

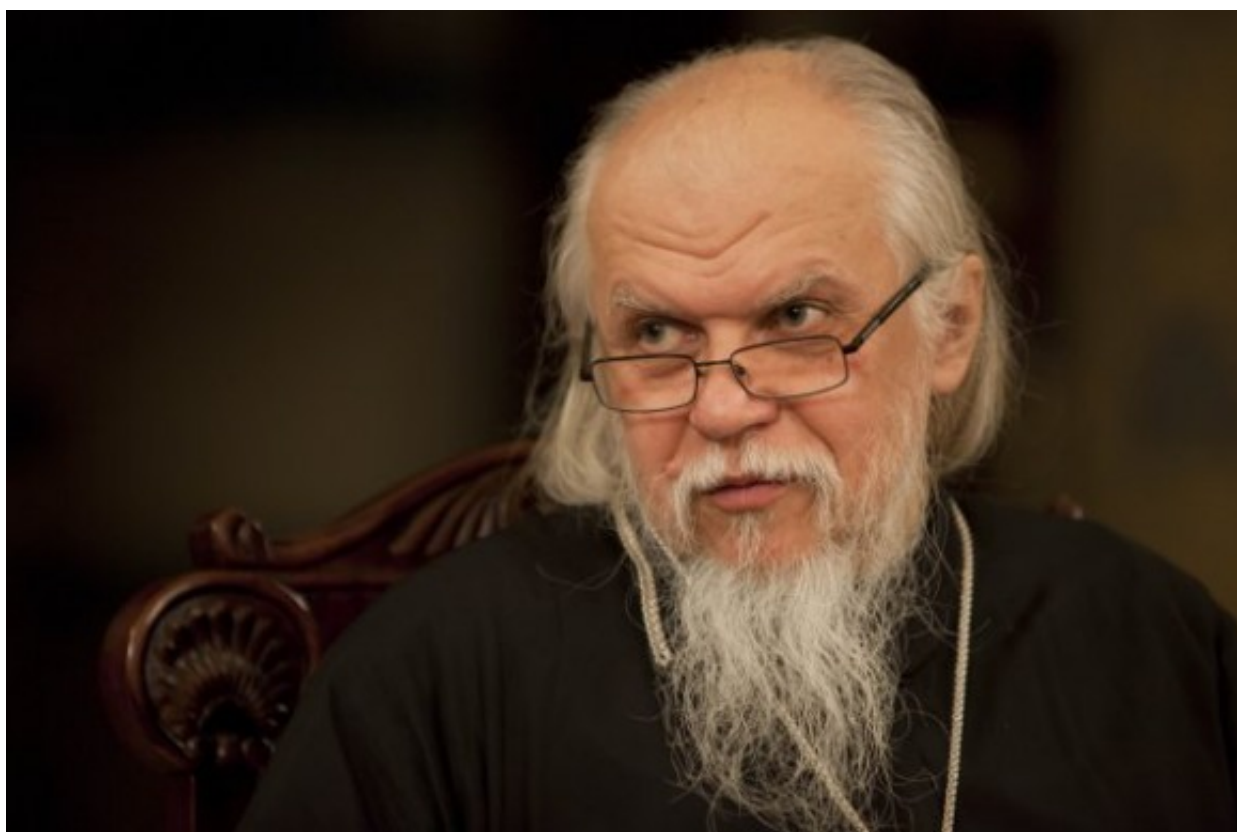


## Panteleimon, Bishop of Smolensk and Vyazma: People Remember about God, but They Forget about Christ

Source: [Journal of the Moscow Patriarchy](#) (in Russian)

*Each person has his own spiritual and life experience—the experience of worries, discoveries, or solving daily problems. But there is also a special experience which reveals to us the mystery of fellowship with God, the mystery of God’s love. This experience cannot be replaced by works of compassion, missionary work, or participation in the restoration or building of temples.*

