

## SCANDALS IN THE CHURCH How Should the Faithful Deal with Them?

– Part One –

### *What Do the Saints of God Say?*

- “In that the people are evil, God gives them evil bishops and rulers.”

St. Athanasius the Great

- “As much as you are able, endeavor to free your neighbor from sin without offending him.”

Abba Hyperechius

- “A priest must not err in the dogmas concerning God; as for everything else, you are not the proper judge, if, indeed, you know your own limits and have not completely lost your mind.”

St. Anastasius of Sinai

### *The One Who Baptized Him*

A taxi driver related this story from his village: A certain child, about 4-5 years old, always avoided the priest of the village. His parents and his godfather admonished him to kiss the hand of the priest and show him reverence, but the child would turn away his face and didn't even wish to look at him.

— “My boy,” they would tell him, “He is the priest who baptized you; kiss the hand of the priest.”

The boy would answer:

— “No, he is not the one who baptized me!”

They all wondered at the child's behavior, until one day in church, when the boy saw the icon of Christ, he suddenly cried out pointing with his finger:

— “*He* baptized me!”

With his chaste eyes, the young child saw Him Who baptized him in reality, but he ignored His instrument, the priest.<sup>1</sup>

### *By the Priest's Hand*

It is not the priest himself who accomplishes the Mysteries – contrary to the beliefs of the west, where they say – “I baptize.”

The heretics are neither able to baptize nor give any other blessing. The blessings of the heretics are non-existent.<sup>2</sup>

The grace of the Mysteries operates independently of the person who administers them. It is not the priest who baptizes; instead, it is He Who was baptized in the Jordan – Christ. The Orthodox priest does not say “I baptize so and so,” but “So and so is baptized;” it is not only the priest who accomplishes the baptism, but Christ concelebrates in the Mystery together with the priest, and He Himself lays His right hand upon the head of the baptized.<sup>3</sup>

Christ did not use the statement or expression “I baptize,” but He said “ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit,” thus teaching us humility.<sup>4</sup> In this way, a restraint is put on the highminded and proud who think themselves great because they baptize, instead of offering up thanksgiving for the gift.<sup>5</sup>

It would be of interest to us to go through the writings of the Church. One can find edifying accounts regarding the discernment we should have between the sin and the sinner, especially when it concerns the clergy.

### *Selections*

It happened that a man saw his spiritual father sinning. Despairing of his salvation and thinking that all the Mysteries of the Church that he received from the priest's hands were invalid, he went into the forest and followed a small brook, all the while drinking from its clear running waters. When, however, with astonishment he saw that the water was coming out of a dead dog's mouth, he fell into despair for a second time. Now, he saw before him his mortal death too. An Angel appeared to him then and assured him that he had suffered no harm whatsoever. Furthermore, he told him that this had happened to him for his correction, that he might learn that it is the same regarding spiritual matters. Grace suffers no harm, it is in no way polluted, from the personal sins of the priest. The idea that the Holy Mysteries are made of no effect by the priest's sins was a heresy of the Donatists.

Another time, a priest who was serving unworthily, would be tied up invisibly with chains outside the church, while in the altar, Angels were serving in his stead.

At yet another time, a bishop who was living in carnal sin was tied up by an Angel to the pillar of the church at the time of the Liturgy, while in his place, the same Angel served with the presbyters and deacons and continued the Liturgy until the dismissal. Then the Angel would untie the bishop and vanish.

During the Liturgy of another unworthy priest, at the time when he approached the Holy Table, an Angel descended from Heaven and put his hand on the priest's head. Then the priest became like a pillar of fire, and so the Divine Liturgy continued.

### *They Did Not Justify Themselves*

In some instances, condemnation for moral corruption is unjustified.

St. Macarius the Great was slandered for committing fornication, yet he accepted the slander as though it were true. As if that were not enough, he also supported his "wife" with the necessities for the newborn baby!

