

THE SPIRITUAL FATHER
According to
Orthodox Tradition



*«Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός»
(Ἰωάν. 10, 11).*

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FORWARD

The initial text of this booklet was made available to me by Father Timothy Pavlatos of Holy Trinity Cathedral, Phoenix, Arizona. The original Greek text is still available on the internet under Mirobilios—digital library of the church of Greece, presented by Father Symeon P. Koutsas. In the last several decades we have been blessed by the resurgence of a healthy element of Orthodox spirituality, mainly due to translations of traditional and patristic writings and to the establishment of monasticism which have been instrumental in leading many of our Orthodox to a more serious sacramental life.

The life giving sacrament of confession, dangerously underestimated for many decades is now, once again, at the “front burner” of the parish life. However, the subject of spiritual fatherhood is not well understood by many of our Orthodox and not a few times abused by our contemporary clergy. We often hear about today’s shepherds who will use the pulpit to control, oppress, and force Christians to come only to them for confession! We often see people condemned to spiritual infamy due to a misunderstood “blind obedience” to their parish priest! Not a few times we see and hear of confessors “competing and advertising” for spiritual children. The above are signs of immature and unseasoned fatherhood, which proves to be injurious to the body of Christ.

Being aware of these problematic situations in the life of the church, I was truly delighted to translate this text at the prompting of Father Timothy. Special thanks are due to the editing work of Christina Bourgeois of Marietta, Georgia. Finally, I thank God for providing me with three great fathers (who kept me from ruining my life)—my biological father, Stephanos who slept in the Lord on Lazarus Saturday 1986, Father Confessor Nicholas Kossis of Easton, Pennsylvania, and Elder (Geronta) Athanasios Mitilinaos of Larissa, Greece.

I was writing during Holy Week 2001

Constantine Zalalas

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Orthodox Tradition

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According to the Light of Orthodox Tradition

Adapted from Symeon P. Koutsas

The Significance of the Relationship

Every human being has a father according to the flesh, a biological father to whom he owes his biological arrival to life. The Christian, however, in addition to his natural or biological father, also has a spiritual father. The spiritual father is he who gave him spiritual rebirth, who introduced him to the life in Christ, and who guides him on the path of salvation. The natural birth brings us into life; it makes us members of the human race. Our rebirth in Christ, however, makes us members in the community of our church and offers us the ability to live a life in Christ. Symeon the New Theologian, one of the most genuine advocates of spiritual fatherhood to whom we will refer often in this text, writes to one of his spiritual children, "*We conceived you through teaching, we travelled you through repentance, we gave you birth through patience, labors, great pains, and daily tears*" (*Epistle 3, 1-3*). As we observe here, spiritual birth parallels natural birth; the second one, mirroring the first, includes three stages: conception, gestation, and birth.

In the early church, where the vast majority of the faithful received Holy Baptism as adults, the spiritual father (for the Christian) was the ecclesiastical shepherd, the one who was in charge of his catechesis, who would take him through the sacrament of Baptism, and who would then continue to be his guiding hand in the life of Christ. Today, since most of us receive our baptism as infants, the Christian's spiritual father is not necessarily the priest who baptized him but the one who at some point in his life "touched him," "reached him," and began to guide him on the journey toward a conscious faith and a responsible Christian life.

The example of the Apostle Paul, the spiritual father of the Christians of Corinth, along with those in many other cities, allows us to see very clearly the mystery of spiritual fatherhood in all its heavenly splendor. Addressing the Christians of Corinth, he writes, "*For if you have myriads of tutors in Christ, yet you have not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I begot you through the gospel*" (1 Corinthians 4-14). For the Christians of Corinth, the holy Apostle Paul was not simply a tutor or a teacher in Christ, but a father, he who gave them spiritual rebirth and who introduced them to the family of the redeemed. His apostolic heart was ablaze from the love for his spiritual children, and this Christian, fatherly love maintained a central position and was the primary force behind his apostolic concerns. He wished to offer them not only the gospel but his soul as well

as he writes in 1 Thessalonians 2-8, "Thus being desirous of you we were well pleased to have imparted to you not only the gospel of God but also our own souls because you have become beloved to us." He was laboring painstakingly to form Christ inside them (Galatians 4:19): "My little children for whom I again travail until Christ should be formed in you!" He never stopped counseling "each and every one" with tears, striving for their spiritual development and for their stability in the life of Christ (Acts 20:13; Ephesians 4: 12-16). This Pauline perception, which serves as a milestone for the content and essence of spiritual fatherhood, permeates the entire Orthodox tradition.



