



STORIES, SERMONS, AND PRAYERS OF ST. NEPHON: AN ASCETIC BISHOP



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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY FATHER DEMETRIOS CARELLAS

Contents

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
PART I: FIRST STRUGGLES	7
FROM EGYPT TO CONSTANTINOPLE	7
THE TRAP	8
THE RETURN	9
BATTLE WITH THE DEMON OF UNSEEMLY SPEECH	11
GLUTTONY.....	12
SLEEP	13
IN THE FIRE OF CARNAL TEMPTATIONS.....	14
A HEART THAT IS BROKEN AND HUMBLED.....	17
THE DEVIL RETURNS.....	20
THE VALUE OF REPENTANCE.....	24
THE HEIGHT OF HUMILITY.....	26
HOW TO ATTEND CHURCH.....	27
HIS BOLDNESS TOWARD GOD.....	28
TEACHING OF THE PASSION OF DEBAUCHERY.....	30
THE OIL OF THE VIGIL LIGHT.....	32
THE SPIRIT OF VAINGLORY	33
HOW PEOPLE QUARREL	36
THE CHRISTIAN TABLE	37
COUNSELS AND INSTRUCTIONS	38
CHARITY AND ITS REWARD	42
BLASPHEMOUS THOUGHTS	44
THE AWESOME SPLENDOUR OF GOD.....	45
DEBATE WITH A DEMON.....	46
THE MERCILESS RICH MAN AND HIS PUNISHMENT.....	47
BLACKS WITH WHITE SOULS	48
PRAYER FOR ONE ABOUT TO DIE	51
CHARITY AGAIN	56

IN THE CENOPIA	57
PART II: TOWARDS HEIGHTS	58
VISION: FUTURE JUDGMENT	58
THE WILD DOE	71
THE CROSS IS THE GLORY OF ANGELS AND THE WOUNDER OF DEMONS	72
HOW SOULS TRAVEL TO HEAVEN	73
TWO MIRACULOUS HEALINGS	79
WHEN ILLNESS SAVES.....	80
THE DEATH OF SINNERS IS EVIL.....	81
BITTER DEATH, PURE SOUL	83
THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF GOD.....	85
FERVENT ENTREATY	87
GREAT DOXOLOGY	89
CONVERSING WITH AN ANGEL	90
ATTENDING THE DIVINE LITURGY	92
THE CITY AND THE DESERT	94
THE COMPLAINTS AND JOYS OF THE DEMONS.....	96
THE GIFTS OF CHRIST AND THE INGRATITUDE OF PEOPLE.....	99
ADVICE TO A YOUNG MAN.....	101
AN ALL-NIGHT CONTRITE PRAYER.....	103
THE OPPOSING ARMIES.....	106
DIALOGUE WITH HIMSELF.....	107
MISFORTUNES AND THE INNOCENT INFANTS	109
CONVERSATION WITH A NOBLE.....	112
IS THERE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD?	115
PART III: THE HIERARCH	117
WHEN GOD SETS TRAPS	117
THE GOOD SHEPHERD.....	120
THE SEA, THE SWIMMERS, AND THE TWO WOMEN	122
TOWARD THE JOURNEY'S END.....	124
REMEMBER, O LORD	127

RECEIVE ME 129
HEAVENLY VISITORS 130

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

We are deeply grateful to Father Lazarus, the Athonite monk from the Holy Monastery of St Dionysius, who discovered the unpublished ancient manuscript which so vividly describes the many ascetic struggles and teachings of the almost unknown fourth century Saint Nephon.

But his struggles and teachings, although exceptional - for he lived in the city and not in a monastery - were not as singular as the divine visions with which the Grace of God enabled him to see "what eye has not seen, nor ear heard", and to give us a glimpse also.

The manuscript, discovered in the library of the Holy Monastery of St Dionysius, dates back to the year 1334, yet through its pages breathes a holy figure, very alive, who spent his entire existence in asceticism and almost unceasing prayer, and whose teachings are as relevant today as they were then. Father Lazarus, feeling that he had discovered a treasure in The Ascetic Bishop, and realizing what a wealth of spiritual benefit it had to offer, patiently copied it and graciously offered it to Archimandrite Cherubim Karambelas of the Monastery of the Paraclete. The brotherhood published it, thus making it available to any Christian who wished to read it and profit by it.

It is our sincere wish also that the reader will find this book as delightful and enlightening as we found it, and that he may receive the same spiritual benefit that we received as we translated it. In this spirit, then, we offer this book to any and all Christians with the conviction that they, too, will profit spiritually by the life of the Ascetic Bishop so loved by our Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

by Father Demetrios Carellas

Over five years ago, my beloved spiritual father, Archimandrite Ephraim, instructed me to “read the lives of the Saints and the writings of the Ascetics (Gerontikon).” I cannot put into words the spiritual joy that has been poured into my wretched heart as I have struggled against my slothfulness to obey my holy Elder's instruction. The life of each Saint which I have read, together with each encounter with the sayings of a Desert Father, have been like rays of heavenly light which are helping my darkened soul to begin to taste the meaning of the Holy Gospels, to begin to experience, albeit minutely, the mysteries of God!

Before I was asked to write an introduction to this book, I would have found it difficult to suggest the life of one Saint and one Desert Father's instructions that would fully illustrate why we must read the lives of the “Holy Ones” - why we must turn to the teachings of the holy Ascetics, if we are truly to prepare ourselves to do battle "against the spiritual hosts of wickedness" (Eph. 6:12) in the trenches of our everyday lives. But after reading (and re-reading) the life of St Nephon, I now can enthusiastically recommend one book which illustrates both of the above points! Glory be to God!

Rejoice, and glorify the Lord, dear reader! Rejoice! For you are about to begin a “spiritual odyssey” which - at times - will fill your heart to overflowing with indescribable joy; and - at other times - fill your eyes with blessed tears of repentance. Pray fervently to God to open wide the gate of your heart to “lay aside all worldly cares” from your mind, so that the Spirit-filled pages that follow can be “planted” with the garden of your heart!

Come and see holy Nephon, who, as a young man, succumbed for a time to the “provocative temptations” of the demons, and lived a sinful life; but who, by the grace of God, was led to repentance and cleansed by Him of all pollution of flesh and spirit. Come and see the great ascetic, who kept vigils and fasts which defied human nature; but who, when at table as an invited guest, would eat whatever he was served without comment or hesitation. Come and see a true shepherd of souls and a living icon of our Lord Jesus, who conversed regularly with the Angels, the Saints, the Most-holy Theotokos, and even the Lord Himself, but who, after striking a deer to prevent it from harming his disciple, went and bowed before the animal and said, “I have sinned, forgive me.” Come and see a “good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:21) of the Master, who was given a vision of the Kingdom of heaven that lasted fourteen days; but who “fell at the feet of the young man” to whom he had just given spiritual guidance!

I am excited for you, dear reader! The God-inspired words of St Nephon's many prayers are waiting to fall like a gentle rain upon the “seeds” of virtue, which were planted in the virgin soil of your heart on the day that you were baptized "with water and the Spirit!" Wait until your mind “feasts” upon his numerous spiritual instructions on such critical subjects as blasphemous thoughts, the great love which our holy Lady, the Saints, and the holy Angels have for all of us! And I assure you, your heart will leap for joy when it receives such wonderful stories as the Elder

Sozon's encounter with a poor soul, and the repentance of a sinful man named Basil! Enough of my babbling, which is like dirt in the presence of the "gold" which follows!

Begin your journey, dear friend in the risen Lord! May St Nephon intercede for you, so that your mind and heart receive each precious word. And may it please our Lord Jesus that all who read this book will mystically become a part of the 'flock' for whom St Nephon - then and now - offers the following prayer:

"Remember, O Lord, everyone who will commemorate Your servant. Breathe Your Holy Spirit in their hearts. Grant them repentance. virtue, and dispassion. Crush the evil dragon under their feet. Into Your hands I surrender this flock which Your right hand entrusted to me. Keep it faithful to Your name. Shepherd it by Your mighty hand, O Most High God Keep it invulnerable until the consummation of the ages." Amen!

PART I: FIRST STRUGGLES

FROM EGYPT TO CONSTANTINOPLE

During the time of Constantine the Great, a nobleman of the royal palace, named Savatios, was living in Constantinople. He was an experienced warrior, and the emperor appointed him military governor of Almiroupolis in Egypt.

All the inhabitants of that city showered him with honors and favors, especially the first nobleman, Agapetos. Agapetos often visited the home of the general accompanied by his eight-year-old son, Nephon.

One day when they were talking, Savatios asked the nobleman: "Does the child read and write?" "Unfortunately no, because we do not have teachers in our city." "And why don't you send him to Constantinople?" the general suggested. "There we have good and capable teachers. I will be happy to have him stay in my home until he is instructed in the sacred letters."

The child studied with great diligence. He had so much desire to become educated, that he even dedicated most of his evening hours to studies. In such a way, he succeeded in learning a lot in a short period of time.

At the same time, he showed great devoutness toward God. He loved to go to the holy services. And when he would hear the struggles and martyrdom's of the saints read, he marveled deeply at their zeal and valor. For that reason, whenever he would find the lives of the saints - ascetics or martyrs - he would read them avidly and pondered over them, thus deriving great spiritual benefit.

His studies led to his love for quiet, meekness and humility. Everyone admired him when they saw that he demonstrated mature thought and wisdom at such a young age.

An important characteristic was his special love for the poor. He would devote himself to them with all his heart, and whenever he could, he would make sure that they had all the necessities.

Once he happened to hear from a devout Christian that he should keep himself pure of carnal sins. He asked himself: "I wonder if I will be able to achieve this virtue, because one has to struggle harshly to overcome the heat of the flesh. However, with the help of God, beginning today I will not look at any woman in the face."

THE TRAP

A long time had elapsed and he had progressed both in his studies and in virtue. A young man now, he longed for his parents and his country and was preparing to leave.

However, General Savatios' wife, who did not have a child of her own, seeing Nephon's virtue and progress, was trying to keep him in order to make him her adopted son and heir to her fortune. However, she was not able to persuade him and fell into great depression.

When the steward of the house saw his mistress sorrowful and learned the reason for her grief, he asked to have him turned over to his supervision, adding: "I will make him forget both his parents and his country completely."

The steward then took charge of him and started dragging him in the company of young men with pleasure - loving lives and to various revelries. Nephon, being young and inexperienced, surrendered to that life of entertainment, to eating, drinking, and to extravagance, as if to console himself in his grief for the loss of his parents.

Youth is easily led into these roads. "Bad company ruins good morals." Drunkenness, dissipation, debaucheries, clouded his mind and so, the former silent, quite, meek and humble Nephon now became garrulous, insulter, scoffer, singer, dancer and reveler. He completely forgot parents, country, and relatives. He quit his studies and was indifferent to every virtue.