St. Savvas the Sanctified, St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Symeon the Barefoot of Mount Athos all were slandered by groups of renegade monks, and they bore these calumnies patiently.

The servants of God are not in the habit of justifying themselves when they are slandered by others; they do not oppose them. At times, however, the Saints' accusers seem to receive a sobering lesson. As in the case where a person became demonized, and the demon began to confess publicly: "I slandered the servant of God."

Another brother fell into temptation and one ascetic ordered that he be expelled, in order to avoid scandal. Then the same temptation fell upon the ascetic, until finally, he heard an Angel's voice saying to him that this temptation came upon him because he was harsh with his brother in the time of his trial.

### *The Character of the Accusers*

The canons of the Holy Fathers say again and again, and emphasize that the character of the accusers must be examined also. Of course, anonymous accusers are rejected outright. The basic regulations that deal with a properly-formed ecclesiastical court are the following (the numbering varies slightly in different editions of *The Rudder*):

- a) 2nd Ecumenical Council, Canon 6.
- b) Local Council of Carthage (A.D. 419), Canons 134, 138, 139, 140.
- c) 4th Ecumenical Council, Canon 21.

*Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged*

As a rule, he who condemns another, has the same passion within himself.<sup>6</sup>

The Saints, even by their example, teach us not to become a judge of the sinner.

“A demoniac boy came one day to be healed, and the brothers from an Egyptian monastery received him. As the Elder, Saint John the Persian, was coming out, he saw a brother sinning with the boy, but he did not accuse him; he only said to himself, “If God Who has made them sees them and does not burn them, who am I to blame them?”<sup>7</sup>

St. Nilus speaks in an explicit way: “If ever you should see the most impure of all impure men and the most evil of all evil men, even then you must not condemn him. Do this and God will not abandon that man, nor will He let him fall captive to the devil.”<sup>8</sup>

“If someone believes evil about the Faith [*i.e.*, *heretically*], flee from him and have nothing to do with him — not only if he is a man, but even if he happens to be an Angel from Heaven. However, do not critique a person’s life; because, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged,’ applies to all matters of the life, and not to matters of faith.”

(St. John Chrysostom, Second Homily  
on the Second Epistle to Timothy)

One defiles his own mouth in relating the impure deeds of the clergy.<sup>9</sup> The same thing happens when they dwell on these things in their minds.

Rather we should consider ourselves sinners along with them.<sup>10</sup>

Better yet, let us not look to confirm or even reckon another’s faults, but only our own.<sup>11</sup>

*Bowels of Compassion*

We should cover our brother’s fall with compassion.<sup>12</sup>

Our fathers were always sympathetic towards the sinner.

He who has fallen into a passion is sick. He needs prayer and care. Especially when he is our spiritual Father.<sup>13</sup>

We exalt ourselves above a clergyman unconsciously and without expressing it in words, when we judge his failings, as did the Pharisee with the Publican. In this way we receive the corresponding “reward” of the Pharisee.<sup>14</sup>

The cleric who sins is in a fearful position. Holding him up to public ridicule is not the best way to help him. There are proper authorities to handle the situation, and to them we must turn, if something should come to our attention.<sup>15</sup>

*Should We Shun Them?*

Does this mean that one should avoid services offered by sinful clergymen and avoid communion with them, before a decision is made by the ecclesiastical court?<sup>16</sup> Far be it \_ if, indeed, we wish to be helped in the way the ancient Christians were.

