

The Church-the Treasury of Salvation - Part 2

by St. John of Kronstadt

The Church is the one true Orthodox Church, the body of Christ, with Christ as the Head, and the means for the restoration of the broken union with God.

Scripture: Romans 13:14

Topics: "Salvation Through Grace", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

St. John of Kronstadt sorrowfully reflects on the corrupting wound of sin that enslaves mankind, but also rejoices in the divine aid granted by God for the salvation of humanity through the Church. He emphasizes the power of Grace as a gift from God for salvation, driving out sin and preparing believers for eternal life. St. John urges believers to rely on God's grace to overcome sin and passionately calls for repentance, reliance on the Church, and obedience to God's commandments to resist the devil's temptations and maintain union with God. He stresses the importance of belonging to the Orthodox Church, the Body of Christ, for spiritual warfare and salvation.

Transcript

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I sorrow, I wail, and I weep profoundly over the horrible wound of sin which corrupts mankind, miserable beyond measure, indescribably, diversely--O the seductiveness of sin by which mankind is enslaved and labors for sin, and even boasts in its work, and is comforted as by some profit! But together with this I also rejoice and exult and clap my hands when I consider and imagine that divine aid which is granted to us by the will of the Creator as a gift from the great Saviour and God to the whole race of man, and for the planting of the Church of God upon the earth, which saves the human race through God's wonderful grace.

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What indeed is Grace? It is the Gift of God granted to a man because of his belief in Christ, for the salvation of the Christian man. Grace is a power, an interceding power, which has mercy, enlightens, saves, and disposes to every virtue.

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Grace which has taken up its dwelling in a man who believes and is zealous for holiness and truth, unceasingly drives corruption and every sin out of his heart and body, out of the whole of his being, and prepares him for eternal incorruption, drives out the stench of the passions and settles fragrance within him. The Saints even during their life in the body were fragrant with holiness and incorruption and were pure temples of the Holy Spirit, working miracles. Live then according to the Spirit, "and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Rom. xiii. 14).

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The commandment of self-renunciation is given; the place is set out for struggles, virtues, for unfading crowns of glory; grace is given, the power of God to overcome and conquer the wickedness of the enemy and all the passions. The Lord Himself, the setter of the contest, helps those who struggle, provides trophies and crowns for His warriors.

Every sinner who sincerely turns to God must rely completely upon every sort of grace-filled help from God during his warfare with sins, passions, and every kind of sinful habit. It is only necessary to believe in God sincerely and undoubtingly, and heartily to call upon His aid, and sincerely to despise sin, to repent earnestly with a pure intention and thenceforth not yield to sin. All the Saints, the Mother of God Herself, the holy guardian Angels, and God's servants are all ready to provide help for our salvation; spiritual fathers and pastors have been ordained by God in order to save and guide those who seek salvation. Behold the conscience of every man, this unbribable, stern, and righteous judge--thou must but obey it eagerly and unceasingly.

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All that is pure, lawful, and holy the impure devil endeavors to defile, or to represent, to depict in an impure, perverted, distorted manner. O how evil he is, how impure, impudent, tireless, and active in his wickedness, in his malice, in his abomination! Who can escape his nets? He who believes firmly in Christ and the Church.

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The Lord, for the good of His rational creation--that is, men--desires to unite all into one body and Himself to dwell in them. "That they may all be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us" (John xvii. 21). However, the devil "strives to disunite, dismember, drive all apart, like a flock without a shepherd: in families he plants enmity, dissension, dissatisfaction, or insult; in villages, in cities he causes some to rise up against others; among nations he causes peoples to rise up against peoples, kingdom against kingdom; among religious communities he causes those who have one confession to rise up against the adherents of another, and he especially breathes wrath upon those who confess the Orthodox faith, as against the true Church of God, inciting different persecutions against them. But let us hold to the one holy Orthodox Church, whose head is Christ our God Himself, ever acting within us for our salvation and renewal.