Seeing him in such a condition, a good Christian would often say to him: "Woe to you, Nephon! What a mess you've become! Come to your senses and try to reform."

These words made Nephon sigh and tear many times, as he would reflect on the evil life he was living. However, he was not able to give it up. The frightful power of habit conquered him.

One day he went out to see a certain friend of his, called Nicodemus. As soon as he saw Nephon, he kept staring at him as if he were absent minded. Nephon was surprised and said to him:

"Why do you look at me like that? Do you see me for the first time?"

And Nicodemus answered him: "Believe me, my friend, I must be losing my mind! Your face seems ugly and black."

Nephon understood. His sinful deeds made him look like that. Full of shame, he covered his face with his hands and left saying to himself "Woe to me, the wretch! How did I come down to this pitiful plight? I wonder if I can repent and correct myself. And if I repent, is there a chance that I may be saved? Who will tell me? Who will assure me that the Lord will have mercy on me? How will I dare ask God's mercy with all the sins that I have committed?"

THE RETURN

He was absorbed in meditation, and these thoughts kept drilling his brain until nightfall. In his grief he went to bed without eating. In a little while he said to himself: "At least let me get up and say a prayer to God."

However, as soon as the devil, the enemy of good, realized his intention, he started attacking his soul with a strange cowardice, hissing to him this odd thought: "If you get up now in the middle of the night to pray, you will become possessed and you will go crazy instantly."

With this thought he would confuse and frighten him a lot. Nephon, however, succeeded in overcoming the fear by saying to himself: "All this time that I stayed up all night in my sinful desires, nothing bad happened to me, and it will happen to me now, that I want to pray to God? Curse onto you, wicked and filthy spirit!"

And immediately he flew out of bed with eagerness. However, as soon as he turned toward the East, a black cloud appeared before him, which frightened him so much, that it paralyzed him and made him fall on his bed as though dead. He trembled for his sins, while at the same time he wondered at the obstacle the devil was presenting to him so that he would not pray.

In the morning, however, reproaching himself, he went to church. He stood in a corner. At one point lifting his eyes he faced the icon of the Theotokos. He sighed from the very depths of his soul and said: "Most Holy Theotokos Virgin, Mother of mercy and compassion, take pity on me and have mercy on me, the sinner."

While offering this supplication with tearful eyes, it seemed to him that the Theotokos turned and looked at him with a gladsome and gentle look. Nephon felt great comfort. He continued, therefore, to pray tearfully for a long time. And later he went out of the church saying to himself: "Do you see, wretch, how God loves you and welcomes you in order to save you? And you abandoned Him. Just think, miserable one, how the Theotokos instantly helped you." And in this way, comforted, he glorified God.

Another day when he was going again to that church, he saw a passer-by sinning and immediately criticized him mentally and disliked him.

When he entered the church and lifted his gaze to the icon of the Theotokos, he saw her looking at him sternly and turning away from him.

Nephon felt great sorrow and disturbance because of this. His mind could not grasp the reason for it right away. However, carefully examining himself; he understood: Because he criticized that passerby with his thought, that was why the Lady Theotokos turned away from him now.

He immediately fell to the ground and confessed his sin. He cried bitterly and begged the Most Holy Theotokos to forgive him. And after he had prayed for a long time, he saw again the icon looking at him with a gladsome face. Thus, relieved, he left the church.

From then on, as soon as he sinned, the icon of the Theotokos would censure him. And when with tears he would confess his sins, he would receive forgiveness and comfort and in this way he would reform.

When a few days had gone by, he saw in his dream that he found himself in a big house. Suddenly, he saw many black and dark demons who were running toward him furiously, with the obvious intention of killing him. He escaped to the other side of the house and finding a church entered it, shut the doors and he was saved. When, however, he came out again later, the black and dark demons pursued him again. Running so that they would not capture him, he re-entered the church and again was saved.

He would see this dream continuously for one week. Then he realized that it was not possible to be saved from the wickedness of the devils, if he did not go to church often to pray to God. And indeed, from then on he would take refuge in the House of God regularly, beseeching the Lord to save him from the tricks of the wicked demons.

BATTLE WITH THE DEMON OF UNSEEMLY SPEECH

In spite of all this, the wicked and filthy spirit of obscenities fought him a lot. And he struggled to chase it away fervently beseeching God, until one night he saw Stephen, the first Martyr, in his dream.

“Hail, Nephon, servant of God,” he said to him. “Your life is good, but you pollute it with filthy talk and swearing. For this reason I promise you that, if you struggle to conquer the wicked demon that incites you to swear, I will be your helper.”

Nephon awakened with big decisions. After thanking St Stephen, he placed a small pebble in his mouth and left it there many days, so that he wouldn't swear. And if some time the wicked one tricked him into swearing at someone, he would go aside and with his fist would beat his body saying: “I'll force you to become humble and learn meekness and silence, and not to become angry and swear.”

For the same reason he gave himself penance to hit himself with his fists forty times every day. And if any temptation or passion fought him, then the punches increased to one hundred or even two.

He became weak by hitting his body like this daily. Often he would faint due to the pain and would fall down as if dead saying to himself “Woe to you, miserable Nephon! If you can't endure this little pain, how will you endure the unbearable tortures of hell? But courage, because the more the outer man - the body - wears out, the more the inner one - the soul - is renewed.”

The devil, seeing him torture his body harshly, would shout to him: “Wretched Nephon, don't you feel at all sorry for your body and you beat it so unmercifully?”

“Filthy demon, you came to order me what to do even in this? Take care, because if you had flesh and fell into my hands, I would show you what kind of tortures Nephon knows!”

GLUTTONY

Whenever the devil fought him with gluttony, Nephon always confronted him with the same aggressiveness, and in this way he would chase him away. But he would return furious to fight him more violently.

Then Nephon, having his confidence in God's help, would say to the wicked spirit: "Today I will eat and drink, to show you that not even in this way can you keep me from prayer, because I have God as my helper."

And after he would eat and drink well, he would say to himself: "Think, Nephon, that as soon as a dog eats and drinks, he barks joyfully. Well, then, you too, since you also ate and drank of all the gifts of God, you must thank Him."

Therefore, he would go to church, and with his hands raised to heaven, he would say: "Glory to You, O Christ, my God, for filling me with Your earthly goods! I beg you, O Most Merciful One, do not deny me Your Heavenly Kingdom."

To this prayer he would add even another and still another for a long time. Then he would turn to the devil and say: "Do you see, wicked and filthy one, I both ate and drank, but you did not succeed in either keeping me away from the church, or in preventing me from praying? Get out of my sight then, and go to the outer darkness!"

SLEEP

But the devil became ferocious when he heard these degrading words and would bring him terrible drowsiness and yawns. He was trying hard in this way to make the righteous one languid. However, as soon as Nephon would feel drowsy, he would take his staff and beat his body shouting angrily:

“Insatiable slave, I gave you to eat and drink; now you want to sleep too? I'll teach you to be sleepy!”

At the same time he would continually beat himself all the more harshly, so that from the painful beating, sleep would - naturally! - disappear. And then, sober, he would stay awake and pray.

After the prayer, again he would say, “Listen, Nephon, if now that you ate and drank; you serve your Lord sleeplessly, I will permit you again to be filled with the gifts of Christ. If, however, you start to get sleepy on me, I will starve you to death!”

The devil, hearing these words, shouted to him furiously: “Oh, you are even more foxy than the demons! Tell me, who taught you such tricks, and where did you learn such slyness? I fought with many, but up to now I never met such a thickhead It's not enough that he tortures and swears at me, but on top of that, he ridicules me and tells everyone that he is not afraid of demons. Woe to me! If I knock him down once, he gets up and knocks me down two and three times. What should I do? But he is still young! I will pull him down again to the mire of debauchery.”

IN THE FIRE OF CARNAL TEMPTATIONS

Here he comes again, in a few days, inflaming and inciting Nephon with shameful thoughts. However, he recognized the battle and said to himself: "Here we go again from the beginning, wretched Nephon!"

And from that day he started eating only dry bread except on weekends. Then he would fruit only, and shortly he started eating every other day or abstaining from food all week, not drinking even water. In this way he subdued and inured the flesh to hardships. Especially for the lack of water, he used to say: "If a man fasts forty days and another eats regularly the whole week, but without drinking water, that second one suffers more than the first one. Because he who eats without drinking water lights a furnace in his bowels and is tortured with thirst. While he who abstains from both bread and water has an easier struggle."

A few times when brave Nephon was burning with thirst, to fool the devil, he would put water in his glass and say: "O my soul, what nice cold water we are going to drink!" But as soon as his tongue touched the glass, he would spill the water on the ground.

The wicked demon would lose it with his very clever fighting spirit and shout: "Wretch, the grace of the Crucified One Whom you have inside you, has made all my powers useless! How frightful is the power of the Nazarene!"

However, again he armed himself to incite him with carnal temptations and fight him in his sleep. He would inflame his imagination, and he dreamed that he fell into a shameful act. He flew out of bed then, and when he realized what the spirit of lewdness had prepared for him - be it in his dream - he shouted to himself: "Woe to you, Nephon, who sleep too much! What happens now?" He considered his imaginary sin and came to the decision: "Now you will taste bitter affliction, instead of pleasure!"

And immediately grabbing a long stick, he hit his feet so terribly, that they were black and blue for a long time. He prayed with sighs confessing to God: "Forgive me, Lord, for falling into a grave sodomitic passion. Have mercy on me, the sinner, the shameless one, the prodigal, the infamous, and guide me to the road of Your commandments, as I desire."

He fought terribly with the spirit of lewdness. He even reached the point where he would hit his body with stones. With that kind of severe aggressiveness he would fight the filthy temptations.

He struggled for fourteen years, until the Lord freed him and relieved him by putting an end to the frightful battle in the following way: Once Nephon was sleeping and it seemed to him that he found himself in a field. He said that his bosom was filled with dung and rotteness, which bothered him unbearably, because the stench that came out of there disgusted him. As he was standing laden like that and miserable, a man dressed in white appeared before him.

"Come with me," he said to him.

He followed him holding his bosom until he reached a ditch filled with mud. The angel of the Lord turned to Nephon then: "Empty in here whatever you have in your bosom." He obeyed. And immediately he felt indescribable lightness and a complete numbness of the flesh. He prayed ardently: "You, my Lord, Who hold the entire creation in the palm of Your Hand, grant me strength against the shameful spirits, so that I may be able to win the Grace of the Holy Spirit."

As soon as he said these words of the prayer and raised his hands, the Spirit of God flashed before him and filled his heart with gladness.