How Spiritual Fatherhood Developed within the Historical Journey of the Church

As time went on and the church began to develop as an institution, the establishment of the spiritual father also took root and developed. It is true that the desert cultivated this relationship more so than the parish, and from the space of the monastery, it spread out, infusing the spiritual life of the entire church. Consequently, terms often found in ascetic literature and in the writings of the desert fathers, "abba" and "geronta" in the Greek Orthodox tradition, "starets" in the language of our Russian Orthodox brothers, are familiar to all of us.

What is the criterion that moves someone to exercise the position of "geronta" (elder)? Who authorizes and institutes someone to act as a spiritual father? These questions have been asked and answered by one of the well-known bishops of Orthodox diaspora, Kallistos Ware, who stresses the charismatic character of spiritual fatherhood (*The Kingdom of God Within Us*, "Akritas" Athens, 1994 pg. 117). From his answer, I will relate his most basic positions:

"The spiritual father, the elder, is essentially a charismatic and prophetic personality who has received this liturgical function from the direct energy of the Holy Spirit. He is not ordained by a man's hand but by the hand of God. This happens to be an expression of the church as 'fact' and not some institution or office of the church. However, the two elements in the life of the church, the prophetic and the established, are not necessarily independent of each other, but the one develops within the other one, and it becomes intertwined with it. Consequently, the function of the elder, while charismatic in essence, also relates to a clear and specific function within the institutional place of the church: that of the priest confessor...Even though the sacrament of confession provides a great opportunity for spiritual guidance, the function of the elder does not coincide with that of the confessor. The elder advises and councils not only during confession but in many other situations. It is true that even though a confessor must always be a

*priest, a simple monk can be an elder... Now if the elder is not ordained, and not necessarily positioned by a specific action of the official hierarch, how does he proceed to assume such a responsibility? Within the continuity of the life of the Christian community, it becomes evident to the faithful people of God—the true guard of Holy Tradition—that this or that person has the grace of the spiritual fatherhood or motherhood. Afterwards, with a rather free and unofficial, unpretentious way, people begin to flock to him or her for advice and direction” (Kallistos Ware, *The Kingdom of God Within Us*, pg. 117-119).*



The Mission of the Spiritual Father

What exactly is the mission of the spiritual father? St. Basil tells us that it is “*The caretaking of souls having been bought by the blood of Christ*” (Basil the Great, *Ethics*). The spiritual father is our guide in the life of Christ Jesus, the doctor of the soul who “*with much compassion and according to the statutes of the Lord’s teachings heals the passions and helps his spiritual child to achieve health in Christ, living faith, and a solid spiritual life.*” If the definition and purpose of Christianity is the imitation of Christ as the Great Basil teaches, then “*those who were entrusted with the guidance of the*

ones yet weak in faith by their mediation ought to help advance them to the likeness in Christ.” The spiritual fathers ought to show them the path that leads to communion with Christ, to theosis; consequently, our spiritual fathers are experienced guides and ever-so-tireless supporters.

However, for a shepherd to serve in such a lofty calling, he needs to be truly spiritual, an organ “*completely and harmoniously tuned to the beat of the Holy Spirit*,” according to the writings of St. Gregory the Theologian. Only he who knows something from experience can in turn give to others. Thus, before the spiritual father can guide and assist others to the Christian life, he first needs to live it himself. He must be a “prime example to the believers” (1 Tim 4:2) and “fully living the gospel.” According to Basil the Great, “*his very life must reflect a prime example by following every commandment of the Lord.*” His example must speak louder than his words. He must inspire with his virtuous lifestyle. He needs to build people up with his love and fatherly affection since according to St. John of the Ladder, “*a true shepherd shows forth or is proven through his love, because the Great Shepherd was crucified out of love (For the Shepherd 24 pg. 88, 1177B).*”



Two Basic Characteristics: Clairvoyance and Love

Many pages would be needed if we wanted to describe the personhood of the spiritual father as it has emerged over the centuries in our ecclesiastical tradition and if we were to number the specific gifts characterizing the genuine elder. However, we will very briefly refer to two of his most basic gifts. The first is clairvoyance, discretion *"in his ability to penetrate through the senses into the deep secrets of the heart of the other person, to understand the hidden depths which are not known to the other person. The spiritual father goes beyond the conventional methods and masterful pretenses which we employ to hide our true personality from others and from our own self; reaching beyond these artificial means of ego preservation, he can grasp or bring out the whole person, the person created according to God's image and likeness. This power is spiritual and not at all natural. It is not some sort of extra sensory perception nor is it some kind of magical ability. It is the fruit of grace, which presupposes constant prayer and incessant ascetic struggle"* (Ware o.b. * 66 126-127).

