



Cultivate That Quiet Light...

Many are perishing

I have often heard advice similar to that given by St. Seraphim of Sarov: Cultivate the quiet light of Christ within you, and with it you will enlighten those around you. At times, when contemplating the zeal which so many apostles demonstrated in their confession of the Faith before the world, I have wondered about that advice. We know that many are perishing, that many have either never even heard of the Orthodox Church, or are not aware that the Church is not an ethnic clubhouse, but a source of Living Water for all. Why are we not told to advertise, to go out with trumpets, drums, loudspeakers, bright lights, to make the Church more visible? God sometimes provides us with wonderful answers in unexpected settings.



Once, on a long journey, I stopped at a state information center to ask for the best route to my destination. The clerk asked me whether I really wanted the best route, or the quickest route. She pointed out that the best way would add about an hour to the fourteen-hour journey I could expect via the



interstate, but that, if I had the time to take the alternate route, I would certainly enjoy the calm and beauty of some lovely country roads. Thinking about my schedule, I chose the interstate. I made excellent time — at least until I was pulled over for speeding. I had saved less than an hour, lost both a sizable percentage of my salary and an opportunity to become acquainted with some pretty country, and had briefly been driven to anger at a state police officer who was properly doing the job for which my taxes paid.

The little things

Shortly thereafter, I stopped in at a small church, almost two hours before the Vigil service was to begin. I found the priest trimming the wicks and replenishing the oil in the lamps behind the altar table. He told me that he almost always arrived at the temple well before the scheduled service, in order to maintain the oil lamps. I asked him whether he had ever considered using candles instead of oil lamps. He smiled, and said, “That certainly would be the quick way. I could enter and light the candles without giving them a thought. Without giving them a thought! Think how great a lesson would be lost!

“Here, lighting the lamps, I must arrange my day so that I can be here early. I must concentrate on my task. I must see that there is an ample supply of oil, so that the lamps do not go out. I cannot hurry. I must pour carefully, lest the oil spill onto the altar table. I must trim and adjust the wick, then light it. and observe the flame: If it is too low, any little breeze may blow it out. If it is too high, it will generate such heat that the glass will crack, or at the least, will burn so quickly that the wick turns to ash, and the flame goes out.

“Such an apparently insignificant task, and yet, it is done in the House of God, and to the glory of God. If I cannot be attentive to the little tasks which God permits me to take on, how can I hope to persevere in the greater tasks? If I cannot take the necessary time and make the necessary effort to prepare these lamps, to see that the flame remains lit but does not become a self-destructive fire, how can I hope to do the same with my soul? How can I control my passions, and how can I instruct others to do the same? No, sometimes the quick way, the easy way, is not the best way. Glory to Thee, O Lord.’

While I was struck by his words, to my shame I found myself a little irritated by them. I found myself thinking that, yes, that may well be the best way, but he has the luxury of serving in a country church with a small congregation which does not put great demands on his time. He has the time, he has no secular job from which to rush to the church in time for services... Suddenly, I realized how irrational were my thoughts, and how cunning and persistent was the enemy of our salvation. When faced with an evident truth, the enemy challenges it by bringing to mind external, irrelevant details, diverting our attention away from the lesson.

The little things of family life

We are all given talents to be used to the glory of God throughout our journey toward salvation. If we exercise them to the best of our ability and to the glory of God, they become part of that light which enlightens the world. The enemy is tireless in his attempts to keep us from performing them. If he cannot sway us from performing the obviously important tasks, he works on the little things, the mundane, seemingly insignificant details of daily life.

An important arena in this battle is family life. In raising children we are given the opportunity to learn



many skills, to develop many talents. We become tailors, fashion consultants, emergency med techs, diplomats, teachers, caterers, chauffeurs and entertainers. All of us juggle schedules in a never-ending struggle to manage time. We learn to do a lot of things in a hurry — taking children to school, to after-school classes, to sporting events. What temptations present themselves! Two children, with two different activities beginning only a few minutes apart. We can be on time if there is no traffic, if we time the lights, if.... It is precisely then that we encounter the longest backup seen on the highway in a decade. Turning on the radio, we hear of a multi-car accident several miles ahead. How do we react? Is our first impulse to ask God to preserve them involved, or to become annoyed at being delayed?

Unfortunately, it is sometimes the latter. Someone not blessed with a complex daily schedule may offer us the sage advice that had we left early, we could have avoided the temptation; had we so arranged our day as to be there well ahead of time, the temptation would not have come. We are tempted to snap at such an individual that it is not always possible to be early! In so doing, we fall to yet another temptation.

We can be sure that as long as we live, we will be surrounded by temptations. As long as we strive, we will be tested. Avoid one, and another quickly takes its place. If we set out to proclaim God's Word, but cannot first calm our passions, if we cannot see the temptations for what they are, we risk bringing not the Word, but temptation to others. If we are to teach others to live as Orthodox Christians, we must first learn to subdue our passions.

The House of God, an island of calm

The Holy Apostle Paul instructs us to put on the whole armor of God. The Holy Fathers often remind us that as part of this process, we should strive for *apatheta*. This is something not to be confused with "apathy," as that term is used in contemporary English. Rather it is *dispassion*, a purity of heart with which we gain control of, and subdue our passions. In search of a respite from the pressures of hectic schedules, in search of a place in which to cultivate this *dispassion*, we come to the House of God, an island of calm, a world of peace, a world in which daily life proceeds at a leisurely pace within an overall structure which does not change from year to year.