*It is the experience of prayer. How can one learn to pray in such a way that God will hear? How can one learn to love both God and neighbor?*



### Expectations which were not fulfilled

**–Vladyka, you have been an ordained minister for over 30 years. If you can recall the beginning of your ministry, what is the main difference between the church life in those days when the Church lived as if in a ghetto, and its current state? Perhaps, you used to dream about the time when the Church would be free. Have your expectations been fulfilled?**

**–Thirty years ago, the Church was mostly underground. There was a visible side of the church life which was depicted in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchy* and in films for foreigners. But this side had a place**



neither for social ministry, nor missionary work, nor catechization of children. And, of course, there could not be any mention of working with convicts or visiting hospitals and prisons.

Once during my time at my first village parish, His Eminence Metropolitan Juvenali of Krutitsa and Kolomna paid us an archpastoral visit. A few years before that, he had ordained me to priesthood. After the service, we came out of the church for a photograph of everyone. I called my young daughter, Masha, to join us and bent down to hug her. And then the photograph appeared in the *Journal*, but Masha was no longer in it. It was because at that time, children had no place on the pages of a church journal—that caused displeasure from government officials, and such things were quietly censored. That is why in that photograph, I turned out hunched over and stooped. This example clearly illustrates the realities of that time.

However, despite the many prohibitions, I and my fellow priests did engage in catechization, and our lives were not limited by the walls of the temple. But we had to do that carefully, to avoid getting transferred to a different parish or losing registration. When we blessed apartments, we always drew curtains closed and sang very quietly. When teaching the Law of God, even to our own and our friends' children, we warned them not to tell anyone about it.

Regular people reacted differently to my appearance somewhere in a cassock. Once a drunk passenger of a crowded bus in which I was riding noticed that I was wearing a cassock. He began to ridicule me, trying to get others to join him and demanding that I be kicked off the bus. Then a group of young people that were standing close by stopped him and threatened to kick him off the bus. He did not bother me again. On another occasion, I walked in a cassock through a stadium, and a large group of children was sitting on the bleachers—they had a rehearsal for an event. I noticed that when they saw me they began to point their fingers at me. I waved at them. And in response, the entire group began shouting and applauding.

Glory to God! Nowadays the Church is truly free. I think that there has never been the kind of freedom that the Church has today. And our Patriarch puts a lot of effort into it; and this is why this period is a very special time for the Church, unlike any other time.

### **–And which of your hopes and expectations have not been fulfilled?**

–When I began my ministry I hoped that when the Church gained its freedom and was able to speak the truth—that Christ is our God, that communion opens for us a door to eternal life, and that life in the Church cannot be compared with anything else—people would flock to it. I was naïve in thinking that people did not come to church because they did not know any of that.

In the early 1990s, churches did get a wave of [new] parishioners. And as Father John Krestiankin noted, people were not coming to church, but “breaking into” it. Unfortunately, only a few stayed in the Church, and the period of active attention to life in the Church and learning about the Church ended relatively quickly. In this, my expectations have not been fulfilled. Many people are far from the Church even today, despite calling themselves Orthodox Christians. They do not go to church, do not confess, and do not take communion. In my estimation, the percentage of people who come to church on a Sunday is no more than 1% of the population of our country.

### **–Why do you think this is?**



–It seems to me that there are two reasons. On the one hand, we badly greet people in the Church. Father Vsevolod Shpiller once said an amazingly prophetic thing: “There will be a time when the youth will come to Church, but who will greet them there?” And so it happens that very often we do not come out to greet people who come to Church. We are not ready to translate the Gospel into their language; we lay on them heavy and grievous burdens, sometimes greet them with a lack of love, and we shut to others the doors which should be open wide. On the other hand, people do not accept Christianity because as their main direction they have chosen the service to three passions: vainglory, pleasure of the flesh, and love of money. And this is what keeps them from coming to church and to Christ. They send each other wishes of success (successful career), health (often they mean the health of the body), and wellbeing (material). But at the same time only a few think about the spiritual life and their fate after death.