Once the Elder Joseph of Optina was told of a lady who died without the Holy Mysteries because she did not want to receive Holy Communion from her parish priest, about whom she

knew many bad things. The Elder grieved over the deceased and said that one should not be disturbed by a priest's life, since his hand only performs the actions, but it is grace which perfects the Mystery. He then told of how one Saint who became fatally ill desired to receive the Holy Mysteries. The nearest priest was very depraved and, it seems, completely unworthy of the priesthood. The Saint was troubled, but then, having overcome his thought, he summoned the priest. During Communion, the Lord deemed him worthy of a vision: He saw that Angels were administering Communion to him.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, people nowadays advise the complete opposite: They tell others that the unworthy clergy should be avoided; yea, and they call this method "holy and spiritual."<sup>18</sup> It can easily be proven with the light of living tradition that these recommendations are completely erroneous.<sup>19</sup>

A Christian is in no way harmed by receiving Communion from depraved clergy, but rather, he receives benefit. The depravity and delinquency of an Orthodox priest in no way hinder the blessings of God from being distributed to his flock, just as it is also not the priest's virtues which distribute them.<sup>20</sup>

#### *He Worshipped with the Depraved*

Father Philotheus Zervakos of the island of Paros in Greece liked to talk about a layman who used to go frequently to services at St. Elissaeus' near Athens together with Papadiamantis, the Greek author, and the other pious souls who attended services there. Now this layman, if he heard that a priest of ill-repute would be serving somewhere, would run to attend that priest's service. When others asked out of curiosity why he did this, he answered, "An Angel gives Communion to the faithful there."

Many, after the scandals in the Church concerning monies, think it enough simply to light a candle, as they say, since they have been disillusioned with past misdeeds and they are reluctant to offer anything more to the Church. Here, again, they are mistaken. Give to the Church the first fruits of your goods and your offerings, says St. John of Damascus, without examining where they go and how they are disposed.<sup>21</sup>

It would be good for the faithful to give newscasters something befitting them, such as unemployment insurance, so that these unfortunates might not receive more condemnation on their heads. And instead of allowing them — as people do now — to work day and night, spewing forth that which is so unedifying, let us apply that which someone said to those who have ears to hear: "Your television set has an 'off' switch."

#### *"Not Only of All Greece"*

The German newspaper, *Deutsche Zeitung* (March, 7, 2005), referring to the scandals which of late have convulsed the State Church of Greece, upgraded Archbishop Chrystodoulos' title; it named him: "Archbishop of All Greece, and of Sodom and Gomorra."

Journalists, both those local and those abroad, err completely, however, in their criteria. The morals of the clergy are not the issue.<sup>22</sup>

During the discussion of these violations of a moral and canonical nature in the Synod, Metropolitan Nicholas of Mesogaias declared that he was scandalized with the things he heard: "What have I to do with such a Synod?<sup>23</sup> This is not a hierarchy. I am ashamed that I am a Metropolitan. The Holy Spirit does not dwell herein," he was heard to say.<sup>24</sup>

Neither is this the issue. The Holy Spirit does not withdraw from the Church owing to the personal sins of her clergy.

St. Anastasius states it concisely: “A priest must not err as far as the dogmas concerning God; as for everything else, you are not the proper judge, if, indeed, you know your limits and have not completely lost your mind.”<sup>25</sup>

Saint John Chrysostom says: “Let each attend to his own affairs. For if he teach perverted doctrine, though he be an angel, obey him not; but if he teach the truth, take heed not to his life, but to his words.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Concerning the Faith, No One Has Spoken*

It is the Faith, then, which is the principal question. But neither the press nor the hierarchs seem to perceive the Faith’s importance

Sin does not sever the faithful man from the Church, but false teaching manages to mangle him like the wild beasts.<sup>27</sup>

Communion with an Orthodox priest, though he be sinful, in no way injures the one approaching to communicate. The unworthy priest can perform soul-saving Mysteries, he can even work miracles, in spite of his unworthiness.<sup>28</sup>

Heresy though, is worse than carnal sins.<sup>29</sup> Grace has abandoned the heterodox. Only then is it recommended that the clergyman be cut off: even if the works of the heretic are irreproachable, and his holiness is famed and he is lauded by all.<sup>30</sup> The Orthodox faithful has no other choice but to sever the diseased sheep from communion. Otherwise, he is defiled by being in communion with heresy.

