

The Business of Prayer and Love of Our Brother

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A wild stock market, Armani-suited bankers glued to shifting interest rates, reams of mortgage fine print – can things of spirit, normally associated with quiet and the renunciation of the world, be explained in commercial terms? The answer is yes, for we see it in the parables the Lord spoke. We also see it in the writings of holy persons such as St. Ignatii Brianchaninov, St. Seraphim of Sarov, and Elder Porphyrios where we find strong references to economic phrases such as “a mortgage of the heart,” “the acquisition” of the Holy Spirit, and “the expenditure” of love. They were quite free in using worldly analogies of a commercial type to make particular spiritual points knowing that anyone mailing a letter or buying a box of laundry soap or investing in mutual funds has experience with this world and can identify with it.

St. Seraphim, in his conversation with Nikolai Motovilov, says:

Now I will tell you about myself, poor Seraphim. I come from a merchant family in Kursk. So when I was not yet in the monastery we used to trade with goods which brought us the greatest profit. Act like that, my dear....If we understand the commandments of Christ and the Apostles aright, our business as Christians consists not in increasing the number of our good deeds which are only the means of furthering the purpose of our Christian life, but in deriving

from them the utmost profit, that is, in acquiring the most abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹

He then discusses just how these profits are to be shared freely: “for earthly riches when distributed are diminished, yet when the heavenly riches of God’s grace are distributed, the more they increase in him who distributes them.”²

“Mortgage of the heart” is a spiritual concept coined by St. Ignatii Brianchaninov. Mortgages, we know personally, as they usually follow on the heels of our student loans! The term *mortgage* is associated with dead-risk and is defined as “establishing a claim in advance upon.” To whom does Brianchaninov say our heart is to be mortgaged? It is mortgaged to our sister and brother. How does it become mortgaged? Through prayer: constant prayer. He writes “by unceasing prayer curiosity, mistrustfulness and suspicion are destroyed, and because of this, other people begin to seem good in our eyes. From such a mortgage of the heart in their favour, love of mankind is born.”³ Brianchaninov is saying that through prayer we come to accept and live with the claim that others make upon our hearts. He is saying that God literally changes our perception of others as we pray.

How does this mortgage find a place in us? From Brianchaninov’s words we get the idea that the love of mankind born of prayer comes upon us almost without knowing it, in a softness of heart that changes our views. It is grace that brings the softness, in fact that *is* the softness, not something born of ourselves. To trace steps backwards in this mystical circle (if we dare to speak of walking in this context, all things being one and joined) love of mankind is

¹ *Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 1 (New Valaam Monastery: St Herman Press, 1991), p. 94.

² *Ibid.*

³ He adds, “He who prays without ceasing dwells constantly in the Lord, knows the Lord as God, acquires fear of Him, by fear enters into purity, and by purity into divine love. The love of God fills him with the gifts of the Spirit, whose temple he is.” *The Art of Prayer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 84.

born of love of the Lord, which in turn is closely linked to our “love-communication” with Him: prayer, whether in words or in silence. Or as Elder Porphyrios states, Scripture, the Psalms and the poetic canons of the Church gladden one’s soul and sweeten the hearing. Then one is filled with divine enthusiasm, the soul becomes worthy to receive the grace of God and God Himself sanctifies the soul.⁴ The sanctified and grace-touched soul loves as it is being loved.

A speculation arises just where this love will manifest itself on the horizontal plane. The wind blows where it will. The Lord’s love being personal and near, it reaches to those closest to us, but in some cases it goes far beyond to benefit global neighbours. The working of love is somehow expressed in deeds of love that combine the elements of the larger church vision, the investment and energy of personal talents and a blessing to undertake them.

A mortgage of heart and love of mankind born of prayer presupposes three things:

1) We have a burning desire to relate to God, to communicate with Him “in growing unceasingness.” Not less and less, but more and more loving the God of mercy, of might and power – the One Who knows our lives intimately and helps us infinitely. This excludes the feeling that we have reached *It*, that we are comfortable just where we are. The Fathers teach us that a sense of spiritual satiety is entirely illusory, that there must always be within us a spiritual watchfulness and vigilance, a desire for a deepening relationship.

2) We are willing to do whatever it takes to pray – to overcome self love, boredom, despondency, distractions of the world, extreme busyness, bad news, heaviness of flesh and spirit, to work within hard circumstances – to ready the heart to pray and pray deeper. We are willing to learn to pray, to take heaven by violence, to

⁴ Harvey, D., *Wounded by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios* (Evia, Greece, 2005), 164.

undertake positive initiatives, to eliminate the unnecessary and to refocus our gaze so that we can pray.