"Nephon, Nephon," He said to him, "I will give you strength and power against the filthy demons. But keep yourself always deeply humble. Because I love the humble very much, while I turn away from the proud. In addition: never take an oath; never ridicule anyone; never let a lie come out of your mouth; do not become angry; and never judge any man, even if you see him sinning. All of these will be punished severely. Be careful, then, not to be like sinners. Do not forget that you are travelling amongst the snares of the devil! Guard yourself not to be caught in one of them. Courage! I am with you."

When the saint came to himself and became aware of the heavenly visit, he glorified the All-Good God with all his heart.

"Truly," he would say, 'from that time the spirit of immorality had no power over me. And if it ever dared to bother me, I always came out stronger than it, because I would say to it: "Take care, wicked one, for I know what you are making me do. You are making me desire a woman, so that I can sin with her flesh. But what is flesh? It is blood, fat and nerves. And, further in, the stomach full of stench and dung. And if you still desire her, go to the cemetery to see her rotted and filthy. Therefore, how do you find pleasure in all that, impudent dog? Because that is what you are urging me to desire. But all that is corruption and stench. How can I taste them? Get out of my sight, shameful spirit!"

The devil would "lose it" with Nephon's wisdom and he would tremble. While the saint would look at him mockingly sneering at his weakness.

In spite of all that, the devil would not leave the man of God alone. He would always invent new, treacherous snares.

One day, now carefree but also careful, Nephon asked the Lord: "Lord, did the devil go away completely from me?" But before he received an answer, he saw in the distance, away from his room, a black dog lying down in a filthy place.

"Do you suppose that dog is a demon?" he asked himself, pointing to him with his finger. Immediately the dog jumped up and came running toward him with fierce moods.

"Are you pointing to me? Here I am. I've come!" he squealed threateningly. But the saint with just one of his blows made him vanish.

Again, one night when he was sleeping on a stool of the church, the tempter came and climbed on his feet. When he awakened, he tried to get up, but his feet felt as if they were tied. He understood: it was the devil! He spat in his face and said to him reproachfully: "O shameless enemy of God, wasn't what happened to you by the power of my Lord Jesus Christ enough?" He tried to relieve his right foot a little and, as if he were trying to kick the devil, he said to him: "May God destroy you, wicked one! And you know well I am not afraid of your filthy ruses."

A HEART THAT IS BROKEN AND HUMBLLED

After a few days Nephon had a vision: There was a long road which led to the East. But it was guarded by huge black men armed with spears, that did not allow anyone to pass. At the beginning of the road a large number of people crowded together, but they would not advance because they were afraid of those blacks. Nephon was also amongst the crowd and he was asking himself how he would cross the road without danger.

Since nobody knew what to do, a white dressed man came and stood in their midst. "What cowardice is this that has overtaken all of you?" he asked.

"We are afraid of the black men," they answered.

"And you, why don't you advance?" he turned to Nephon. "Because of the same fear," he answered.

"Did you perhaps ever pray to be given humility?" "Yes! That is what I continually ask of my God."

"Well, then, here, He sent it to you. Behold the wonder!"

And he sees: It appeared that the angel had torn open his chest and removed his heart in front of everyone. He threw it on the ground and put another in its place.

"Go on your way now," the angel ordered him. "The blacks become deadened as you pass by, and nobody will touch you."

Then the rest of the people also begged the angel: "Do the same to us, we beseech you, so that we can travel unhindered on this road!"

"Ask the Lord for it with prayer and fasting, too, and be sure that He will give it to you. If you do not ask for it, you will not receive it. And if you do not receive it, you will not succeed in passing by this road. And you should know that it is the only one which leads to life! Look, the one that you saw receive 'a heart that is broken and humbled' asked God for it for many years, and he just now gained it. See how he is progressing!"

They turned their gaze and saw him crossing the road unhindered. He arrived at the first sentry-box which consisted of two blacks. As soon as they saw him, they drew their knives and came towards him, but all at once their hands turned to stone, and he passed by undisturbed. He advanced to the second sentry-box and crossed it in the same way. The same thing happened with the third, the fourth, and with all the rest, until he reached a place where a multitude of blacks were gathered. Immediately they all rushed to hit him, but they were left entirely numb and senseless. There were so many of them, that blessed Nephon, not finding room to pass, started to push one, trample on the other, to open a path.

"Who put up these abominations here to obstruct the road, so that we cannot travel toward life?" he shouted.

And while everyone stared at him with admiration, he advanced triumphantly to the end.

When the vision faded and he came somewhat to himself, he wondered what all that meant. However, the Holy Spirit still had hold of him and enlightened his mind:

“You want to understand what you saw? Pay attention! The road on which you travelled is ‘the straight and narrow.’ The black men are the wicked demons, who oppose all those who want to travel on it. By now you must have learned that no one can pass by this road, if he does not ask for and receive a broken and humbled heart. You asked for it and received it. From now on ‘you shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flies by day, nor for the thing that walks in darkness,’ because ‘you made the Most High your refuge’. Be careful, however, because a great temptation will rise up against you; but you will not be conquered, because I am with you.”

The Spirit of God said these words to him and left him. The saint was enthralled by the ineffable fragrance which inundated him.

“The human heart,” he mumbled to himself, “cannot describe what the sweetness of the fragrance of the Holy Spirit is like. It surpasses every pleasure and delight. I would never want to experience the pleasures of the world again.”

When he left his meditations, he turned on himself again. “Woe to me, the sinner, the foul one, the wicked, the immoral, the obscene, the blasphemous! Woe to me who surpass the demons in sin! What might I do to be saved from ‘them that work iniquity?’ Woe to me who sits ‘in the region and shadow of death.’”

It was always his habit to say, “Woe to me the sinner!” When he went to church, after the prayer he bowed to all with humility, while he himself shut his eyes so that he would not see anyone bowing to him. He despised human glory that much. Many times I heard him praying with sighs and saying: “My Lord do not permit men to glorify me. Do not permit them to show me admiration and respect. Give me instead the glory that remains in the ages. Because only then will my spirit rest, when it rejoices close to You.”

Many times, as he was going to church, he would upbraid himself saying: “You came here, too, wretched one, to infect these holy people? Woe to you, filthy one, because even though in shape you resemble man, in life and deeds you are a wicked demon!” And he would add: “My God; have mercy on me, because I haven't done anything good for Your sake.”

With these thoughts he succeeded in trampling himself underfoot and feeling that he was dirt at the feet of the brothers.

He would often say when my himself: “Nephon, the dust that the brothers are shaking from their sandals is more precious than you, because it comes from holy feet; while you, miserable one, have surpassed every satanic wretchedness. Oh, woe to you on Judgment Day!” Degrading himself in this way, he served and worshiped the Lord with admirable piety.

When he wanted to give money or something else to someone poor, he would say: "Your own of Your own we offer unto You on behalf of all and for all."

And he would bow his head first paying homage to the beggar with fear and trembling and he would explain: "Is it not enough that Christ comes to our feet to beg, but must He also go through the trouble of begging us, imploring us and paying homage to us? No! But we must - according to His commandment - give to Him eagerly and console Him, so that we may have His mercy. Blessed is he who cares for Christ!"

His entire life rolled by in deep humility. If he happened sometime to err, he would run to Church at once to confess, imploring God with sighs to forgive him. He was in the habit of saying that, since man sins every day, he must also repent every day. Thus, while Satan may be building, we will be destroying.

THE DEVIL RETURNS

Just as the Lord had warned him, that great temptation came. It was Saturday and Nephon was praying. Every Saturday he would start his prayer in the evening and finish in the morning. He neither slept nor sat down. All night he would pray and do prostrations, imitating Daniel or rather the angels, about whom the prophet says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him." He kept this schedule not only on Sundays, but also during all the feast days of the Lord, according to Church tradition. The night before he would recite his own prayer, which he repeated in the morning also. But what a prayer that was! Full to the limit with divine knowledge and wisdom. It locked within it all the eternal theology, the unoriginate generation of the Son, the creation of the heavenly powers, the effable and ineffable, the marvelous, divine dispensation, nature's grandeur, eternity, the celestial, the terrestrial and the infernal, the visible and invisible, the comprehensible and incomprehensible, the rational and the mystical - as we will confirm further down, if we may convey here some fragment of that prayer.

Well, that Saturday night he began his prayer as always. Suddenly, he heard something like a loud gong that echoed in his ears. He lost it and was asking himself what it could be! At that very second, behold, the devil! He was roaring, threatening and raging against Nephon. He paralyzed his mind and left him shaken, terrified. He tried to pray, but he could not think clearly. Numbness, yawning, laziness and drowsiness took hold of him. And with them, babbling, unbearable depression, and myriad other evils.

Thus he continued to torture him trying hard to cut off completely the pure and sovereign mind. Very depressed due to the satanic gloom, Nephon would cry out: "O sinful Nephon, it seems that your sins have caught up with you now! The temptation which you feared is truly terrible. The infernal dragon confused your mind and now rages against you. Be careful that he does not swallow you up alive!"

And saying this, he made the sign of the cross. But the shameless devil caused him great confusion and struggled to coerce him with these cunning words: "Either you quit praying or we will both sit right here. I'm not budging an inch from your side, no matter what happens!"

"I do not hear you, filthy demon," Nephon would answer. "Because if the Almighty has ordered you to put me to death, I humbly accept His Command. But if my God has not ordered such a thing, I scorn all your tricks."

"But, is there a God? There is no God!" the devil hissed at him. And with these satanic words he clouded his mind with thick darkness, again adding: "But is there a God? There is no God!"

The evil one had prepared an infernal plan from before, in order to succeed in confusing the saint and convince him - as if that were possible - that there is no God. Terribly hurt on hearing these frightening words, the servant of God brokenheartedly would cry out. "The fool has said in his heart: 'There is no God.' Dissolve, revolting darkness, and do not blaspheme! Get out of my sight, because I believe absolutely that there is a God Who will surrender you to eternal fire because

of your ruses!” Infuriated, the malicious devil clouded his mind even more. With the haze of his satanic sorcery he would eliminate every sacred word from his mind. Nephon would begin to recite a psalm, as was his custom, but often, although his mouth was speaking, his mind did not understand anything because it seemed wrapped in fog. This caused him unbearable anxiety and sadness. “Woe to me, the wretched one! I do not know what I am saying.” And again with great effort he would start his prayer from the beginning. This torment, at the time of prayer, lasted four long years. And the devil never ceased to repeat to him daily: “There is no God!”

And with that blasphemous phrase he would sink him into inconsolable grief. His disturbance and affliction were so great that you would see him walking like a desperate man, indifferent about everything.

In the meantime, the devil would continue: “I don't intend to ask you for anything else, just stop praying morning and evening.” The servant of God, shocked with the devil's impudence, answered him: “Even if I fall into immorality, and if I kill, and even if I commit any other kind of sin, I am not going away from the feet of my Lord Jesus Christ.”