The gift of clairvoyance becomes especially evident in the area of discretion of thoughts. Discretion, according to Symeon the New Theologian, is the "lantern" and the "spiritual eye" used by the spiritual father to see the inner state of his own heart and the heart of his spiritual children. Thus, having

this gift, he can always come forth with the true diagnosis, and he can administer the proper cure (*Catechism 18*, SC 104, 292). Discretion, which presupposes purification of the heart, is a gift from the grace of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, a spiritual father, *"not possessing the light of the Holy Spirit himself and who is not able to see and evaluate his own deeds not having total assurance if they are pleasing to God, cannot guide and teach others about the will of God, nor is he worthy to accept or heal the thoughts of others"* (*Catechism 33* SC 113, 250).

The second charisma of the spiritual father is love: the ability to love others and to receive their troubles and temptations as his very own. Without this love, spiritual fatherhood is nonexistent. Love, according to our spiritual teachers, is not simply the most important quality of the spiritual father but the foundation and the essence of spiritual fatherhood. The love for others presupposes the "co-suffering" with them. This is the literal meaning of the Greek word "sympathy"—the sharing in one's pain: *"Keep on bearing one another's burdens and thus fill up the law of the Christ"* (Gal. 6:2). The spiritual father is he who mostly bears the burdens of others, the burdens of his spiritual children. He assumes their sadness, their guilt, their temptations, and their sins. He co-suffers and cares sleeplessly for their growth and advancement in the life of Christ. *"Brother Andrew, loved one of my soul,"* Abba Varsanouphios writes to one of his spiritual children, *"there is no time longer than the blink of*

an eye that passes by that I don't have you in mind and prayer, and if in this way I love you, God who fashioned you loves you even more, and I pray to Him to guide you and to govern your life according to His will" (Nikodemos the Haghiorite, on Varсанouphios and John, answer 208, pg. 132). In the same book of answers of Varсанouphios and John, we come across an awesome prayer revealing the magnitude of the love of the spiritual father towards his spiritual children:

"Behold me and the children whom you gave me, protect them in your Name. Shield them with your right hand. Guide us to the port of your Holy Will and write their names in your book of Life... Master, you either let my children enter your kingdom along with me, or erase my name from your Book..." (a. b. answer 10, pg 82-83).



The Necessity of Searching for a Seasoned Spiritual Father

The importance of the spiritual father on a Christian journey and on our successful finish shows the great importance and necessity for all of us to find an experienced and secure spiritual guide. This is our duty and our right, and we are responsible for this selection, a selection that needs to take place with a lot of caution and care since according to Saint

Symeon, *"It is truly rare, especially recently, to find those who know to be good shepherds and those who can thoroughly heal the logical (human) souls."*

Based on this, we need to exercise caution. However, we should not isolate ourselves and become self-governed or else we will be in danger of being trapped by the beast, by the soul-destroying wolf--the devil--or while falling, we will not have a helper to raise us up. According to Ecclesiastes, *"But woe to the one who is alone when he falls and there is not a second to lift him up."* At the same time, let us not indiscriminately follow a wolf or an "inexperienced doctor" where we are certain to suffer spiritual harm or at least fail to find a cure (*Catechism 20, SC 104, pg. 117*).

Even though the selection of a spiritual father is entirely a personal choice, something left to our discretion, the discovery of an experienced spiritual guide in the final analysis can only be a great gift from God. For this reason, Saint Symeon further advises: *"Brother, beseech God extensively in order to reveal to you a man who is capable of guiding you properly, to whom you need to obey as God himself, and to act upon his words without reservation, even if his precepts go against your own judgement and even if his rules initially seem harmful and nonsensical to you" (Catechism 20 SC 104 pg. 334).*

The same teacher in his 7th Homily on Ethics passes down a prayer for us to use when we are fervently praying to God to send us a seasoned and experienced spiritual father: "*Lord, you who do not wish the death of the sinner but to have him return and live, having come to Earth for this very reason, in order to resurrect and look upon the fallen and those dead from the sting of sin, you the true light capable of looking upon every person, visit my unworthiness and send me a spiritual father who knows you, so that I can work through him as I would through you and to obey him with all my power and to do your will through his will, thus pleasing you, the only God, and to be found worthy of your kingdom, the sinner that I am*" (Ethics 7 SC 129 pg. 186-188).

