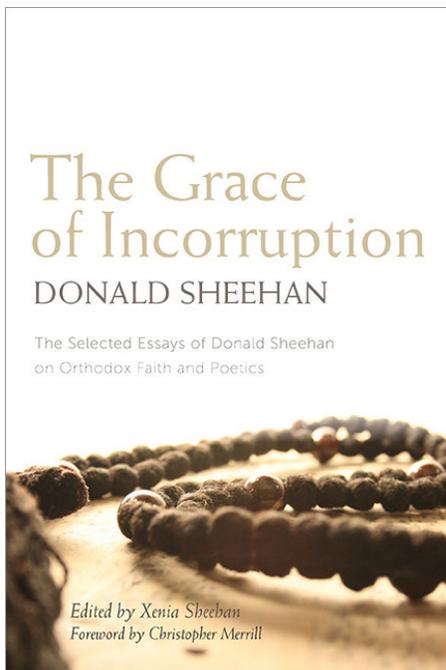


Donald Sheehan, *The Grace of Incorruption: The Selected Essays of Donald Sheehan on Orthodox Faith and Poetics*. Edited by Xenia Sheehan. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015. ISBN-10: 1612616011, ISBN-13: 978-1612616018



By Fr. Anthony Estabrooks

This remarkable new publication, put out five years after the author's death, came into this reviewer's hands during Orthodox Christian Holy Passover (Easter) season. Indeed the collection of essays gathered in it has a common underlying theme: the overcoming of death in laying down our lives for others as the means to incorruption and resurrection life.

This journey of life through death as the means to life, keeps surfacing through:

- the author's exploration of poetry and literature, ancient and modern,
- biographical sketches from his own astonishing unexpected journey into, and within, the Orthodox Christian faith,
- his encounters with and meditation on teachings of the Orthodox ascetic prayer tradition ancient and modern,

- his notes, collected and organized by his wife, which he had been developing toward publication of a book on the Psalms.

Nowhere else have I yet met, within Orthodox literature in North America, this wonderful kind of poetic prose and this mystical "from the inside out" way of moving seamlessly between what might be considered "secular" and what might be considered "religious" aspects of life. Within one essay this seamless thread may include a personal experience, an event, a passage of literature or poetry, and a plunge into the deep waters of ancient spiritual writers. Moreover these details may re-appear unexpectedly in other essays, in a fresh way, without the least ripple of disturbance, as if they were a necessary part of the flow of the whole collection, as well as of each essay.

The epigraph for this collection of essays is a quotation from Archimandrite Vasileios (*Beauty and Hesychia in Athonite Life*):

To die, to be buried, to depart . . . And yet to have lived and died in such a way that your presence, discretely and from a distance as if a fragrance from someone absent, can give others the possibility to breathe divine fragrance!

In ways that are wonderful, but seemingly perfectly obvious from an Orthodox "in-side out" experience of the whole of reality, Sheehan finds this theme to be central to all aspects of life and all times and places; for example, in the whole of Fyodor Dostoevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which, Sheehan notes, has as an epigraph for the whole novel "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

Similarly, in Sheehan's short, intense opening account of his childhood with his violent, alcoholic father, and his much later forgiveness of his father at the latter's grave-site, and subsequent events, he ends with his discovery of, and entrance into the Orthodox Church, through the sudden appearance and

autonomous working of the Jesus prayer in his heart, which he came to understand to be a gift of his father to him from beyond the grave.

One final example of this obvious, but seemingly natural, theme occurs in the second part of the book, which consists of essays from his detailed notes on chanting the psalms, which require more effort to absorb. Sheehan presents from both his experience of chanting the psalms for many years, and from his meditative and scholarly studies on the psalms, the view that Psalm 118 is explicitly a condensed summary of what the Book of Psalms is as a whole; that is the prayer of David, as figure of Christ, constantly overcoming death through death. He understands the chanting of the psalms to be a powerful force in our hearts, implanting and guiding our journey through temptation and death to incorruption.

Two final comments on a personal note.

Since this book is written by an accomplished teacher of literature, almost as poetic prose (especially part one), it is most engaging and effortless to read. Yet it keeps calling this reviewer back to re-read with more attention and to discover more depth and richness on the theme of the essays. The author seems to me to have experienced the Orthodox faith as an illumination and connection with the whole of existence, from which any subject, experience, or challenge which we might encounter in our human journey in this world and beyond, presents us with a bottomless well of Beauty, Wisdom, Love and Redemption upholding all. This approach highlights what I believe is needed in North American Orthodox Christianity today, and is slowly in progress, which is the indigenization of the Orthodox faith in Canada and south of the border. What I mean by "indigenization" is exemplified beautifully by the wholistic integration and experience of life, all of which is continually revealing and leading us to communion with God, through death to incorruption.

Secondly, I found this book to be a shock from its beginning pages, in that, though in very different ways to my own journey into the depths of the Orthodox faith and its experience of reality a few years after Sheehan, it nevertheless

paralleled my totally unexpected and "accidental" discovery of the Orthodox ascetic prayer tradition and the Jesus prayer, my sudden entrance into the Orthodox faith, and the growing discovery of the integrating factor of all our experience of human existence to be the deepening and repeated journey through death to life.

However, Sheehan's journey of discovery from within Orthodoxy of the world and life in literature, in the psalms, in life-experiences and experiences of death, so parallel in some ways to my own, opens forth very new and wonderful considerations, which help me to understand better what I have experienced, which is that the purpose and meaning of human life is to discover what Sheehan restates in so many ways and contexts in his essays; that is, continually dying to ourselves so that others may live.

I owe a debt to the author, who seems, despite his death in 2010, more present than departed this life, through his life story and these writings. Also I commend his devoted wife, Xenia and others who felt that the labour was worth it to share with others her husband's life and his writings, in this very unique format. Personally, this book came as an unexpected gift to me.

About the reviewer: Father Anthony (Spencer) Estabrooks, MA, MDiv, is Director of St. Arseny Orthodox Christian Theological Institute, in Winnipeg, and a parish priest of the Theotokos of the Life-giving Spring Mission, in Winnipeg, Manitoba.