“Judge not lest ye be judged” holds good, for the personal sins of the priests.<sup>31</sup> But as far as concerns their creed, their public confession, the opposite words apply: Judge, examine.

Among the many heretical teachings which have spread in abundance and prosper today in the local “Orthodox” churches, we conclude with a recent quote from a new calendar theologian and university professor in Greece, who comments on the following words of his ecumenistic bishop:

“The Church is the strength of Hellenism and the spiritual refuge of our people. That is why all of us are obliged to protect her in a positive way.” (Archbishop Chrystodoulos)

“Yes, the Church for Archbishop Chrystodoulos is not the gospel of hope, neither the source of illumination for our life. It is rather the crutch of nationalism. . . This remark alone demonstrates a surpassingly more hopeless decay than the much published sins of some depraved clergymen. This is an estrangement from the Church’s truth.”<sup>32</sup>

This is the issue.

## Endnotes for Part One

<sup>1</sup> “Approach the Minister of Baptism, but while approaching, think not of the face of him thou seest, but remember this Holy Spirit of Whom we are now speaking. For He is present in readiness to seal thy soul.” St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 17, 35.

<sup>2</sup> “One must not accept blessings of heretics, which are babblings rather than blessings.” *The Rudder*, Laodicia, Canon 32.

<sup>3</sup> “For it is not only the priest who touches the head, but also the right hand of Christ, and this is shown by the very words of the one baptizing. He does not say: ‘I baptize so and so,’ but ‘So and so is baptized,’ showing that he is only the minister of grace and merely offers his hand because he has been ordained to this end by the Spirit. The one fulfilling all things is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the undivided Trinity. It is faith in this Trinity which gives the grace of remission from sin; it is this confession which gives to us the gift of filial adoption.” St. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions, Second Instruction*, 26. “For it is not a man who does what is done, but the grace of the Spirit which sanctifies the nature of the water and touches your head...” St. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions, Second instruction*, 26. “That it is not man, but God Who anoints you through the priest’s hand, listen to what Paul says: ‘Now He who establisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God’ (I Cor. 1:21).

<sup>4</sup> Migne PG 60,21.

<sup>5</sup> “Paul appears to say: ‘Why are you elated at having baptized, when I for my part even give thanks that I have not done so!’ Thus saying, by a kind of divine art (οἰκονομικῶς) he does away with their swelling pride upon this point; not with the efficacy of the baptism, (God forbid,) but with the folly of those who were puffed up at having been baptizers: first, by showing that the gift is not theirs; and, secondly, by thanking God therefore.” St. John Chrysostom, *On First Corinthians, Hom. 3*.

<sup>6</sup> A brother attacked by the demon went to see an old man and said to him, “Those two brothers have a carnal bond.” And the old man saw that he was mocked by the demons, and he sent someone to call them. When evening came, he spread a mat for the two brothers and then covered them with a covering, saying, “The children of God are holy;” and he said to his disciple, “Shut this brother in the cell outside because it is he who has this temptation in himself.” Benedicta Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, SLG. “Systematic Sayings,” p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *The Desert Christian, Apophthegmata Pátrum*, St. John the Persian, p. 107 #1.

<sup>8</sup> St. Nilus of Ancyra, Book 3, Epistle 56, Migne 79,417 B.

<sup>9</sup> Someone wrote to St. Isidore of Pelusium and protested about a notorious presbyter of Egypt, Zosimas. The Saint — when he confirmed that the evil things that he heard about him were true — forewarned him thus: “Even if he (Zosimas) is worthy of a myriad of deaths, ... and used his priesthood as a weapon, daring what others wouldn’t dare... nevertheless you pollute your own mouth... ridiculing his profane acts.” *Second Book, Epistle 162*, Migne PG,78, 616C.