## How can one learn to pray?

**–Which words in the Gospel are the most meaningful to you right now, and which ones do you most often recall? And which words were your favorite ones when you first began your ministry?**

–You see, one should not pull isolated words out of the context of the Gospel and try to live only by those words. One must constantly reread the New Testament. And at different periods in one’s life and in different circumstances, the most fitting verses from the Gospel should come to mind. In the past, I often recalled the words: Woe onto you, scribes and Pharisees... (Matt. 23:14) I referred these words to myself. Because when I became a priest, I also did very little to help people come to the faith. I changed my life very little and barely thought about my soul. And now that I am involved in social ministry I quote not even the words of the Lord, but those of John the Baptist in which he explained how to bring fruits worthy of repentance. When I ask modern clergy about these words, unfortunately, they do not remember them. So, when the crowds asked John the Baptist what they should do, he said: He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise (Luke 3:11). He expressed that which must become the fruits of repentance, but these words are quickly forgotten by us. People are not being reminded of them. Regrettably, not too many people understand that one cannot think only of his own wealth, only of one’s own self—even robbers share with others. We do not preach these words, and this is very bad.

**–When you read the Gospel, does it happen that you uncover something new for yourself even though you know the passage very well?**

–Recently before a service, I was rereading a passage where Christ is talking to the Samaritan woman (see John 4). The Lord asks her to bring her husband to Him. And the Samaritan woman answers that she has no husband, hiding the fact that she lives with a man out of wedlock. The subtlety of this situation is that she says a half-truth, but her conscience remains clear, since she indeed does not have an “official” husband. But at the same time, she hides her sin and does not say that she is a loose woman. And what astonishes me is that the Lord, knowing about it and pointing out this sin to her, did not judge her and even found some truth in her words. He focuses attention not on the fact that she in essence lied to Him, but that something in her words is worthy of praise. It is astonishing how tactfully He did that: *You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly* (John 4:17-18). I remember reading about a famous missionary who preached to pagans. He did not denounce them, saying that they were bad and everything about them was



bad. Instead, he said: it is very good that you believe in God, it is good that you keep certain rules, but this is what you still lack. In other words, there is a way to approach a man without humiliating him, or denouncing, or reproaching, but instead supporting him—this is a graphic and wonderful example of God’s love.

**–Are you often asked how to learn to pray? How do you usually answer this question?**

–Yes, very often. But regrettably, many people turn to God in prayer with requests and even demands, while one must first learn to thank Him. They do not understand and need to be taught to gather in a temple on Sunday and thank God for everything.

As for prayer itself, I usually say that at the beginning of the path, one should keep three main rules. First, one needs to unite one’s mind with the words of the prayer and pronounce them very attentively. Second, one must remember about the magnificence of God. Third, one should realize his unworthiness. Holy Fathers say that when you pray to God, imagine yourself as “some little worm,” a mosquito, some insect. Remember your unworthiness. On the other hand, Father Georgii Breyev, a remarkable spiritual guide, says that there are as many forms of prayer as there are people.

This is why to pray is not to simply read from a prayer book or some other text; prayer is an art, and everyone has his own form of prayer.

Also, I often tell people to say the Jesus prayer. It is not only for those who live in a monastery, but also for those who live in the world. And it is necessary to remember that the Jesus prayer must be coupled with humility. Because without humility this prayer will be only unto condemnation. For example, here is a parable often told by an elder on Mount Athos.

A certain good priest passed away and came to the gates of paradise. Apostle Peter came out to greet him and asked: “What good things have you done in life? To enter in, one must do good and earn 1000 points.”

–I served as a priest.

–Good, this gives you one point. What else?

–I organized a Sunday school.

–One more point. What else?

–I have a family, and my children grew up in the faith.

–Good, for this you get two points.