“What are you saying? Does Christ exist? There is no Christ, I alone rule creation. Therefore, why do you deny me?”

“Yes, wretch, Christ exists! And He is both man and God!” Nephon answered “How long will you torment the creature of God, evil one? Did you imagine that you would delude me, black and gloomy one? I know too well that you are dark and in darkness you will be tormented in all eternity. Get away from me, enemy of God and of His saints!” But that sly one would not separate himself at all from his side and would continually repeat that there is no God: “What? You mean to say that there is a God? And where did you see this God that you are talking about? Who showed Him to you? Where does He stay? Where does He live? Show Him to me and I will believe in Him also!”

As we said before, for four years the devil tormented him in this way. No matter what he was doing, whether eating, sleeping, or praying, the devil would place in him that thought, forcing him to believe that there is no God. He would drill his mind incessantly and would confuse his logic with that continuous repetition. It was sad to see the saint fall into sorrowful doubt. At times he would say that there is a God. At times, however, taught by the devil, he imagined that He did not exist. He fell into deep despondency. In spite of all this, he did not neglect his prayer and his studies. So, one day, while he was praying in Church, the devil came again and began to give him the same thought.

And then! Suddenly he saw the face of the Lord Jesus Christ unfolding before his eyes. He sighed then from the bottom of his heart, stretched his hands toward that holy Face, and cried out: “O God my God, attend to me; why have You forsaken me? Assure me that You Are God, because I will be forced to stop what I am doing for Your Holy Name and do what the evil one tells me.”

He was standing and waiting for what he would hear. While he was looking at the Divine figure, he saw it suddenly shine like lightning illuminating his face and filling him with ineffable fragrance. Dazzled by the light and not being able to stand the awful glow, he fell trembling with his face to the ground.

“I believe in one God, the Father All-governing, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, my Creator and Master; and in His Holy and Life-giving Spirit,” he stammered. “My Lord Jesus Christ, do not be angry with me, O Most Merciful One, and do not send away from You the profane one who dared to insult Your Holy Name. You know, Lord, how the enemy bound me, sinking me into baneful unbelief. For this, forgive whatever disrespect I have shown to Your forbearing love of man.” He was still face down on the ground. When he said these words, he raised himself up a little and again saw that most-revered figure. What a luminous vision! The divine Face was full of light and sweetness.

With his soul full of delight, Nephon began to chant, “Lord, have mercy.” He remained dazzled, ecstatic by the heavenly vision. “Truly the God of Christians is great,” he cried out, “and great glory awaits him who takes refuge at His immaculate feet, because He never permits His creature to be lost. Blessed is God, and blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, Who saved me, even though I was bound in irons 'in the region and shadow of death.’”

He gave many more thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ and then left the church, returned to his cell, and slept a little. His heart had flooded with spiritual delight. It was a joy to see him, because now he was walking cheerfully, always smiling and optimistic. He was so cheerful towards everyone, that his acquaintances would ask themselves wondering: “He walked dejected and sullen for so many years. Why is he happy with everyone now? Do you suppose he saw some vision?”

They were trying to give an explanation to the mystery, while Nephon, from the time he saw the figure of the Lord, would often lift up his eyes and all night long would say: “Have mercy on me, You Who became man for my sake, Who are the only begotten Son of God, our courage and mediator to the Father, Who are the wealth of compassion and the indescribable love of man of the uncircumscribed divinity.”

Then he began to mock the evil one saying, “Where is that evil-doer who said there is no God? Let the filthy demon, the liar, the dark one, the malicious one, be ashamed now! I saw my Lord and He assured me, like blessed Thomas, when he did not believe. ‘My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.’” With these words of praise of our Theotokos, he would praise and ardently thank Him Who visited him in ineffable fragrance.

One night, after he had finished his regular prayer, he slept a little. In his sleep he saw an endless sea and in the middle an enormous fiery pillar with a shiny throne on its top. Suddenly someone appeared and asked him: “Why are you standing here? Climb up on the pillar because it is willed that you do so.”

When he heard this, he started to climb. With much effort he went up but couldn't reach the peak. Approximately seven feet remained. He was trying to lift his leg to step on the ledge, but he wouldn't dare, because when he saw the immense sea, he was terrified.

"Oh," he kept thinking, "sinner that I am, I don't know what to do! If I extend my foot to reach the top, I'm afraid that I may slip and drown. But again, to turn back and go down again seems hard to me."

He thought, labored, hesitated, he was at an impasse. But suddenly, without realizing how, he ventured a small attempt. It was enough to be able to easily step over the distance and to sit enthusiastically on the throne. With wonder he looked at the open horizon around him now. He marveled: "How did I climb up here? But also how will I be able to go down again?" At that very second, he woke up.

Perplexed, he wondered what all this meant. The next evening the same thing all over, the third also. Then his bewilderment reached its peak. "Lord," he prayed, "reveal to me what my vision means!" And the Lord enlightened him.

When he thought about it again, he himself began to explain it. "The ascent up the pillar is the difficult road of virtue which leads to the heavenly city. As for the obstacle of stepping over, this is what it means: Many times we return to things earthly and thus have difficulty mastering dispassion; because the throne on which I sat and rested overlooking everything is dispassion, which like a throne is over all virtues. If someone sits on it, he observes with a clear eye both things divine and human and discerns how the demons deceive people."

As soon as he succeeded in interpreting the dream, Nephon with all his heart glorified the Lord, Who cared for and looked after him so often.

THE VALUE OF REPENTANCE

One day, when I went to visit him, I found him sitting in his cell reading. As soon as he saw me, he was very happy. He greeted me with special love, and picked up his book again. I prevented him from reading and began to ask him about repentance. Then he answered me: "Believe me, brother, God Who is goodwill not judge the Christian because he sinned."

I was very surprised with these words and I asked him with respect: "In that case, then, as you say, sinners will not be judged? In other words, we should believe that there is no Judgment?"

"There very definitely is Judgment." he answered me.

"Then who will be judged?"

"Listen, my son, I'll tell it to you plainly. God does not judge the Christian because he sins, but because he does not repent. Because for one to sin and to repent is human, while not to repent is a trait of the devil and his demons. Since we do not live continually in repentance, that is why we will be judged."

Then with great wisdom he told me a wonderful incident, which leaves one who hears it amazed at the Lord's ineffable love for man.

When the Grace of God first visited him and led him to repentance, something similar to what happened to the Prodigal of the Parable happened to him also: He was in a district called Aristarchus' and was thinking about his sins. Suddenly the grace of the Holy Spirit pricked him within, and he said to himself:

"Sinful Nephon, let's go to church to confess our sins to God You do not know if you will be alive tomorrow. Run then! The Father of mercy, the All-Merciful God Who expects the repentance of the wretched and filthy, is sitting here waiting for us." Almost running, he arrived at the church of God with these thoughts. He raised his hands to the East and let a deep sigh escape from his heart:

"Father, accept the lifeless one, who lost his soul. Accept the den of sins. Accept the blasphemous one, the evil one, the shameless, the obscene, the polluted in soul and body. Accept the one enslaved in all demonic activities. Have mercy on me, the immoral, the thief the transgressor, the abomination of sin. Have mercy on me, rich Fountain of mercy, and do not turn away Your good face from me. Lord, do not say: 'I do not know you!' Do not say: 'Where were you up to now?' Do not despise me, the dirt, the smoke, the corruption, the iniquity, the disgrace, the abomination, the rubbish, the ruins of the demons, the scandal of men. Do not turn away, Master, but have pity on me and save me. Because I know, Lover of man, that You 'have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live.' I will not stop, until You have mercy on me, until You help me!"

He said these words and many more with a very bitter soul. And, suddenly, a sound came from heaven, and a terrible radiant light shone. This light in the form of two arms came down from the

height of heaven and embraced the saint saying: “Welcome, My child, My lost one! Now you are living again, My little one. Your eyes have been enlightened, your youth has bloomed again, and from now on you will glorify Me with your deeds!”

And saying these words, it disappeared into heaven, while the righteous one fell into ecstasy from the intoxication of the vision. When in a little while he came to, he cried out: “Glory to You, O God, glory to You!”

He repeated and repeated it unceasingly, because his heart had over-flowed from a divine fragrance and his mouth was full of spiritual honey. He prayed a long time after that indescribable vision. Then he returned to his cell, still in the same ecstasy and dazzled by the divine embrace.

From then on, as he would say, he travelled unencumbered on the road of his life, serving the Lord.

I first heard of this miracle from the very lips of the saint. His eyes were flooded with tears, when with awe and mystical joy he told it to me, because I always begged him persistently and would force him to tell me everything that happened to him. And since he loved me a great deal, he never hid anything from me.

The day that the All-Merciful Lord embraced him while he was praying, rolled by then. At night the righteous one prayed again to God with these words:

“O Lord ‘Who stretched out the heaven as it were a curtain’ and adorned it with stars, the sun, the moon, and the clouds, adorn me also with humility instead of stars. In place of the sun let Your Holy Spirit shine within me. Let Your wisdom illuminate my mind like the moon. Gird me with meekness, holiness and righteousness, instead of clouds. Gird my feet with the equipment of the Gospel of Your peace. My God, my God Who richly spread the wind in Creation so that the people may breathe and rejoice, richly pour within me the Grace and gift of the Holy and Life-creating Spirit, that I may become god-like, pure, full of light, modest, and meek full of grace and truth. Enrich me, O Lord with wisdom and spiritual knowledge.”

As he uttered these last words, the heavenly light again envelope him. At the same time, an angel of God appeared holding a vial filled with myrrh which he emptied on his head. It rolled from there and bathed his whole body. The place filled with fragrance. Even his clothes were fragrant for many days so that his friends wondered and asked him what it was.

And he would humbly answer: “I know that I am entirely submerged in sin. Now, who knows what this is.”

THE HEIGHT OF HUMILITY

He would answer like this because he had a humble spirit and turned away from vainglory and pride. He always beseeched God:

“My Lord, Who showed Your Immaculate Mother to be more venerable than the heavenly powers, forgive my sins through her holy intercessions and drive far away from me every immorality, impurity, judgment, jealousy, wrath, injustice, negligence, vainglory, pride, avarice, cruelty, drunkenness, evil desire, and especially the insignificant and very bitter praise of men. Yes, my God, grant that men consider me worthless, that they may detest me. O Lover of man, let no one on earth praise or honor me. My Lord, let no one say that Nephon is a saint, that I may not be punished for it. O God of Heaven and earth, deliver me from praise of men. Liberate me from the bonds of the desire to please man.”

With such prayers he succeeded in living very humbly.

One day he was talking to a few of his guests about vainglory and humility. When he finished, they bowed to him and left. After the strangers left, I asked him: “My father, why do you persistently look down at the ground when someone bows down to you?”