The spiritual development of the faithful, due to his relationship with a spiritual father, does not happen automatically or effortlessly. It presupposes a certain reciprocity in terms of the love, the care, and the devotion that the spiritual father puts forth for him. One basic and foremost presupposition is love. The bond developed between the spiritual father and the spiritual child is characterized by a reciprocal love. The faithful responds and lives up to the love shown by the spiritual father. "*Nothing is so effective in the area of teaching as loving and being loved*," Saint John the Chrysostom observes (Hom. 6, 1 to 1st Tim. pg. 62, 529). The spiritual bonds are stronger than the natural ones. Thus, the love that springs from Christ is more powerful than the one found in blood relatives. "*Truly, what is*

more dear than the true father?" asks Saint Theodore the Studite (*To Plato 2*, pg. 99, 909B), thus expressing his personal experience with his spiritual father.

The love towards the spiritual father is genuine when expressed as "faith," and this faith is manifested when we show trust in his person, when we place our entire well-being in his hand, and when we recognize him as our guide to the path of salvation. Consequently, we must trust him. We need to follow his precepts without reservations and inner doubts. On this point, our Holy Fathers become very emphatic. "*It is necessary to believe unquestionably those who accepted our tutorship in the Lord*," advises Saint John of the Ladder (*Ladder 4*, pg. 88, 717B.) Without an unshakable trust in our spiritual father, we cannot progress in the Christian life. Saint Symeon writes, "*The one who has acquired steadfast faith towards his spiritual father has the feeling that whenever he is looking at him, he is looking at Christ himself, and when in his presence or when walking with him, he firmly believes that he is the presence and walking along with Christ.*" This person will never desire or prefer to speak to anyone else nor will he choose any of the things of this world above his memory along with his love.

Now, if the spiritual father is watchful and vigilant over the soul of his spiritual child, the child must also obey and follow his directions faithfully (Hebrews 13, 17). Through our spiritual father, God

himself is speaking. Essentially, when we show obedience to him, we are obedient to God's will. We insure and protect ourselves from mistakes that we would certainly fall into when we follow our own will. Finally, we acquire inner freedom, and we attract the grace of God.

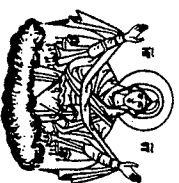
One more great responsibility of the father is the sacrament of confession. To our spiritual father, we confess with confidence everything. This includes both our actions and our thoughts. "Do not keep a single movement of the soul secret," Saint Basil exhorts, "but uncliothe the hidden areas of your heart" (Oroi kata platos 26 53, 184). We must keep nothing from our spiritual father. With humility and with a "son-to-father" trust, we must place everything at his feet. This is the only way to have our sins forgiven by God, to free ourselves from the weight of guilt, and to uproot our passions. In this context, the spiritual father is enabled to guide us in our spiritual life with assurance.



The Pathology of Today's Spiritual Fatherhood

Everything so briefly expressed up to this point has consisted of the faith and the practical experience of the church regarding spiritual fatherhood and its development and evolution, especially in the area of

monastic spirituality. The questions that naturally arise are "Can this bond of spiritual fatherhood function today?" and "Does it function in today's reality the same way as it has before?" These questions are extremely relevant and significant and could very easily be the subject matter of another entire homily. However, please allow me to bring up some specific points pertaining to our subject. Some of these specific complexities, which could be classified as the pathology of spiritual fatherhood, seem to seriously preoccupy a great number of Christians. Unfortunately, this is not a rare phenomenon.



The Elderism of Many Contemporary Clergy

Many of today's clergymen, and not a few of them with charisms and abilities, prematurely set out to seek the glory of being an elder. These clergy, extremely young in age, not having reached maturity in their personalities, inexperienced as shepherds, without having served as disciples or having done obedience to another experienced and seasoned spiritual father, promote themselves, or they strategically and methodically advertise themselves as some new descendants of Varanouphios, as some charismatic and rare child-elder prodigies.*

According to the Word of the Lord, they travel "land and sea to win one proselyte" (Matthew 23, 15). In other words, they actively seek to attract followers. They exercise a relentless oppression on the consciousnesses of the people in the name of "blind obedience to the elder." They manipulate their followers to develop a sick attachment to them.