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The enemy of our salvation is the devil, and knowing all the saving power of our union with God through faith, the Church and God's grace, he strives with all the means he has to tear asunder our bond with God by sin, by carnal passions, and by attachments to the world. It is necessary for all to hold tightly to the

union with God and the Church, keeping the commandments of the Lord.

II. Life in unfailing union with the Church. The indispensability of belonging to the one true Orthodox Church.

Thus it is indispensable to belong to Christ's Church, the Head of which is the Almighty Tsar, the Conqueror of hades, Jesus Christ Himself. His kingdom is the Church which wars with principalities, powers, the world-rulers of the darkness of this age, with spirits of wickedness in high places, which compose a skillfully organized kingdom, and do combat in an extremely experienced, intelligent, well-directed and powerful manner with all men, having well studied all their passions and inclinations. Here no man by himself on the battlefield can be a combatant; and even a great community which is not Orthodox, and is without the Head--Christ--can do nothing against such cunning, subtle, constantly vigilant enemies, who are so skilled in the science of their warfare. For Orthodox Christians a mighty support is necessary from on high, from God and from Christ's holy warriors who have defeated the enemies of salvation by the power of the grace of Christ, from pastors and teachers, and then--from common prayer and from the Mysteries. Behold, precisely such a helper in the struggle with our invisible and visible enemies is the Church of Christ, to Which, through God's mercies, we belong. The Catholics have invented a new head, having demoted the one true Head of the Church--Christ. The Lutherans fell away and remained without a head. The Anglicans likewise. There is no Church among them; the union with the Head is broken; there is no Almighty help and Belial wages war with all his power and cunning, and holds them all in his delusion and perdition. A multitude perish in atheism and depravity.

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By creating man in His own image and Likeness, the Creator placed a close bond between Himself and His creation, that is, man. Man was obliged to maintain this blessed union through scrupulous submission to his Creator, through fulfillment of His holy, wise, and life-giving commandments; as a summary of these commandments, the commandment not to taste of the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was given to him. This commandment was to have strengthened his will in its agreement with the will of God, so that God's will should be one with the will of man,--as the will of one of the Persons of the Trinity is in complete accord with the will of the second and third Persons: "As Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us" (John xvii. 21). But by his disobedience, man audaciously broke his union with God and thus fell away from God and His life. And since the wages of sin is death, man was subjected to temporal and eternal death, and to all the innumerable, pernicious consequences of sin--illnesses, calamities, griefs, sorrows, corruption, every sort of deformity, and every kind of slavery to sin. Other than the Son of God no one could reestablish this lost union, and He, in His measureless goodness and condescension towards fallen man, most wisely and wonderfully restored it; and intelligent and chosen men have utilized this marvelously good restoration. But by what means was this union re established? By the Son of God's assumption of human nature without sin, fulfilling all God's righteousness with human nature, taking upon Himself our curse, suffering and dying for us, and, having conquered death, by rising from the dead and giving resurrection to us--incorruption to us. He established one Church upon the earth with Himself as the Head and under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Within the Church He granted all the means for the restoration of the broken union with God through the Mysteries and teaching, through the guidance of the pastors; He gave Baptism, Chrismation, Repentance, Divine Service, constant instruction in the Word of God. Now, whoever wishes to live in holy union with God, be thou in union with the Church which instructs, which holds Divine Service unto holiness and truth and the Kingdom of God--and thou shalt be saved.

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"He that is not with Me is against Me: and he that gathered not with Me scattereth" (Luke xi. 23). He who is not with the Church is against the Church; he who is not within the Church is against the Church; he who has not the faith is against the faith; he who does not do the works of repentance, the works of virtue, is against virtue. It is but a small thing to be named a Christian: one must do the works and fulfill the commandments which Christ decreed; unceasing repentance is necessary, unceasing attention to oneself in the spirit of faith, unceasing prayer, unceasing correction, unceasing forcing of oneself ahead, unceasing self-perfection, and with this goal--unceasing self-examination: are we in the faith? do we live according to the faith? are we with the Church? do we go to church? do we love the Church? do we fulfill the dictates of the Church? or the commandments of Christ preached by Her? Behold then how Christ God teaches. Therefore he who does not repent, who does not attend church, and instead of church goes to the theater and various spectacles and worldly gatherings, disdaining the Church--such a one is not a Christian.