3) We acknowledge once for all that it is His love flowing in our veins, not our own. He is giving the love and loving the others through us, for which we are glad. That we can force love on our own is analogous to trying to rise by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, or to attempt to follow some path of programmed self-help or self-actualization which is completely foreign to the Orthodox Way.

The beauty of Brianchaninov's "mortgage of the heart" is that it offers hope if we find ourselves in a situation where we just cannot seem to love. The temptation is to stew over it all, or worse, to fall into the swirling stew ourselves. Prayer? Suddenly it's a distant and foreign thing. The thought of praying unceasing resounds in our dry-and-drier hearts like a bitter joke. Before long, trouble on the horizontal level of life brings the temptation to stop praying, to see oneself instantly as displeasing to God, even rejected by Him. We turn in on ourselves. How quickly we forget, "I will be with him in trouble!" (Psalm 91:15). In fear that we have sinned, we feel an urge to hide from God, instead of turning to Him with our confusions and troubles. We go horizontal instead of vertical, we concentrate on "he said, she said, they said" or even worse, "I think that they think that I think...." in a scramble of thoughts and a rapid rush toward dead ends. We also talk, for the world says "talk out your problems." Talk show mania treats this as the great panacea for whatever ails. But without God and without peace, it is simply an unending verbal treadmill.

In reality, the coin needs to be flipped over. Brianchaninov says, we need to talk, but we need to talk to God. Prayer to the God of love will begin to take care of everything. Clothing ourselves in simplicity, we must force ourselves to pray. Sometimes even the memory of prayer, when persons seemed good to us in the light of God's love, might grant us strength to turn again to the Lord in the particular situation facing us. Then we must steel ourselves, keep trusting and

praying. According to Brianchaninov, this will enable us to experience improvement in our relationships with our brother and sister from our side of things, a “working out of a wordless miracle” deep within our hearts, independent of forcing circumstances to change. Our inner perception of those around us will change.

Simplicity acts on prayer and prayer on simplicity. Prayer and practical good works, he says, simplify our life, and keep us from having wandering thoughts, distractions and “devising plans about” ourselves and our neighbours. Simplicity brings freedom as we find we have no axes to grind and no sense of agenda. Then breathing fresh air, it is not surprising that when others flub up, it is easier to let love cover it, to see the larger picture and not try to rush in to straighten it out ourselves. By this we can avoid personal rescue missions that often end up in nothing but temporary behavioral control. But the prerequisite for this glorious freedom and liberation, he clearly states, is to have the desire to pray and actually to pray, to open ourselves to having the love of mankind born in us with its grace-filled, softened perception (in Russian, *umilienie*).

When we have found mercy ourselves, we can afford to be magnanimous with others. God seems to expect of us unending “70 x 7” magnanimity? When we are preoccupied with the funeral in our own souls, we fail to be busy with the illness in the soul of one next to us. When we know God is being patient with us, we realize that we have to be patient with others. As Sts. Seraphim, Ignatii and Porphyrios say, when we can scarcely breathe for beholding Christ’s sufferings on the cross for us, and tears flow with abandon, let us not be surprised that the Lord allows us to taste His sufferings, to be put in a situation where we must love and forgive, even if we receive nothing from the one whom we love or forgive. And then the Lord Himself will console us, and from this consolation more prayer will be born, and more love, and more giving, in a wondrously infinite circle.

How do we grow in relating to the Lord of love, to pour out our hearts in worship and praise? We need to prepare, as St. Theophan of

Vysha says, a place at the feet of the Lord to which we run in time of trouble. Talk to the Lord simply, he says, just as a child would talk when hungry or thirsty or hurting. Talk and listen to God. Porphyrios emphasizes allowing the words of prayers and poetic canons to echo in the heart, pausing at the parts that speak, drinking deeply of them. The saints promise God will come as we seek.

From this vertical line of right relationship (God-to-man) will come the horizontal line of right relationship (man-with-man). The two bars, together, will form a cross. And love for our brother will be revealed as the zero-risk mortgage it really is, a sure profit in the long-run for all involved. The saints concede it is difficult. Is it impossible? No. Otherwise, the Lord would not have told us through the Apostle, “pray without ceasing.”

Again we hear of debt, in the words “owe no man anything but to love one another.”⁵ The lives of the saints prove that “maximum gain for your effort” is indeed possible and yields good dividends. May their prayers help us to attain to this increase!

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⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Romans 13:8.