Unfortunately, with all due respect to our hierarchs, we must be permitted to point out that our bishops, those who ordain very quickly and offer the office of spiritual fatherhood with great ease to immature clerics, are responsible for this phenomenon. For the correct understanding, we only need to look at the very wise exhortations of the recently reposed and truly spirit-filled elder Paisios. In one of the many epistles published and circulated shortly after his death, he refers to the person of the elder and to the challenge of each monk candidate to choose the proper elder:

"Strive as much as you can and be sure that your elder is a spiritual man with virtues, seasoned in the practice of spirituality more so than a teacher of these. It is ideal if he started out as a 'cabin boy' and worked his way to being the 'captain' so that he would not apply the weight of monastic life, which he learned from 'how-to-books.' It is also good if he is naturally endowed with great love combined with discretion so that he can feel for his children and not be so eager to send them to paradise immediately, using the method of Diocletian....It is also very advantageous for the spiritual child if the

elder happens to be at least 18 to 20 years his senior because this brings forth the natural respect on the part of the pupil. The elder must live a simplified life without excessive worldly cares and involvements, and he must not look at all towards his personal self interests but concern himself with the interest of the soul of his spiritual child and generally the best interest of our Mother Church!" (Elder Paisios the Hagiorite, *Epistles* 1994 pg. 43).



The Danger of Elder Worship

The obligation of a genuine and experienced spiritual father is to orient the vision and the hearts of his spiritual children to the person of the Lord, not to himself. This person-worship, whether instigated by the man of the cloth or by the spiritual child, is a serious sickness, posing a grave spiritual danger for both of them. As spiritual fathers, we don't project our own person but the substantial person of our Lord. We do not raise ourselves between Christ and our spiritual child, thus hindering his sight from envisioning the Lord; instead, we stand aside discretely, pointing Him out as the Redeemer of all.

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "*In reality, this is not a two-sided relationship, but a triangular one, since beyond the elder and the disciple there is a third party, God. The Lord tells us that we should not call someone 'father' since we have only one Father, the one in heaven (Matthew 23:9.) The elder is not some infallible judge or an appeals court, but a co-servant of the living God. He is not a dictator but a guide and a companion on this journey. The only true 'spiritual guide,' with the absolute meaning of the word, is the Holy Spirit*" (Kallistos Ware, *The Kingdom Within Us*, pg. 139).



The Extent of Obedience Due to Our Spiritual Father

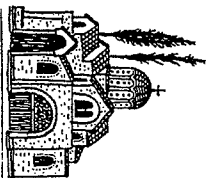
The purpose of the spiritual fatherhood is not the constant attachment of the spiritual children to their father but their progressive development toward spiritual freedom. The genuine spiritual father does not condemn his children to lifelong spiritual infancy; instead, he constantly struggles for their spiritual manhood. The Apostle Paul teaches to see them become "*a perfect man to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*" Oppression, spiritual force, and heavy control have no place in the relationship between spiritual father and spiritual children. The obedience owed to the

spiritual father is not necessarily blind, but conscious. Nor does it absolve us from our personal responsibility, which springs forth from our freedom in Christ. Bishop Kallistos Ware submits that "*The duty of the spiritual father is not to destroy a man's freedom, but to help him see the truth of his own. The goal is not to impress and persuade the personality of a man, but to give him the ability to discover himself, to develop, to mature, and to become what he is in reality. The spiritual father does not force his personal ideas and virtues, but he helps the disciple to find his own exclusive calling. In one word, he is only a talent scout for God, and he must escort and guide the souls to the path of God, not to his own*" (*The Kingdom is Within Us*, pg. 141).

Moreover, Saint Varsanouphios writes, "*You know that we never exercise forceful authority on anyone - on none of them. Do not force someone's free will, but plant the seeds in hope because our Lord did not force anyone; he offered His gospel, and anyone who had ears heard it*" (Response 51 and 35).

Furthermore, we must not confuse the guidelines of monastic obedience with that of the everyday Christians to their spiritual fathers. Monastic obedience, in regards to its latitude and longitude, differs from that of the Christian in the world. For this reason, the spiritual father does not insist on the regulation, and the spiritual child does not owe the obedience which an elder can expect from a monk. A monk must obey "until death," a necessary duty

which emanates from the monastic vows given at the time of his monastic tonsure.



The Danger of Extreme Emotionalism

The bond between the spiritual father and his children resembles the interrelations of a biological family. Just as the natural father and children in a normal family must be connected with the reciprocal love, the same must be true with the “charismatic family.” However, we must not overlook the fact that this bond is exceptional, it needs to be purified from the fluctuations of emotionalism, and it needs to be protected from anything that hides the element of passion or the dangerous sugar-sweet, rose-hued emotionalism.