And then the poor Father realized that he did not have enough good deeds to earn 1000 points, and without that he will not enter into the heavenly kingdom. And he began to pray to God with his whole soul: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner, I do not have any good deeds!” Suddenly, the gates of paradise flew open, and the Apostle Peter said: “For this, you get 996 points. Enter in.”



Thus, the main task of a Christian is prayer to God, a constant appeal to Him, realization of one's sinfulness, and the understanding that all our good deeds are simply nothing before Him. The feat of inner prayer and realization of one's own sinfulness saves a person's soul—not the building of temples, missionary work, or social ministry. And there is a place on Earth where everything is literally steeped in prayer; and when you are there, you participate in this prayer, whether willingly or unwillingly. It is Athos.

## **Athos is a place of prayer**

**–You often visit Athos. What do you discover there each time for yourself as a pastor?**

Athos is an amazing place. All who live there understand that the main task of a person is prayer. In this prayer, they acquire the gift of the Holy Spirit. There are fewer things there that distract you from prayer. In general, I consider Athos to be one of the witnesses of the truth of Orthodoxy. And if some can be convinced, for example, that Catholicism is a great religion by showing them Rome, crowds of pilgrims, papal museums, by telling them about the culture of European religion, and about the Vatican which has ambassadors in all countries, then we have Mount Athos.

Athos reveals the truth and greatness of Orthodoxy. And for us it is a wonderful and holy place.

When I come to Athos, I no longer discover anything new for myself, nor do I want to discover anything. But there I discover something new inside myself. There are notable elders there, beautiful icons, relics full of grace. But Athos is also important to me as a place where I can look deeper inside myself.

For me, it is an opportunity to be alone, to pray in the night, an opportunity not to answer the telephone, an opportunity to be with my friends, to visit with people who left everything for the sake of God—their homeland and their loved ones. It can be very difficult to leave one's homeland and friends. I know that many Russian monks who come to Athos cannot look at birch trees without tears. The vegetation on Athos is different from that in Russia, and it is said that one of the most difficult feats for a Russian person is to be among the dull and stunted Greek vegetation, even though there is a sea there and its own southern charm. For me, Athos is an opportunity to be with these people, to observe them, and to learn from them about their prayer, their sacrifice, and their ability to love God and other people.

## **To learn to love is to learn to give joy to each other**

**–In one interview you said that the main reason for divorces today is that people largely are not able to love. How can one learn to love? What does one need to know of be able to do for that?**

–I think that to love does not at all mean to arouse within oneself some feeling toward another person. Of course, one could try that; but still, to love is to sacrifice something for another. One woman told me that she was married for many years, and once she woke up in the night because her husband was snoring. She was about to wake him up, as was usual, because she could not go back to sleep. She had to get up early, she had many children, things to do... usually she woke him up. Then she suddenly thought: if I wake him up, he will not fall back asleep right away, but he also has to go to work in the morning; I would fall asleep, but he might not fall asleep until morning. Perhaps, it is better if I be patient? Let me be patient with his snoring, and he will get enough sleep. I love my husband, and since I love him, I need to be patient about



some small inconveniences that he causes me. And when she told me that, I realized that this is the lesson. This example, although a domestic one, is a path on which one can learn not only to be patient with a husband's snoring, but also with a wife's nagging. Or the husband's attachment to football. Or the children's messiness. Or other things which are present in each one of us. To learn to love is to learn to bring joy to each other. To understand what brings joy to another person. Not in the sense of indulging one's base propensities; for example, giving a bottle of vodka to a drunk. But to find the joys which will make him better and in which there is no sin. And through this, to bring him joy.

I once asked one father who had many children how he punishes them. He said: Somehow, I do not think about it; I try to give them joy. He raised wonderful children: three priests and a daughter—wife of a priest. It seems to me that this will help us learn to love.