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God has bound the Orthodox faithful to Himself by means of the one Holy Spirit and the one Church, by one faith, by the unity of the law, the Mysteries, and the hierarchy, for the general good of His rational creation. One must hold on to this bond through holiness of life and submission to one another.

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Christian man! While there is still time, strive to appropriate God and His Saints to thyself here upon the earth through faith and piety; be churchly, nourish in thyself the spirit of churchliness, the spirit of repentance, holiness, peace, thoughts of God, the spirit of love, meekness, humility, patience, submissiveness to good, salvation. Lift not shine head, and scorn not thy Mother the Church which saves thee;--attend church often during Divine Service, stand with humility, listen, reflect, or read and chant. If thou cost not gain Her here, and through Her, God,--thou shalt remain foreign to Her and to God, and after death, God shall not take thee, and all His Saints shall renounce thee as some one foreign to them in spirit and in disposition of heart and thoughts. Thou shalt be driven into a strange country, into the gloomy and fiery place of the fallen spirits and unrepentant souls of men. Be wise, therefore, in order to escape the craftiness of the devil and attain thy great calling.

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Thou belongest to the Church of God, that is, the community of those who believe in Christ; this Church is the one Body of Christ, God is the Head. Art thou a worthy member, cost thou live in holiness, cost thou always repent, cost thou correct shine heart and life, thy morals, thoughts, feelings, intentions, yearnings, thy whole behavior?, Art thou a living member, or dead? Will the Saints receive thee when thou departest from this temporal life into the eternal one? Will they not renounce thee as a putrid member reeking, worthless? Till not thy fate be in common with those who are reprobate from God ? Hasten to set this matter right, to correct shine entire behavior. For this thou art granted time.

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The work of the salvation of our souls is the greatest and most wise work, and to learn this work, this art, it is necessary to have recourse to those to whom this work is known, who have completed it. This work of

salvation, this work of repentance, is especially known to the Saints, since they have especially endeavored to concern themselves with it, and have carried it in a surpassing manner, one saving for their souls and pleasing to God. Indeed, the Saints have left this spiritual inheritance, this art of repentance and salvation, to the Orthodox Church, having laid up in Her, as in a secure treasure house, all their understanding, their instruction, their zeal, their art, their experiences. Let us therefore learn repentance and salvation from Her. We all have come and do come to the church services for Sundays, holidays, ordinary days, and for the Great Fast. All these services teach us repentance and salvation. Have you heard the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete? Heard the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian? Heard the troparia and canons for the Great Fast? What a spirit of repentance is in them! What a compunction, what contrition for the sins of sinful mankind! What a thirst for salvation and pardon from God! What wails and tears of sinners repenting! Behold and learn repentance and propitiation of the Lord from the holy Church. Attend well, reflect, comprehend your sins, have contrition, repent, vaunt not yourselves, do the works of mercy: for the merciful shall obtain mercy.

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It fell to the lot of fallen man, after the measureless compassion of God and the unsearchable wisdom and justice of God, to have the honor of confessing the name of God before unbelievers and of suffering for this Name, for the Lord God Who is glorified and worshipped in Trinity. The Apostles, martyrs, hierarchs, monastic saints, and the righteous have been deemed worthy of this honor in particular. All those who now struggle for the Orthodox Christian faith and for virtue, those who firmly defend the holy Orthodox faith and Church and undergo slander and torment at the hands of Her enemies are also found worthy of this honor.

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The Holy men of God would not betray the faith and by even so much as a word, and if it did happen that because of the cunning of the persecutors, they unawares betrayed it by either word or deed, they were ready to erase their sin by means of the tortures. See how strictly the Saints held to the right confession! And of what sort are present-day Christians? "Reeds shaken with the wind" (Matth. xi. 7).