“My son,” he answered me, “when a brother bows to me, as he falls at my feet, with my thought I descend even lower, to Hades, and I stay there until the brother rises. Then I, too, ascend from Hades and bid him good-bye. I do this because I, the unclean, am not worthy to have the children of God fall at my feet.”

I was amazed by his words and sighing deeply I cried out: “Lord, have mercy!”

“Do not marvel, my child It would be better if you would be envious enough to do the same.” “But I don't know how you descend to Hades,” I remarked to him perplexed.

“If you cannot descend to Hades, go with your mind under the feet of your brother. If you cannot do that either, at least say, ‘I am the most sinful of all people.’ And if you cannot do that either, bow your head to the ground saying: ‘I am dust and to dust I shall return.’ And if this is still difficult, say always this divine word: ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner, and save me.’”

HOW TO ATTEND CHURCH

“Be very careful,” he continued, “when you are in church. Do not talk and when you chant, do not try to make your voice nice through vainglory, so that you will be pleasing to people.”

“Is all this a big sin?”

“You must know, my child, that there are countless angels above the people in church and invisibly sing along with them. But when one of the faithful begins to joke, to talk about worldly things, or to comment about others, the angels who see him, drop the hymn and weep bitterly for his plight saying: ‘Oh! into what deep imprisonment this man's soul has fallen! How impiously, shamelessly and without the fear of God he stands in church! God bent His ear for him to fill it with humble and devout prayer and he fills it with laughter and criticisms.’”

These words shook me and from then on I stood in church with more piety. I would remember what the saint said to me and, if sometime I would forget myself and say a word, I would be afraid and ashamed before the angels of God.

HIS BOLDNESS TOWARD GOD

One afternoon I was sitting and enjoying again his wise advice. When night fell, we left his cell to go and pray in the Church of the holy martyr Anastasius.

Just as we were passing by a narrow alley, we heard laughter and indecent songs from some tavern. The servant of God sighed with intense disenchantment. He lifted his gaze toward heaven and, whispering something, continued on this way. Instantly, all that demonic misbehavior ceased. Thus we passed unperturbed, without polluting our ears with anything offensive. As soon as we had gone away, the contemptible ones began again the same obscenities. I understood and marveled: At the time that Nephon became indignant and lifted his eyes toward heaven, he must have said: "Lord, shut their mouths to keep them from using obscene language, until we pass by." And that's what happened.

We arrived at the most venerable church of St Anastasius, we prayed with contrition a long time, and then left. We came across a big house on the coppersmith's road. Painted on the gate was the Mother of God holding the immaculate Child on her holy bosom, while the Magi offered their gifts to Him. The townspeople revere this icon very much. Day and night they continually come and go reciting long prayers.

When the saint saw the divine figure of the Lord, he raised his hands, and sighing began to pray:

"O Lord, God of heaven and earth, accept the prayer of Your servant, who lives in sins. You are the One Who came down from the Paternal bosom, O Lord, but without being separated from it. And astonishing the heavenly powers, You entered the womb of Your Glorified Mother, the holy Theotokos Mary. How singular this divine miracle! The Lord really passes through the 'shut' gate which is the womb of the Virgin. Naked upon entering, a God wearing flesh upon leaving. And the gate always remains 'shut.' You entered a perfect God; You departed a perfect God and perfect man. With two natures, with two substances, in one hypostasis. With two wills - the divine and the human - but always one Lord Jesus Christ, Word and reflection of the Father. You took-the form of a servant, even though You were in everything the same with the Father - except that the Father is not begotten. And you became like us in everything, except sin. You walked thus amongst men performing unique miracles as proof and confirmation of Your Almighty divinity ... Therefore, my Lord Jesus Christ, don't let me be lost within the multitude of any iniquities! But show me at this time Your compassionate and affectionate countenance! Overshadow me with Your Holy Spirit. O Good One and Lover of man, You know how to comfort my miserable soul and enrich me with the mercy of Your benevolence!"

He poured out the myrrh of his adoration with still many other words of prayer. Suddenly, a tremendous sound was heard, like the current of a rushing stream, which sprang out from the venerable figure of the icon and came toward him. The Spirit of God penetrated deeply into his heart and, like a strong whirlwind, snatched him from the earth. He found himself suspended in the air with his hands raised.

When he descended again, I saw his face radiating like the sun. He was walking now, but he did not seem to be aware that he was walking on the ground, as if the earth respected the saint and had become a soft sponge under his feet. You had the feeling that you were seeing someone fleshless flying through the air. He was sustained by the glory of God which transformed his every sense of gravity into light and freedom from passions.

TEACHING OF THE PASSION OF DEBAUCHERY

Our road passed by a house of ill repute with women of sin. Outside of this place of debauchery the saint saw a man of noble appearance, who was very grieved. He had hidden his face in his two palms and was lamenting; afterward he raised his hands toward heaven and prayed sighing, and again he wept filled with dejection.

Nephton himself started to weep, while at the same time approaching the unknown nobleman. "In the name of God, brother," he said to him, "what happened to you that you are so sad that you are weeping inconsolably outside this place of ill repute? Tell me, please, because your weeping is breaking my heart."

"Renowned Nephton, I am an angel of God as you know, at the time of baptism, every Christian receives from God a guardian angel of his life. I, too, undertook the task of guarding a man. But he embittered me thoroughly by sinning continually. Indeed he is now inside this house of ill repute and is lying in the bed of immorality with some woman of the street. Seeing this plight how can I not weep for the image of God that is plunged in such darkness?"

"Why don't you warn him to avoid sin?" Nephton asked again.

"Unfortunately, I cannot approach him, because from the time that he began to do evil, he is a slave of the demons, and I have no authority over him."

"But why don't you have any authority? Didn't God entrust his salvation to you?"

"Listen to me, servant of God Our Lord created man with free will and let him travel on the road he likes. He showed him the narrow road and the wide one also, and He told him that 'the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction.' He even revealed to him the outcome of each road. The one deceives with a little temporary pleasure, but eternal damnation follows it. The other has a little effort here but eternal rest in the endless ages. Then, what warning can I give to my man, whom God gave me to guard since our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, with His own lips warns, begging and teaching all to abstain from filthy deeds?"

"And why did you raise your hands to heaven sighing bitterly?"

"I saw the demons around him, some singing, some playing the guitars, and others clapping their hands. Some even were laughing sarcastically at his expense. My heart was burning seeing those abominable creatures triumphing. That's why I begged God to save His creature from the snares of the dark demons and to grant that I rejoice in his return. I was praying that He enable me to surrender his soul white and pure with repentance."

The angel said these things and disappeared from our sight. Then, we left too. On the way the saint was saying that there is no deed worse than that of debauchery. But should the immoral one desire to repent, the All-Kind God accepts him faster than all the sinners, because this passion

is rooted in man, and in addition, the devil inflames it even more with manifold temptations. For one to conquer this passion he must struggle with vigils and fasts.

And he added, as we were walking: "Once I saw a man travelling on the wide road of sin. The eyes of my soul opened then and I saw around him some thirty demons making noises. Some were buzzing like flies in his face. Others whistled like mosquitoes in his ears, while the rest of them had tied his feet and neck and were dragging him forcibly, one here and another there. At this sight my eyes filled with tears, and I was wondering what those ropes dragging the man could mean. Then God revealed to me that each rope corresponds to one type of immorality. The demons that whistle in the ears of the man sink him into despondency, while the others that buzz in his face make him shameless and impudent. These are the things the Lord revealed to me. And at once I saw his angel following from afar, holding in his hand something like a thin staff that had a marvelous lily on its tip. He was walking stooped, sad, deeply grieved. This man seemed to be the reason for all his grief. He saw him entirely in the mouth of Hades, because he was enslaved to every type of debauchery. I, too, raised my eyes and hands to heaven to say even two words of prayer for his sake. But the wicked demons fell on me like mosquitoes pinching and biting my hands. They thought that in this way they would prevent me from praying for him."

THE OIL OF THE VIGIL LIGHT

The saint also had the following amazing habit: when he was to sleep a little, he would first spread stones on the ground and throw a small mattress there. Then he would chant funeral hymns, as if he were planning to bury himself; and recite by heart four Epistle lessons, four Gospels, and a few other things. Finally, making the sign of the cross three times on his bed, he would lie down, using a stone for a pillow.

The demons often attacked him in his sleep. They would bother him and would not let him sleep. Then he would take his stick and with spiritual strength hit them wildly, mocking their weakness. So much so that the demons had lost it with him.

“What are we going to do with this headstrong man?” they would ask themselves. “One time he hits us and the next he abuses us and degrades all our race.”

One night, therefore, when the servant of God was sleeping a little, the devil came holding a spade and wanted to hit him. But suddenly, very terrified, he jumped noisily outside again and disappeared like smoke. As he was leaving he was gnashing his teeth and saying: “O Mary, you burn me everywhere, protecting this hardhead.”

Hearing these words, Nephon realized that the Theotokos defended and guarded him. And this because every night before sleeping, he would take oil from her oil lamp and anoint his forehead, ears, and all his sensory organs. This is why the devil was routed and disappeared.

From then he saw the power this oil of the Theotokos and all the saints had, and oftentimes he would give it to his acquaintances to anoint themselves at bedtime.

THE SPIRIT OF VAINGLORY

Once when we were discussing vainglory and other spiritual topics, he said to me: "The spirit of vainglory is sly and demands great force on the part of the servants of God, in order for them to be delivered from it, because it urges the virtuous one to admire himself. If he is somewhat exhausted from fasting, it says to him: 'Look at the shadow of your face in the well! It looks so ethereal! It's only natural that the world consider you a renowned ascetic. Walk bent over. Talk in whispers, so that you may barely be heard, and walk ever so slowly, so that people may honor you.' Or: 'On the road sigh a little and lift your eyes to heaven with reverence. Observe those around you from on high, so that people may say: 'There goes a great saint!' And the spirit of vainglory says all this to conclude: 'Well, you deserve a kingdom, or at least a bishop's throne. In any event, you deserve to become a priest or an archdeacon, since everyone calls you a saint, and they all consider you to be one. Only make sure later to perform some miracle with your virtue, so that you may be more glorified!'"

"But why should I run on so?" the saint continued. "When I began repenting for my multitude of sins, the spirit of vainglory fell on me, flooding my heart with delight. It drove away my grief. It filled me with sweet peace and put this thought in my mind: Wow you are great and famous. Could there be another one like you on earth?"

"From time to time it would bring to my nostrils fragrances from incense, assuring me at the same time: 'Do you see how the angels attend you censuring your holiness?' And then it added: 'Nephton, you are truly blessed for beating the devil!'"