<sup>10</sup> On one occasion a brother committed sin, and the priest drove him out of the church. There was there a man of discretion whose name was Bessarion, and he also arose and went out of the church, and said, “If ye have judged that this man who hath committed only one offence is not fit to worship God, how very much less fit am I, who have committed many sins?” E.A. Wallis Budge. *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Abba Poemen, p. 115, para. 500.

<sup>11</sup> Again he said concerning humility, “[Humility] has no tongue in order to speak against someone for being careless, or someone else for being contemptuous; nor does it have eyes with which to notice another’s faults; nor, again, does it have ears to hear that which does not benefit the soul. Neither does it have anything against others, except one’s own sins. Instead, it renders one peaceful with all people for the sake of God’s commandment, and not merely some friendship. For, if one fasts six days out of seven and is entirely given to great toils and commandments, all of that person’s toils outside this way of humility are in vain.” Abba Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, John Chrissyavgis, Cistercian Publications, 2002, p. 88, Discourse #8.

<sup>12</sup> They said of Abba Macarius the Great that he became, as it is written, a god upon earth, because, just as God protects the world, so Abba Macarius would cover the faults which he saw, as though he did

not see them; and those which he heard, as though he did not hear them. Abba Macarius, *The Desert Christian*, Benedicta Ward, p. 134, Discourse #32.

An old man was asked [by a brother], “If I see the sin of my brother am I to despise him?” And the old man said, “If we hide the [the fault] of our brother, God will also hide our [faults]; and if we expose our brother’s [faults], God will also expose ours.” Abba Poemen, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, E.A. Wallis Budge. p. 225, para. 358.

Some Fathers questioned Abba Poemen saying, “If we see a brother in the act of committing a sin, do you think that we ought to reprove him?” The old man said to them, “For my part, if I have to go out and I see someone committing a sin, I pass on my way without reproving him.” *The Desert Christian*, Benedicta Ward, p. 183, Discourse #113.

<sup>13</sup> “Even if his father should have a myriad of faults, a man conceals them all. For it is said, “Glory not in the dishonor of thy father; for thy father’s dishonor is no glory unto thee. And if his understanding fail, have patience with him.” (Eccles. iii. 10-12.) And if this be said concerning our natural fathers, how much more so of our spiritual fathers? Reverence him, in that he daily ministers to thee, causes the Scriptures to be read, sets the house in order for thee, watches for thee, prays for thee, stands imploring God on thy behalf, offers supplications for thee, for thee is all his worship.” St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2,4*.

<sup>14</sup> “Yet because the Pharisee only said, ‘I am not as this publican,’ he destroyed all his merit. I am not, thou sayest, like this sacrilegious priest. And dost not thou make all in vain?” St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2,4*.

“All who consider themselves pure, have utterly condemned themselves as impure”. St. Epiphanius, *Migne PG 41,1028 CD*.

<sup>15</sup> “The sins of the priests must only be corrected by the bishop.” St. Symeon of Thessalonica, “Απαντα, (In Greek) p. 234.

If someone is aware of a sin committed by a priest, he must, as St. Basil the Great says, report it to the hierarch, that there may be an examination made by him.” St. Symeon of Thessalonica, “Απαντα, p. 369.

“Await the Judge, and usurp not the office of Christ.” St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2,4*.

<sup>16</sup> “One should not think of the priest as being deposed and profane before the Church makes that decision.” St. Symeon of Thessalonica, “Απαντα, (in Greek) p. 370.

<sup>17</sup> *The Elder Joseph of Optina*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> *Eleutherotypia*, 20/3/05, (in Greek) “Depravity and impurity are found also in the highest ranks of the clergy. In the parishes, we should adopt a holy and spiritual attitude. The cleansing will begin from the lower levels. If a certain priest causes scandals, we should not go where he goes. Let the people leave him by himself.” *Eleutherotypia*, 20/3/05, (in Greek).

<sup>19</sup> “For we are obliged to receive Communion even from a priest whom we can see with our eyes to be sinning carnally.” *The Rudder*, Footnote 1 of Canon 22 of St. Nicephorus the Confessor.