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"Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" (I Peter i. 9). Behold the end and goal of the Orthodox Christian faith--the salvation of the soul of every believer. How invaluable is our faith; how holy, true, God-pleasing, powerful, saving! How necessary it is to love Her, worthily to esteem Her, constantly to utilize Her for one's own salvation and that of others. O Lord, save the race of Orthodox Christians, and convert all the non-orthodox to Orthodoxy, as to the one faith which saves, established by Thee, glorified by Thee, and to be eternally glorified by Thee! Thou art holy and righteous--and Thy faith is holy and righteous.

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What does the rite of conversion from different beliefs and confessions and of being united to the Orthodox Church show forth? The indispensability of the rejection of false beliefs and confessions, of the renunciation of errors, of the confession of the true faith and--of repentance for all former sins and of the promise to God to keep and firmly confess the blameless faith, to guard against sins and live in virtue.

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The beginning of all false teachings, heresies, sects, and schisms is in the serpent who deceives the whole world. The first, most pernicious false teaching was preached by the serpent to Eve in paradise and then to Adam, then Cain, to whom the primordial manslayer--the devil--falsely whispered against Abel that he stood in Cain's way, went against him, did not think, did not feel, did not live as he did, that he supposedly mocked him, reviled him. From hence arise all heresies, sects, and schisms. They wish to be teachers, not from God but rather from themselves and according to their passions. From hence arise the followers of Tolstoy, the Pashkovtsy, the Stundists, and others.

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"Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on the earth? I tell you, Say; but rather division: for from henceforth there shall be five in one house (the Church of Christ) divided, three against two, and two against three" (Luke xii. 51-52). Catholics, Reformed, Lutherans,. Old Believers, sectarians.

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A hatred of Orthodoxy, fanaticism against and persecution of the Orthodox, even killings, run like a crimson thread through all the ages of Catholicism's existence. By their fruits ye shall know them. Was such a spirit commanded to us by Christ? If to anyone, it is always possible to say to Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of" (Luke ix, 55).

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The cause of all the errors of the Roman Catholic Church is pride and the acknowledgment of the pope as the real head of the church' and what is more--that he is infallible. From hence all the oppression on the part of the western church arises. The oppression of thought and faith, the deprivation of true freedom both in faith and life, in all things upon which the pope has placed his heavy hand; from hence come the false dogmas, from hence the duplicity and slyness in thought, word, and deed; from hence--the various false rules and regulations, for the confession of sins; from hence indulgences; from hence the distortion of dogmas; from hence the fabrication of the saints of the western church and non-existent relics, not glorified by God; from hence--"the exalting against the knowledge of God" (II Cor. x. 5), and every sort of opposition to God under the appearance of piety and zeal for the greater glory of God.

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The pope and the papists have become so proud and have so exalted themselves that they have thought to criticize Christ Himself, the Hypostatic Wisdom of God Himself, and have extended their pride to the point that they have distorted some of His words, commandments, and ordinances which should not be altered to the end of this age: for example, His statement concerning the Holy Spirit, His commandment concerning the cup of His all-immaculate Blood, of Which they have deprived the layman, setting at naught the words of the Apostle Paul: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come" (I Cor. xi. 26); instead of leavened bread in the liturgy, they use wafers.

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I thank the Lord Who has heard and hears my prayers in the presence of the most saving and dread sacrifice (the Body and Blood of Christ; for the great communities which have gone astray in their faith, which though named Christian are in reality apostate--the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and others; also that all peoples may be drawn to the true faith, as also our Old Believers.

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Count L. Tolstoy infringed upon the truth of the Gospel and the whole of Sacred Scripture and perverted the thought of the Gospel, which is indisputably most important and invaluable for the people of all ages. He rejected the belief in Christ as the Son of God, the Redeemer and Saviour of the world, and led astray many who followed in his footsteps, and destroyed them; he renounced the Church, founded by Christ, trampled upon the grace of Baptism, Chrismation, Repentance, Communion and all the Mysteries; because of his self-conceit he accounts himself to be the judge of the Word of God and his own supreme criterion, and does not verify himself by It. But woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes and in their own sight! (Esaias v. 21);

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