"And I believed all this and I was deceived considering myself the way the spirit of vainglory portrayed me. God however, Who has 'no pleasure in the death of the wicked,' granted me discernment. Whenever, therefore, the devil came and said to me, 'Truly, from now on you are Saint Nephton; who else lives on earth in the midst of tumult and cultivates such virtues?' I say, whenever he would whisper this and other similar things to deceive me, with discernment I would rebuff his tricks."

Once, as the saint told me, the spirit of vainglory fought him with special provocativeness. "Behold the greatest personality of our times," it would say to him. "Behold the luminary of the universe. Behold, the man who stands above all men in virtue."

It said a lot more trying to mislead the saint. But he realized the devil's maliciousness and would say to himself: "Sinful Nephton, take care that deceiver doesn't steal your mind. Look don't be deceived, stay humble. Guard yourself, because you are human like all the others. Be careful, miserable one, don't lose yourself, don't be proud, don't imagine that you are anything. What is one seed in the midst of an entire mountain of wheat? Only one seed in the midst of all the seeds. So it is with you. You are the one man amongst men. You are formed of the same clay that all are formed 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return'. Keep in mind that you are a sinner and will be judged. Wretched one, wake up! Never forget your sins. Weep for that bitter eternity that will

devour you. Ponder-these things, meditate on them daily and don't put on airs saying, 'I am virtuous, I am righteous, I am wise,' because such things keep you far from God."

He would rebuff the spirit of vainglory, thus putting himself in the proper place. You would continually see him quarrelling with the demons. Sometimes he would humiliate them scorning their weakness, while at other times he would curse them and remind them of the eternal fire.

Once the filthy demon with an angel's face wanted to provoke arrogance in him by saying: "From today you will begin to perform miracles, and your name will become famous among men, because truly you have pleased God, and through me He sends you this great gift."

However, the servant of God recognized the snare of the devil. He threw him a sneering look and, with the purpose of deriding his wickedness, said to him: "Hold on, and I'll perform a miracle in front of you!" He looked around him and saw a stone. "I order you, stone," he said, "by the gift this one here brought me, to move from your place and go elsewhere." But the stone remained unmoved and didn't budge an inch. Then he laughed at the deception of the devil and said to him: "Admire your gift, wicked and treacherous one. It accomplished nothing!" And immediately he reprimanded him with scorn for his deceit and made him disappear.

Another time again, when he was praying, the spirit of vainglory placed in him the proud thought that, as he stood thus with his hands raised to God, he looked like a saint. But that wasn't enough for the devil. While Nephon continued to pray, he put in him another prouder and blasphemous thought: "You are very great in everyone's eyes. You have become equal to God!"

At that time the Holy Spirit lifted his mind to things heavenly and revealed to him how God holds the entire universe together, and how great and awesome He is; how He rules "heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is therein" with His mighty hand. At the same time he heard a voice saying to him: "Look, Nephon, do you, too, perhaps rule heaven and earth like this? Try to consider how great God is! Examine yourself afterwards, to see how small you are; and next time don't think you are equal, because such a thought is demonic. Guard yourself then, that the devil may not lead you astray."

Nephon then turned on himself: "Miserable and most wretched one!" he said to himself. "So, you have the impression you are a man, depraved deceiver? Where is your rotten brain that you allowed yourself to be so arrogant against your God? You have become antichrist, O loathsome and dark one! You are dirt and dung, and all of a sudden with your demonic arrogance you became God? Shame on you! Aren't you horrified don't you tremble at the 'Woe' of judgment, O wretch, babbler, filthy one? What is to become of you? Where will you hide then? Which one of these will you give an account for first and which last: for shamelessness, for lying, or slander? for malice, or for pride and vainglory? for hypocrisy, blasphemy, avarice, or miserliness? Woe to you, lawless and shameless Nephon! All these passions weren't enough for you, you had to become antichrist too!"

The servant of God sighed from the depths of his heart and at last he pleaded:

“O God, have mercy on me who has fallen and turn not away from me, the destitute and good for nothing, but forgive me, most merciful that You are. Good God and Lover of man, You know the human disease and suffering. Heal me, O Lord With Your strength I shall become more watchful, so that I may be able to escape from my secret passions and be saved from the enemies of my soul.”

From then on he was very careful and examined his thoughts with special prudence. As soon as the devil would draw near to put in him a bad thought, he would shout out to him with wrath: “Where are you going, miserable one?” And in this way he would make him turn right around completely flustered.

Even so, there wasn't a day or night the enemy didn't set traps for him. He tried hard, after all, to pull him down either in censure or in rage, either in breaking of oaths, or in whatever else he could. The treacherous one was trying to trap him. He failed, however, and Nephon would defeat him by the grace of “Christ who strengthened him.”

HOW PEOPLE QUARREL

Once Nephon was observing how the demons tempted people, by whispering various devilries in their ears. They, however, having their minds scattered on worldly cares, were not aware of the demonic activity. Therefore they accepted the bad thoughts and entertained them as if they were their own. Thus, some were excited into anger, others to slander and censure, and others to arguments, disputes and resentments.

The servant of God, who was observing all these things, would say sadly: “Oh, the malicious ones! They became masters and now order people around! And they, thinking that everything comes from their good sense, quickly and indiscreetly carry out all the commands of the demons. That is why we should always examine our thoughts well, and then proceed to actions.” And he related the following:

“Once I saw a man working. In a second a black man came, stooped down to his ear and for a long time was whispering something to him. Further down another man was working. Suddenly the first worker dropped his work, ran threateningly toward his colleague and started to insult in the ear of the aggressor, the other demon was doing the same, because it was the demon in him also that was inciting him to fight back.”

Seeing this, Nephon was shaken and said: “Oh, the deceiving and rotten demons! Look how they sow hatred amongst the people! And those fools, without any loss of time do whatever they are told.”

THE CHRISTIAN TABLE

One day he was passing by a house. Inside the master of the house with his wife and children were seated at the table. Around them he saw some handsome young men with shining garments attending them. They were exactly the same in number as the guests. This family seemed very poor. Surprised, the saint said: "What is this now? Those seated are very poor, while those attending them are splendidly dressed!"

God then revealed to him who were those standing and what that strange meal signified: The handsome and splendid men are angels of the invisible God ordered to attend to the Christians during mealtime with folded hands like good servants. But as soon as something judgmental is heard at the table, instantly the holy angels flee from the bad conversation like bees from smoke. And when the holy angels retire, a dark and black demon comes and rolls amongst the garrulous guests.

COUNSELS AND INSTRUCTIONS

Nephon had now reached the height of virtue. His ascetic labors were admirable. Many hastened to meet him and seek his advice. Thus once a brother came and said to him: "I'm greatly amazed, Father, that you are not proud when everyone honors you!"

"Do you know, my son," the saint said to him, "why I am not proud?" "No, Father. If I knew, I wouldn't have asked your holiness."

"Listen then: Two, three, and four times every day I bring to mind my sins, which I've committed without fear of God. The more I think about them, the more my soul feels a bitter pain, because I don't feel I have ever done anything pleasing to God. Therefore, that is why I am not proud. And when I hear praise and acclaim, I reproach both myself and the praise. Let 's say, you praise me once or twice a week. But I continually, every day, become disgusted with myself. I insult and reproach myself and consider myself a dead dog, full of worms and stench."

"Tell me, Father," the brother continued, "why do most people hate the virtuous? Some despise them: and others are scandalized by them. Some praise them, but the majority criticize them."

"My son, the righteous have a lot to gain from these criticisms. They adorn them just like the stars adorn the firmament. Once I saw a devout man win fifty crowns in a single day."

"Tell me," the brother begged, "how did he win them?"

"This man was kind and very meek. He did a lot of good deeds for his neighbors and loved them all like God's angels. But they were confused by the evil one and hated him as if he were a criminal. And since the devil was used to denigrating the saints through the mouths of sinners, that is what happened here. Some said he was wicked and others that he had fallen into heresy. What did that blessed man do? He prayed and said: 'Lord have mercy on all them who hate, envy, and denigrate me. Let none of these brothers suffer evil because of me, the sinner, neither now nor in the future, nor at the time of death, nor on Judgment Day. But I beg You, crush and dissolve the evil plans of the devil, because You know, Lord, Lover of mankind, that it is he who rouses them against me. I implore You, therefore, my God just as You did not turn away from me, the profane, as often as I have sinned and run to Your compassion to ask forgiveness, so also do not turn way from these Your holy servants who now speak evil of me, but sanctify them with Your Holy Spirit.'"

"This is what that righteous man said my dear brother, in his prayer for his enemies and slanderers. Well, then, as many times a day he would force himself and beg God for their salvation, that's how many times an angel would come down from heaven and 'set upon his head a crown of precious stone."

"For this, my brother, the Good God often permits the faithful to be insulted and slandered so that they may increase their crowns to ten thousand and inherit His Kingdom."

Then the brother said to him: "But why is that many virtuous people never do anything bad, and yet the people are scandalized with them and say, for example: if he wanted to be saved it would be better if he had gone to the desert. Those who are conceited and men pleasers live in the cities solely to enjoy the glory of men."

And the saint answered him: "It's not the place, my son, that saves, but the means, the diligence, the willingness, and the watchfulness of each person. Pay attention, and I will give you many examples: Just as Moses assures us, Enoch was one of the first people who pleased God. But he also had a wife and children, and the most amazing thing is that he lived amongst impious people. But what a select friend of God Abraham also proved to be! He also had a wife and 318 relatives and servants, plus countless gold and silver. Nevertheless, none of these proved to be an obstacle to his salvation. As a matter of fact, he excelled in piety and love toward God. But think also of where Lot lived! In the midst of Satan's temptations, in the midst of sodomites! He saw their indecent sins, but he didn't judge anyone, that is why God loved him and did not deprive him of His Kingdom. Later, Job had royal wealth and incomparable glory, wife and children and servants, and yet he too achieved his salvation in the same way. What can one say about Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and many, many others? It was not by means of the external surroundings of their lives that these pleased God."

"But remember Daniel and the three youths! one in the den, the others in the furnace, they all prayed and God heard them immediately. Then, Jonah was heard from inside the belly of the sea beast, and the thief on the cross with one supplication opened Paradise. Not to mention from the Old Testament Hezekiah, Manasseh, David and Rahab."

"You see then, my son, all of these pleased God in different places and in different ways."

"I believe, you've received an answer also to this question of yours: salvation exists everywhere for him who struggles, for God is everywhere."

"As for the other question you ask, why the pious are liked by some and not by others, pay attention so that I may explain it to you with many examples: Don't you see, for example, that God sends rain, but it isn't pleasing to everyone? One says, 'It will cause damages;' the other, 'Glory be to God Who gave a little water for the earth to drink!' If we have a Winter with cold and frost, then the poor who are cold and shiver say, 'Ah, why does God send the cold?' The rich, however, are happier then, because they have all the amenities to fight the frost: wine, bread, meats, fire, warm clothes, and everything which delights the body. After Spring comes Summer with its great heat. Then some say, 'Winter is much better. It has neither flies nor fleas nor bugs.'"

