides your life. Reject the one that dramatically guides the young man. He wants you to! Barely in time, the young man struggles to repent of his way of thinking. But it must be admitted that, that way of thinking dominates, and in fact, *IS* the story in this book. We experience the story largely through the perspective of the young man's power-seeking way of thinking. It ought not be our way of thinking. These are the reasons why this book is not a book for everyone. To benefit from the book, we must see ourselves, or have already have seen in our life earlier, through that false way of thinking ourselves.

Some readers this book will set Elder Paisios, and possibly all saints, up in a place of a power so high and far away from ourselves and our lives as we are living them, that they remain and beyond our reach. Safely, for us, beyond our reach. That is how saints, and even Christ Himself, have been thought of in the West in times past. Such a false separation of the saints, like Elder Paisios, and even of monastics in general, who are seriously engaged in the spiritual life, from how we see

ourselves and how we permit ourselves to live, can seem to justify and affirm my continued living at a distance from God. God, and His saints, are "up there." But here in my life, though I venerate them, I am also safe from them. They are, thankfully, powers as far beyond my reach as I am beyond theirs. The holy saints. They are so far beyond me that I am safe to live a worldly life. They may just seem holy ones available for my pious worship, and for my requests for their miraculous help. But their way of life is safely beyond me.

The greatest shortcoming of this book, it seems to me, is that the Elder Paisios essentially becomes a character in the spiritual drama of the young man. Still, to use Lewis' distinction between using or receiving a book: his book is best read in order to receive the another person, the author. This is a book better received as a witness than used as an exciting ride. Also, receive the author's experience of what it might be like to meet a person who is a fixed point, Elder Paisios himself, in the midst of spiritual chaos.

To truly meet the Elder ourselves though, we must turn elsewhere. Read his *Spiritual Counsels*, and you will find the Elder Paisios to be among the most accessible and helpful of all saints. You will then fully meet the holy man described on the back cover of *The Gurus, the Young Man, and the Elder Paisios*. When we objectify holy men or women and cast them into idols, we miss the fact that, like us they are human beings, only more so. Unlike us, their lives are lived fully and intensely.

Elder Paisios evidently, did not speak to the young man about *philotimo*. Maybe he was not yet ready for that. But in his spiritual counsels, it is one of the Elder's most favorite words. Before Christ, *philotimo* meant respect for, honor of, and loyalty to our own humanity – to the high human nature we share with other human beings. Jesus Christ, by fully revealing that true humanity, raises *philotimo* to a higher key. Christian *philotimo* is a matter of the honor of our human comradeship with Christ-God. We cannot betray this, and Him, without betraying ourselves utterly.

We must remember that we are created in the image and likeness of God. *Philotimo* is carrying out of that remembrance. It is the Orthodox Christian answer to our fallen need for pride. Jesus Christ has taken on and has fulfilled our human *philotimo*, and we can come to share this with him by gathering it during our lives as bees gather honey. We do this by how we live and how we think in our hearts. For Elder Paisios *philotimo* is not an idea, it is not an abstract ideal. That is because he has it in spades! It is what he is all about. A Christian *philotimo* can govern and regulate our family life, and all our dealings with others. Come to know Elder Paisios by reading his counsels,

and you will come to understand Christian *philotimo*. *Spiritual Struggle*, the 3rd volume of Elder Paisios' *Spiritual Counsels*, is a training manual in Christian *philotimo*. This man is no distant saint. He is a down-to-earth man of high and humble spiritual nobility. He is so accessible as to constantly convict and shame by his gentleness. If read him humbly, we understand him; almost against our will. In him we do not find high-flown spritual concepts and ideas. He get to you right where you're at. And we find it not within us to be able to respond to him adequately. The result, is humility. He spurs us on to abandon ways of living not worthy of ourselves as bearers of Christ.

We require just enough *philotimo* to include ourselves somewhere on the same spiritual spectrum of life as that which Elder Paisios struggles to fulfill. We are engaged in the same spiritual work. Our own little effort is the same effort as his. Its not, them up there and us down here. Being a human being is about the same thing for both of us. And they are doing it. And we aren't. But that doesn't get us off scott-free. So we don't have to participate in the struggle of being a human being. While he may live at the ultraviolet blue end of that spectrum – near divinity, and while we may live at the infra-red end of our passions, our spiritual life in common is lived within the same reality of our shared human struggle toward God. Such men and women are true spiritual fathers and mothers to us, but they are brothers and sisters too. If we dare to join our own little efforts to theirs, they will welcome us to our great benefit.