## **Why the Church is not a symphony orchestra, but rather a music school**

**–Why is it that in our society today with its thirst and need for love and personal attention people remain so self-centered that demanding love toward themselves, they are not ready to love, not ready to sacrifice, and not ready to give anything in return?**

–We live at a time—and my words are trivial—when people have forgotten about Christ. They say that people have forgotten about God. No, people have not forgotten about God; God is present in their minds. They have forgotten about Christ—about God who became man, about God who dies on the cross for them, about God who arose. But as for God as some generic higher power, people know and remember Him: “Well, I believe in God! Well, I know that there is God!” But they forget that God came down to earth and became man. They forget that man must live the same way that God lived when He was incarnate on the earth. [They forget] that the human nature is amazingly noble. If it can contain God within itself, then think of the kind of nature it is! Nowadays, people live like animals, like consumers, in a constant search for pleasure. But the image of Christ is meek, humble, loving, the image of His thoughts, the image of His feelings... “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). This is what people have forgotten. During the course of 70 years, they were forced to forget this.

The image of the Russian people used to reflect the face of Christ. Fyedor Tyutchev said an interesting thing: “A proud foreign gaze will neither understand nor notice / that which gently shows and secretly shines through your humble bareness.” The image of Christ was adopted by the Russian people. But now it has disappeared. In the past, people gave to the poor for Christ's sake. But now nothing is done for Christ's sake. It is done for the sake of something else. Even by the believers. This, it seems to me, is the scariest.

On the other hand, in this I contradict myself. When disaster strikes—Krymsk being the latest example—this pain resonates in people's souls. People respond and are ready to sacrifice themselves, their energy, time, and resources in order to help people who are in trouble. This is still very much alive in our people.

**–How then can we return to Christ?**

–First of all, it is necessary to remember that Christ is always invisibly present at the Divine Liturgy.



Secondly, the Lord is with those who suffer. When a person shares the pain of another and helps another, through this he can also acquire Christ. Besides this, one needs to prayerfully read the Gospel, go to church, repent and confess. During the Liturgy, the priest says: Christ is in our midst. If you are looking for Christ, go to where there is Christ. Be in church at least on Sundays. Learn to do this. And just as a child cannot learn to talk or distinguish colors correctly immediately, in the same way it takes time for a person to see Christ and to feel His presence in the temple in all fullness.

**–Master, there are many people who used to partake in the sacraments, to live by the commandments, but then someone was rude to them, or they did not receive the love for which they came to Church. And they stopped coming. Why did this happen, if they also sought Christ?**

–Every sin that people see in the Church is not a sin of the Church, but a sin against the Church. Some people fall into this trap: first, they think that everyone in the Church is a saint, and then they think that everyone there is a liar. Both this and that is wrong. The people who gather in the Church are just like you are. And you must not ask of them that which you yourself do not have. For example, you lack humility, and are offended by its lack in them. Everyone comes to Church to learn. I have the following image. People mistakenly think that when they come to Church, they come to a concert by a symphony orchestra. On the contrary, they suddenly see that they ended up in a music school where in one classroom students play one thing, and in another—a different thing. And at that, there is no harmony, no skill in playing these instruments. In other words, a temple is not a concert of a symphony orchestra, but a music school. All go there to learn: bishops, and priests, and laymen, and adults, and children. We are all Christ's students. We came to learn from Him. But whether we will all sound like a symphony orchestra will become clear at the Final Judgment. Now we are having a rehearsal—it's the Sunday Liturgy. The people who play at this rehearsal often cannot really play well. They are not great musicians, but rather people who only recently took up an instrument and who had bad training. All must understand this. Otherwise, they come to church and think: saints are getting ready to play their heavenly organs for us. But instead, they see Aunt Claudia in the choir together with Mike who came to earn some money. These are average people, but Christ is in their midst, and everyone can touch Him and unite with Him at the Liturgy.

And in order for the heavenly music to sound in you, it is not enough to listen only with your ears—it must sound in the soul. This will happen if you remember your unworthiness, your sins, that which was reminded to that priest at the gates of paradise.

Translated from [the Russian](#)