"But why do we need examples? It is enough that we remember one: our Lord and God became man and associated with the ingrates, He Who is full of Grace. He did infinite good to the human race: He chased away demons, cleansed lepers, gave sight to the blind, supported the lame, restored the paralytics, raised the dead, associated with tax collectors, reformed prostitutes, fed countless numbers with a few loaves of bread and so much more that a corruptible man cannot describe. But what recognition and reward did our Lord receive for all this? Some said, 'This man

is not from God; others said that He is a Samaritan, and still others that he had a demon.' One debased Him, another struck Him, others flogged Him and spat on His immaculate face, and finally they crucified Him. If, then, He Who created us could not please all people, how could the pious, especially since there are so many people?"

"Remember the righteous Abel, who even though did no harm to Cain, the latter was envious of him and, with the cooperation of the evil one, killed him. Think then: if, when there were only two brothers on earth, the virtuous Abel did not succeed in avoiding the envy of the wicked brother, how can someone avoid it now in the midst of such crowds? Surely that is impossible, for it is written: 'My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation.'"

Then the brother said to the saint: "Father, now that we've started such beneficial discussions, please teach me something else too for even in times of old, Christians desired to discuss spiritual topics with the fathers."

"Speak, my son, don't hesitate. It is God Who will give us the answer to profit our souls."

"How did it happen that our fathers in olden days lived and died peacefully, while we today, as you know, go from grief to calamity and from worry to worry, and thus end our lives turbulently?"

"Men of long ago had a great deal of love among themselves, and each one faced his fellow man with sincerity and justice. They even had such love for God, that they would not offer anything to His Temple, unless it was perfect. But today things are not like that. We offer the choicest things to the belly, thus deifying it; and whatever is rotten and worthless that is left over, this we offer to the churches of Christ. It is therefore obvious that they truly served God with each of their work Thus they had Him as a helper and peacemaker in all their affairs; while we, as I said, have our stomach as god and serve it in everything. But the belly not only does not grant us benefits and salvation, but, conversely, causes us pain and grief."

"Father," the brother continued, "since God enlightens your most wise mind to tell me what is correct, tell me, I beg you, does the soul suffer pain and violence when it is separated from the body? or does it perhaps depart calmly and easily?"

"Since I haven't died yet, I'm not sure," the saint answered him jokingly. "However, I shall tell you in theory. Pay attention: There are pious people who have a bitter death, and there are sinners who have a sweet death. But the bitter death of the pious washes whatever bitter sins as a man he may have committed in his life, for no one is without sin, but God alone. While the sweet death of the sinner takes away the little right to reward for whatever good he happened to do. And thus, on the one hand the pious became completely pure, while on the other the sinner becomes completely unclean. But I tell you this, my son: even though the death of the righteous seems bitter, it is something temporary: from then on he is happy and rejoices continually; while the sinner even though he temporarily seems to have a sweet death, will burn eternally and suffer inside the unquenchable fire."

“To be sure, there are sinners who have a bitter death and are sent to Hades instantly. And there are also pious men with a sweet death who are led immediately to eternal bliss. You see, the judgments of God are various. He determines to each death, in accordance with one's life, an end that will also be fitting. But death itself is not as fearsome as the judgment taking place at that time. Because, as the soul leaves the body, a multitude of angels receive it. But a great number of demons gather also. And while the angels present its good deeds, the demons present the bad ones. Therefore, all await the decision of salvation or condemnation to come from heaven. You can imagine then what grief and what agony that wretched soul goes through. At times it is afraid and trembles that the decision of its condemnation may come; at other times again it hopes for salvation. It suffers, lifts up its hands toward heaven and implores not to be surrendered to the dark demons. But the good angels also are very anxious. They long to hear the decision of salvation. Conversely, the evil spirits await and desire to hear the verdict of damnation. Therefore, wherever the righteous Judge decides, that is where the soul is surrendered: either to the angels - to salvation - or to the demons - to perdition.”

“Therein, my son, lies the fear and trembling: that man be not condemned to perdition. Apart from this, death is something quite natural awaiting us all. To answer your original question then: the soul experiences pain and violent trembling when it is about to learn God's verdict, in case it is condemning.”

And completing his sentence the saint got up to pray, because he never neglected his prayer. Many times, even in the midst of crowds, he would pray mentally. At whatever time, whether eating or conversing with someone, in the depths of this heart he never stopped reciting verses from the Psalter. But the most amazing thing is that very many times, although he was sleeping, his clear mind meditated on the words of the Lord.

Another trait of his was his ardent love for the apostle Paul. As soon as someone would praise or say whatever else about him, Nephon's heart was inflamed with special devoutness and he would often say: “Paul the great, like heaven and earth, my beloved, the firmament of the Church, Christ's luminous eye. Paul, the all-virtuous one, God's spokesman, may he always be glorified!” He would say these things, and his heart never tired of praising the holy apostle.

CHARITY AND ITS REWARD

Once a Christian came to his cell to seek his advice. After the customary greeting, he sat down and asked the saint: "Please, father, what benefit do those who distribute their wealth to the poor have?"

"Didn't you hear what the gospel says?" he answered him.

"I heard and read a great deal, but I would like to hear something from your mouth."

Then Nephon said to him: "May the God of heaven and earth teach you according to your faith, because I am weak and unworthy. But since you came to hear something, pay attention and God as I said, will enlighten you."

He was silent for a while and then he began: "In the days of Cyriacus, Bishop of Jerusalem, there lived a very charitable man called Sozon. One day, passing through the public square, he saw a poor man who was naked and trembling from the cold. His soul felt for him. Therefore, he took off his garment and gave it to the poor man. In a little while he returned home. It was getting dark, and he lay down to sleep. Then, in his dream he saw that he found himself in a wonderful garden which was illuminated with pure immaterial light. A multitude of flowers - roses and lilies - and tall trees exuding a superb fragrance from their peak to their roots adorned it. The trees were laden with most beautiful fruit, so that their branches bent to the ground. Each one had a special beauty. Amongst them numerous birds of all kinds and colors sang melodiously. Their singing was so divine, that you thought it was coming from heaven. All the trees, the plants and flowers fluttered gracefully."

"Seeing and hearing them that man experienced indescribable sweetness and inexpressible pleasure."

"As he was observing this in amazement, a young man came and said to him: 'Follow me.' He started to walk behind him and shortly they arrived at a golden fence. He threw his glance farther between the spaces which formed the golden fence, and he saw a courtyard and in the background a palace which glittered. As Sozon was looking, sixteen young men, shining like the sun, came out of the palace. Every four of them transported a gold-adorned chest. As these angels of God crossed this fairyland courtyard, Sozon realized that they were coming towards him."

"As soon as they drew near to the gold fence, directly across from him, they stopped, lowered the chests from their shoulders and rested them on the ground. Now it seemed as if they were waiting for someone important to come. Indeed, shortly Sozon saw a very handsome figure coming down from the palace and toward the side of the angels. 'Open the chests,' He commanded them, 'and show this man what I am holding for him for the garment he loaned me a short time ago by means of the poor man.'"

“Immediately they opened one gold chest and began to take out royal tunics and garments, some all-white and others variegated, all exceptionally beautiful. They spread them out before him asking him: ‘Do you like them, Sozon?’ And he answered with awe: ‘I am not worthy to see even their shadow!’ They continued, nevertheless, to show him splendid, very ornate and all-golden tunics, until their number reached one thousand.”

“When, finally, the Lord of Hosts gave him to understand in this way what it means to ‘receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life,’ He said to him: ‘Do you see, Sozon, what goods I've prepared for you, because you saw Me naked and had pity on Me and clothed Me? Go, therefore, and continue to do the same. If you give one garment to the poor, I will prepare a hundredfold for you.’”

“Hearing this, Sozon asked the Lord with awe but also with joy: ‘My Lord will You do the same for all who help the poor? Do You have in store a hundredfold for them also and eternal life?’”

“And He answered him: ‘Whoever will sacrifice houses, or fields, or riches, or glory, father or mother, brothers or sisters, wife or children, or whatever good on earth, will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. For this reason never regret any charitable act, humiliating the poor man that you gave him something, lest by chance, instead of a reward you suffer double damage; because he who does a good deed and later repents or humiliates the poor man, not only loses his wages, but is also found guilty on Judgment Day.’”

“After these words, Sozon woke up full of amazement because of the vision. He immediately got out of bed and gave his other garment also to someone needy. At night he saw the same vision again, and in the morning, without delay, he distributed all his wealth, renounced the world and became a wonderful monk.”

“My child, you should keep this in mind from now on,” St. Nephon advised his visitor, “and do whatever you can to store up a hundredfold in heaven.”

BLASPHEMOUS THOUGHTS

“Believe me, father,” that man answered him, “that up to now I have been given a great deal of advice. But never have I profited so much. It is obvious that God truly abides in you and you in Him. What do I do, however, when the demon of ungodliness overcomes me? Whether I'm eating, drinking, or sleeping, he never ceases to annoy me, particularly in church during the time of prayer. He puts in my mind heresies and countless impious and blasphemous thoughts against Christ our God His Holy Mother, and other such things. He fights me so forcefully, that I don't know what to do. I'm afraid that perhaps fire may fall down from heaven and thoroughly consume me.”

“Listen to me, my child, and you will be somewhat consoled,” the saint said to him. “Observe the sea: when the storm rises, it sends wild waves, which break upon the cliffs of the coast. But does anything happen to the cliffs from the mania of the waves? The waves simply beat upon them and return again to the sea. The same thing happens with blasphemous thoughts. They originate from the devil and assail human intelligence. Why? Obviously to throw the servants of God in despair, which has killed many souls and led them to perdition.”

“If however, the devil does not succeed in throwing man into despair, he tries with obscene thoughts to at least shake him up. And if he sees that even then man is not shaken, he is beaten, disgraced, and his wild attacks backfire on him; while the man who was tried not only is not judged, but instead is crowned and glorified by God.”

“You, too, be patient, then, kindling your zeal with fasting and prayer, and the temptation will leave. Didn't the Lord say it? ‘This kind never conies out except by prayer and fasting.’”

With these thoughts he strengthened him greatly and sent him off in peace. When the visitor left, he told us that blasphemous thoughts are born of judging others and of anger.