Monasticism is today of a special and specific interest to us in America because it is the only concrete answer to the dilemma of our own radical individualism. Our commonly shared American culture is one of exactly that radical individualism. Our American spiritual philosophy is very simple. I am unlike anyone else who has ever lived and who lives today, therefore my values can be self-chosen and different from those of any others. What common humanity? What target that I may have missed? Not for me! But this is only partly true, and in the end, it is a total lie. It is true that no two women, no two men, from the beginning of time until now has been identical. We're all individuals. We can't escape the fact that we are all individual human beings. We must work out our salvation in fear and trembling – ourselves, first-hand – everybody . Every human being who has ever lived has been some one individual person, each with their own limited and particular capacities, abilities, and personality. But for any human being to take that fact, and to use it to try to justify some kind of a uniquely individual vision of their own values, their own destiny, their own individual calling to be themselves is individual *-ism*. A life lived according to this philosophy revolves the endless whirlpool of that lone person's own passions. And now you've got human chaos. You've got human beings who

have forgotten what it *means* to be a human being. Such people, even if they look to Christ, will not see the gold standard of a common humanity, but will see someone leading him or her in a unique direction peculiar to themselves.

Finally, there is this: we have long assumed that America cannot be converted as Greece and Russia were converted, that is, as a people. We have assumed that we can only convert Americans by persuasion, one by one. But what if we could deal directly with the radical root of what it means to be an American? It is the meaning of radical individualism itself that must be converted. And the good news is that this task has already been accomplished, not at an abstract level, not at the level of ideas, but at a concrete level. Elder Paisios is simply himself. His individuality reveals God.

It seems to me that monasticism, that is, the fulness of Orthodox spiritual life, is exactly how Orthodoxy deals with individualism. Faith in individual *-ism* is the radical idea that each one of us is the center of our own life and values. That is a lie. But it is true that each one of us is a particular individual human being. An active Orthodox spiritual life is how the Orthodox Christian faith deals with the fact that every human being *is* an individual. When a man, or a woman is called to confront himself or herself directly, never alone, but always within the divine-human ethos that is the *ecclesia* – our common life – it is always a matter of some particular individual's ascetic struggle – including yours and mine. This path is anything but individual *-istic*! In fact, every struggling Christian person includes all of us. Everytime someone is struggling it includes all of us, and our own spritual lives, as compatriots in every battle. We are never alone in our struggle. It is a battlle to remain true to our love of and communion with others, and with Christ-God. Saints are the fruit of such battles. The wisdom and uniqueness of every monastic saint is a source of strength for every member of parish life, because their struggle is our struggle.

Each one of us united to the same life lived by the Saints, by the Theotokos – the life of Christ-God. To be a Christian is to desire to be like Christ so much that we begin to struggle to live that life, one event at a time. Doing that is what a Christian is. That is what Elder Paisios did. We can't define Christians abstractly. The Truth is a person. And the revelation of the truth is always a revelation by the face of some person who is like that Truth – the one who is the Truth. To be a Christian is never an idea, it is always one man or one woman like Christ. This is the Orthodox answer to the centrality of individual *-ism* in our own time.

It is the very fact of your and my own specific and concrete life as an individual human being that enables you or me to know God. If there is a knowledge of God it is somebody who is knowing

God. The knowledge of God is not about abstract ideas. It is not abstract ideas, or beautiful thoughts, that enable a human being to know God. Our very specificity and limitation as to our life as the particular person that we are, is the path to the glory that is the knowledge of God. That's the answer to individual *-ism*. All of this is because God humbled Himself to become one of us. When we look toward the brightness of the saints, we see Christ-God revealed. After two millennia there are so very many thousands of true human beings, and such an incredible variety among the saints, that no human being who turns away from themselves can fail to see the light of Christ shining into this world, directly from the Kingdom of God.

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