Love, of course, is often expressed externally (hugs, kisses, etc.), and this can hold true in spiritual relationships as well. However, much care and discretion are needed in this area. In Christ, relationships must be distinguished by their modesty and discernment. For these characteristics to be preserved, spiritual “remoteness” and comfortable distancing become necessary.

The Boasting Over Our Spiritual Father

Another common phenomenon is the boasting over one’s spiritual father. Many exalt themselves because of their famous elder, and they never waste any time referring to him in such a way that little doubt is left about their own spiritual nakedness and dangerous saccharine emotionalism. This is not healthy by any means. Symeon the New Theologian vouches for this, insisting, “Do not swell with pride because your elder is honored by many, or because you may have developed a following due to his name. Rejoice rather if and when your name stays written in the heaven of humility” (Catech. 20).

On this St. John of the Ladder employs even more strictness: “I saw an untrained disciple boasting to some people about the accomplishments of his teacher. And even though he was seeking to bring glory to himself by riding on someone else’s coat tails, he ended up embarrassing himself when all those present told him, ‘And how is it that such a good tree brought forth such a fruitless branch?’” (Ladder 4 pg. 88 713A).

Precautionary measures must be taken about another similar phenomenon having to do with the boldness our elder may have in the presence of God. Our fathers advise us not to rely on nor to have confidence in this. Neither must we limit our spirituality to simply asking them to pray for us. We must also struggle with zeal regarding our

salvation. In the writings of the elders, we read about a certain brother who visited the great Anthony and pleaded with him: "Pray for me." The elder answered: "Neither I nor God will help you, if you yourself do not persist in asking God."



The Changing of the Spiritual Father

As we already stated, the selection of a spiritual father is a matter of personal choice and preference. However, our Godbearing fathers forewarn that the changing of spiritual fathers incubates dangers not only for spiritual progress but for our salvation as well. St. Symeon writes, "*Do not wander here and there searching for big name monks, and don't become a curious examiner of their lives. By the grace of God, if you happen to meet a spiritual father, tell all your concerns to him only!*" (Ethics 7 Sect. 129, 184).

Therefore, it is unacceptable and spiritually dangerous to travel endlessly here and there changing spiritual fathers with the greatest of ease without any valid reason: "*Let's not search for foretellers or foreseeers but above all for those who have humble mindedness in all things, and those who can deal with our spiritual illnesses!*" (Ladder 4, pg. 88 725D). This very statement of St. John of Climacus precisely addresses the mindset of many

contemporary Christians, and their superficial searching, which often pushes them to jump from one spiritual father to the next (Symeon the New Theologian, *Catech.* 20).

Here I will once again call upon the testimony of Bishop Kallistos: "*Many people think that they cannot find someone to be their spiritual father because they imagine him to be some extraordinary type of man; they want a St. Seraphim of Sarov, and in thinking like this they close their eyes to all the ones who God in reality sends them. Often times their supposedly complex problems are not so difficult, and they already know what the answer is inside their heart. But the answer does not appeal to them since it demands constant struggle and perseverance on their part. So they go searching for a Godly and automatic wonderworker who can fix all that ails them with one miraculous word; one word and suddenly everything becomes a breeze. These people must be helped to fully understand the true character of spiritual fatherhood!*" (The Kingdom Within Us, pg. 145).

My dear brothers, the Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition is not something that pertains to the past only. It simultaneously addresses the past and the future. It is the faith and the incessant grace and experience of the church through the centuries. This also holds true for the spiritual fatherhood, an ecclesiastic institution, which we tried to briefly touch upon in these few pages, using the highbeams of our Orthodox tradition. The conclusion that

emerges from this brief walk through the meadows of our ecclesiastical tradition is as follows: it is our responsibility to have a permanent and steady spiritual father. At the same time, we have the right to choose the most appropriate one for us, not the most accommodating, but the most experienced and seasoned, a true man of God in whose presence we will find spiritual rest and security. St. Symeon observes something that holds true in our days. Those who know "to guide well and cure the logical souls" are rare at every season (*Catech. 20*, sections 104, 346).

This is precisely why we must take the necessary measures in our selection process. We need to pray fervently so that God will find us worth of this great gift. The same teacher writes, "*With prayer and tears, keep pleading with God to send you a holy and passionless guide,*" a guide for our journey to the heavenly kingdom.

Amen