“If, therefore, we are worthy of participating in the Divine Mysteries, we receive no harm by the unworthy life of the priest, but it will be unto remission of sins and salvation.” St. Anastasius of Sinai, *Migne PG*, 89, 848B.

“There are some who, thinking that they are doing something good, do not receive Communion from these priests, but they are ignorant of the fact that they will receive greater condemnation.” *Sacred Parallels*, para. 29 (in Greek).

“If someone is aware of a sin committed by a priest... One should not consider the priest to be deposed and profane, before the Church makes that decision. If he leaves the judgment to God regarding this, and accepts the sanctification from the priest as from an instrument, he will receive perfect sanctification, and a greater reward, inasmuch as he approaches the Gift through faith, rather than for the sake of that man’s virtues, and looks to God for all and not to man.” St. Symeon of Thessalonica, “Απαντα, p. 369-370 (in Greek).

<sup>20</sup> “Reverence all this, think of this, and approach him with pious respect. Say not, he is wicked. What of that? He that is not wicked, doth he of himself bestow upon thee these great benefits? By no means.

Everything worketh according to thy faith. Not even the righteous man can benefit thee, if thou art unfaithful, nor the unrighteous harm thee, if thou art faithful. God, when He would save His people, wrought for the ark by oxen. Is it the good life or the virtue of the priest that confers so much on thee? All is of grace. His part is but to open his mouth, while God worketh all.” St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2, 4*.

<sup>21</sup> “Offer to the Church the first fruits of your goods, without examining how they are spent.” *Sacred Parallels*, para. 29 (in Greek).

<sup>22</sup> “Perhaps an idea of what’s happening within the hierarchy may be seen in an interview with a well-known cleric: ‘Remember the Archbishop in the hierarchy. Instead of addressing the flock with a spiritual and pastoral word, he waves dossiers he has against the other hierarchs and says, “Here, I’ve got you also...” This proves their connivance. We understand on what level the majority of the Synod is on. The one threatens the other, the one covers the other. What type of cleansing are we talking about? ... I reckon that it was the greatest blow that the ecclesiastical establishment has ever received. Because the ecclesiastical establishment is at fault for all. If they had checked these dossiers years ago, we would not have what we have today. As long as His Holiness [*sic*] provokes [others], so much the more the attacks will be. There exists filth and impurity, and, indeed, in the highest level of the hierarchy.’” *Eleutherotypia*, 20/03/05. (in Greek)

<sup>23</sup> *Ta Nea*, Feb. 21/05.

<sup>24</sup> *Eleutherotypia*, Feb. 21/05.

<sup>25</sup> Migne *PG* 89, 848 A-B.

<sup>26</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2, 4*.

<sup>27</sup> “It is true, there are ill and weak sheep, those that sin, but still, they trail along behind the flock. But faith has been lost by those who have fallen completely behind and are left to be eaten by beasts.” *Hieroschemamonk Feofil, Fool for Christ’s sake*, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville NY, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> St. John Climacus states in the *Ladder*: “People who are still subject to passions can often know the thoughts in the souls of others on account of their great love for them” ... *The Ladder*, step 26a, 100, p. 176, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978.

Let those take note, who run after “saints” who have miracles to show, but are in communion with heresy, or are themselves unorthodox.

<sup>29</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, “Being in communion with (or being of one mind with) the things spoken against piety is worse than the works of darkness... Concerning the carrying out of the divine commandments, God’s love for man fills what is lacking.”

<sup>30</sup> “For if he teach perverted doctrine, though he be an angel, obey him not; but if he teach the truth, take heed not to his life, but to his words.” St. John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle to Timothy, Homily 2,4*.

<sup>31</sup> “Judge not lest ye be judged, concerns life, not faith.” St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews, Homily 34*.

<sup>32</sup> Chr. Giannaras, ‘Καθημερινή’ 13 Feb. 2005 (in Greek).