As we enter the Temple, a wonderful thing happens. We slow down. We prostrate ourselves before God, and, like the publican, ask God to have mercy on us. We take the time to light candles, to join our little light to the overall light whose Creator we have come to worship. We take our places within a structure whose icons span the centuries and tell us of those who throughout history successfully battled the same temptations, the same passions which now assail us. Before us, in the images on the icon screen, we read our history, We see, frozen out side of time and place, the overall perspective of our path to salvation: The fall, our exile, our promised Savior, the events which led to His Glorious Resurrection, and the means by which we can hope to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

A soft, gentle light

We enter this refuge, and begin our liturgical day with what the secular world sees as the close of day. We begin not when the world commences its frantic daily schedule, not when we must shade our eyes from the flat detail-obliterating glare of bright sun light, but at the time when God's creatures are beginning to settle down in their nests, when calm settles over land and sea and all is bathed in a soft, gentle light whose shadows outline God's creation. In such light, we can calmly study and appreciate the complexity and



beauty of God's creation, we can experience that peace of which Motovilov spoke in his famous discussion with Saint Seraphim on the Holy Spirit. Feeling that peace, we can actively join in the beautiful words of thanksgiving sung at the evening entrance. Having seen the world in the evening light, we perceive what sometimes eludes us in the glare of midday — that at all times it is meet to glorify the Lord, the Giver of life.

Because we treasure the Peace from Above which we find in the Temple, we consciously strive to do nothing to disturb it. Looking through the Royal Doors into the Holy of Holies, we encounter God on the Heavenly Throne, surrounded by the Holy Angels. During the Small Entrance, we see Christ appear. With Him, and surrounded by the Heavenly Hosts, we are transported from earth to Heaven. What a wonderful expression of a great Mystery! How easily, in the quiet light, in the calm order of that procession, do we cast off the petty temptations, the little distractions of secular life.

On the other hand, how easily can that Mystery and the calmness of spirit which it engenders be disrupted when, instead of seeing a place of peace, we see chaos, when in the seven-lamp candelabrum two lamps are out while five others are blazing, smoking torches, when acolytes who, because they have not been paying attention, are rushing to light candles, are turning every which way or arguing over who carries what candle or fan. These tasks, while small and routine, are integral parts of the whole. If we attentively prepare the lamps, if we attentively prepare ourselves to carry out the little tasks assigned to us, the quiet light of Christ will be made manifest. If we choose to prepare neither the Temple nor ourselves, we disrupt not only our own calm, but the entire order of service, and risk evoking in clergy and laity alike not an attitude of prayer, but one of irritation or anger.

The family — the little church

The preparation of the Temple, the preparation of the dispassionate flame, must begin within ourselves, with a recognition of who we are. “And how is your little church doing? How are matushka and the children?” Such a greeting, common among Orthodox Christians, may seem confusing to those outside the Church. The ecclesia, the body of believers, makes up the Holy Church. The family is the “little church,” an icon of the life of the entire ecclesia in Christ. A building prepared for use as the Temple is consecrated by the bishop. Likewise, when we have prepared a residence for our family, we ask the priest to bless it, for it is to be the dwelling place of our little church.

When we enter a Temple, we see before us the icon screen. When we enter an Orthodox Christian home, we see the *krasny ugol*, the “beautiful corner,” as the Russians call it, or icon corner. While it may not be directly opposite the entrance, it is not hidden away, for it is the center of our family life: Here we give thanks to God for having brought us through the night, we ask for God to guide us through the day, we ask for God's blessings as we begin activities throughout the day – be they taking a meal, undertaking a task or setting out on a journey — and we give thanks to God upon their completion. Here we keep holy water and prosphora (blessed bread) to be taken at the beginning of each day. Here we see the images of the saints whose names we bear and who are praying with us and for us. Here, in maintaining the lamps before the icons, we reinforce each day the lesson which that priest so simply and eloquently expressed. “O gentle light...”

Come unto Me all ye who are heavy laden



Yes, family life is undeniably hectic. Yes, we could save some time, rush past the icon corner and get on with our daily tasks. However, in taking only a relatively few moments before and after those tasks in order to pray to our Creator, to ask the Holy Theotokos and all of the saints to help us in our tasks, we find that the tasks become more bearable. When unexpected problems occur, instead of allowing the resultant passions to occupy our time, we can simply recognize them as temptations, and get on with the rest of the day. When we stand in the Temple, that recognition can be so simple. We are bathed in that quiet light, we put aside our earthly cares, we look upon the Icon to the right of the Royal Doors, we read the words: *“Come to Me all ye who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...”* and a burden is lifted from us. When, at home, it becomes our practice to take that relatively short time needed to prepare ourselves and the lamps which burn before the icons, we cultivate that dispassion in which we can keep the peace which we acquired in the Temple. If we nurture and cultivate that steady, quiet light, if in all of our activities we strive to live in the light, we can subdue our passions, and can become beacons~ to draw to the refuge of the Orthodox Church those who are heavy laden with the passions and temptations. May God grant us all the strength and discernment to persevere.

Source: [Orthodox America](#)