THE AWESOME SPLENDOR OF GOD

He had the habit of praying from Matins until the Third Hour of the day. In one such prayer, as he was standing with his hands raised, his mind was lifted up to heaven. He felt as if his heart had broadened and embraced all the world and all the heavenly mysteries. He was contemplating the ineffable immensity of the godhead with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As soon as he felt this awesome majesty of God, he came to. He thought again about what he had seen and, shaken from the ecstasy and awe, he began to run terrified. He took refuge in the church shouting, "Lord have mercy".

When he recovered somewhat from that brilliance, he came out and returned to his cell. On the way he was whispering: "What God is as great as our God? You are God Who worked wonders." From that time on, he would be seen going to church often walking as though numb with fear.

One of the following days I went to find him. I fell at his feet so that he might tell me why he walked so bowed down and dazzled. And since he trusted me in all things, he answered me.

"Ah, my son, my soul is experiencing great fear. I bring to my mind - as much as possible, of course - our Creator and God, and I see myself as a loathsome reptile slithering on the ground. Because the more man draws near his Creator, the more he sees himself submerged in sin and depravity. That is why when Isaiah also saw the Lord sitting on the throne amongst the Seraphim, he cried out with fear and trembling: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' My child, our God is so great and awesome, that neither heaven nor earth nor eternity can contain Him. And only just thinking about Him produces fear and trembling."

DEBATE WITH A DEMON

Once he was walking on a road. A little ahead of him another God-fearing traveler was advancing. Then Nephon saw a black demon flying around the man and sowing filthy thoughts in his mind. However, enlightened and discerning as he was, he did not accept his suggestions without examining them. That is why he would often turn and spit on the devil reviling him.

When the saint saw the evil one annoy the man, he threw him a fierce look saying: "Stop now, degenerate fiend, stop throwing yourself on God's creature. What benefit do you have, wretch, if his soul - God forbid! - is lost?"

"I will answer you at once," the devil said to him. "Certainly I have nothing to gain. But even if I don't want to, I'm forced to try. You see, we also have masters over us, who command us and check if we neglect to fight the Christians. And woe to any demon the masters find neglecting the warfare! They whip him and torture him terribly."

"Wretch," the saint said to him, "don't you know that fire awaits you for your miserable sins? Why don't you gather yourself in a corner and weep for the inevitable fire which has been prepared for you?"

Thoroughly abashed, the demon disappeared. At that time a monk with an angelic countenance was passing by the square. The saint saw flames coming out of his mouth and rising toward heaven. Behind him like a fiery pillar came an angel who, with his sword raised, was guarding his soul and body. From time to time the angel would turn back and chase the demons, threatening them ferociously for plotting against that holy monk.

"Truly, 'wondrous is God in His saints,'" Nephon whispered, watching the strange sight. "The Lord gives courage and strength to His servants, and He Himself 'is the strength of His people.' Blessed is God!"

THE MERCILESS RICH MAN AND HIS PUNISHMENT

One Saturday evening when he was in the church of St Anastasius, the saint suddenly saw the Most Holy Theotokos accompanied by the holy Apostles appear amongst the people. She seemed to examine what virtue adorned each Christian. He would see her satisfied and happy with several, because she confirmed that they fought for their salvation with much toil. With others, however, she often cried and shook her head with desperation, because she saw them neglecting their soul. For each one of these she would stop, raise her hands toward her Son and, tearing and mourning, she would ask for his repentance.

Nephton was deeply moved and marveled that the All-Immaculate Theotokos never abandons the Christians, but continually labors both for righteous and sinners, that none may be lost.

Finally, after the Theotokos passed by all, she saw a certain eunuch at the door and a number of beggars seeking help from him but he would not give to anyone. The Theotokos then approached his guardian angel and asked him: "Tell me, Eutheel, does this man have a lot of gold in his home?"

"Yes, my Lady, he does, because he is stingy and would die for a nickel. He mercilessly tortures and starves his servants forcing them at the same time to work hard."

"And what is the reason that prevents him from giving charity to the poor?"

"The devil comes often, my good Lady, and says to him: 'In a little while you will grow old, you will become ill and will be bedridden until your last breath. Don't give anything, because then you will need it all and will say: Why did I distribute everything to the poor? But no matter how much you regret it then, it will be too late!' This is what the ungodly and deceitful devil tells him every so often, my Lady, and he believes it and is hard and unfeeling to the misfortune of others."

"Well then," the Theotokos said sternly, "he will get what he fears!"

And indeed, the eunuch who accepted Satan's suggestion that he would become sick ended up in bed with a terrible illness, which caused him horrible pains and was incurable. Thus, he spent all his gold on doctors. Nevertheless, not only did his condition not improve, but steadily it got worse until he disappeared from this life like smoke. He died spiritually and bodily! Thus the divine saying was fulfilled: "Lo, this is the man that made not God his helper, but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his vanity."

"For this reason let us also be careful," St. Nephton advised his listeners, "not to be tricked by the evil one. Specifically, let us not be uncharitable and merciless toward the poor, especially if we are rich, because then there is the fear that the Lord may treat us equally un-charitably, and justly so. In this way we hurt both the body and the soul. We will lose both the Kingdom of Heaven and the present world."

BLACKS WITH WHITE SOULS

Another time again, when we were together in his cell, I found the opportunity to answer a question to mine in respect to the black race. The question as to whether the color of their bodies had any effect on their souls preoccupied me. Could God have an aversion to them? Because, according to what I believed, there weren't any people from their race who had fought the good fight and had been saved. I had never heard of any black person who had pleased God.

"I'll answer you," the saint said. "The Ethiopians are genealogically descendant from Shem. And there are many from their race whom God called to His Kingdom. Indeed their virtues glittered with miracles, too. I shall relate three examples to you:"

"Years ago there lived one such black thief He was a very tall man with a fearful appearance. He used to steal in the area of Pannephus. He was so terrible that, whenever he groaned you died of fear. One night, however, he saw a terrifying dream. There was, he says, and endless plain, and he was standing in the middle. At one point he turned his gaze and saw a fiery river flowing very tumultuously, and in its path it devoured even the dirt and rocks. He took a few steps closer to see. However, as soon as he drew near, four flames came out, grabbed him from the hair and were dragging him to throw him into the fiery river to burn him up. As he was being dragged, it seemed to him that a spirit said to him: 'Miserable wretch, had you repented and become a monk we wouldn't be able to submerge you in here.'"

"He awoke terrified. Dizziness and horror had seized him from the terrible vision. 'What could it mean?' he would ask himself. And since he couldn't give an explanation, he decided to go to an anchorite monk and ask him what this fiery river in his vision was."

"He immediately threw away the tools of his trade and took the road to Pannephus. He travelled quite a way, and shortly, glancing around him, he saw the anchorite's cell. He drew near and knocked on the door. An elder opened the door to him at once. 'Welcome, young man! Why did you put yourself through this trouble? Could it be that the fiery river and the four flames that grabbed you to throw you in scared you? My son, how horrible is the threat of that river! Do you want to escape from its horror? Repent for your robber's exploits and become a monk Then you will be saved.'"

"Thunderstruck the thief heeded the words of the hermit. He fell at his feet immediately: 'Have pity on me, honorable father,' he begged, the black in soul and body. Have mercy on me, the wretch, and do with me whatever God commands you'. He continued to implore him with tears until that holy elder tonsured him a monk. And after he taught him all the duties of the monastic life, he left him his own cell and retreated deeper into the desert, to live among the beasts."

"Then, with a lot of asceticism that black man attained such heights of virtue, that at the time that he was praying his whole body resembled a glowing, fiery pillar. Thousands, countless demons would throw themselves on him, but he would scorn them all. His prayer would burn them and make them disappear completely. The wisdom of God had illumined his mind He would write

books and send letters to the fathers of the Scete and to many others. He would benefit everyone with the pure and lucid truth of Christ. And when that black man died his holy relics exuded a lot of myrrh which, as all from that area confirm, cured all those possessed by demons and all the ill. But enough about him.”

“Another black man - old and poor - lived in a town where he would go here and there always mumbling something. That's why many thought he was crazy. Once a big drought came to that town. The earth was completely dry, the animals were dying, all the plants were turning yellow. The inhabitants of the town with their bishop continually held litanies and vigils, but to no avail! Finally, one night, the bishop saw an angel in his dream saying to him: ‘God commands you to take all your clergy and go to the southern gate of the town. There, the first farmer you see coming in, you must beg at length, until you convince him to pray to God to send you rain.’”

“The angel said this and disappeared The next day, very early in the morning, after Matins, the bishop with his clergy set out for the gate the angel had pointed out. No time went by when they saw a very old black man coming from outside carrying wood on his shoulders. ‘Father’ the bishop immediately implored him, ‘pray to our merciful God to take pity on us and send a little rain to this very your earth.’”

“No sooner said than done, the old man lifted up his aged inky-black hands and prayed. Suddenly, it began to flash with lightning and thunder loudly. A strong wind started blowing, clouds gathered in the sky, and rain began to come down in torrents. All this happened in a twinkling of an eye and with only the prayer of the black man. It rained so much that the houses were in danger of flooding. Then the bishop again implored the old man to stop the rain. And he raised his hands to heaven a second time. The violent rainstorm ceased!”

“When everything calmed down, the bishop pleaded with him to reveal who he was, how he lived, and what he did to have such boldness with God. And that venerable old man answered humbly: ‘You see that I am an insignificant black man, and you seek to find virtue in me? For God's sake,’ the bishop insisted, ‘tell me the whole truth for the glory of our Lord.’ ‘I haven't done anything good, Father. Except that from the time I became a Christian, I never accepted charity from anyone. Every day I go up the mountain and gather a small load of wood I put it on my shoulders and go down to town to sell it. From what I earn, I keep only two obols, just enough for my daily food The rest I give to those like me, the poor. When winter comes and I can't climb up the mountain for wood, I fast until I find a good day. Then I climb up the mountain again, as is my custom, and I bring my small load to sell and make do, always sharing with the poor.’”

“The old man again put the wood on his shoulders, bid farewell to the bishop and clergy and entered the town to sell the wood.”

“But enough about him also, I shall relate to you the life of another, my child, so that you may be assured that our Good God has also called large numbers of blacks to His Kingdom.”

“When the devout King Constantine was living, I visited the area around Mount Boeum where there was a coenobium by the seaside. As I was discussing spiritual topics with the brothers, the subject of the blacks came up: that God had honored a large number of them. Then one of the brothers named Charisethes said: ‘I met a black who became a great ascetic.’ And since everyone sought to learn his hardships, Charisethes started:”

“I was in a certain field of the coenobium and I was working in the vineyard. One day I saw a black sitting under a grapevine. He had in front of him a washed pumpkin full of water and some weeks which he was eating. I observed him continuously for several days and admired his hardship, because for a month he didn't change the water in the pumpkin. So much so that the water became putrid and stunk unbearably. Many times I begged him to let me change the water or to bring him a little bread, but to no avail. He stayed continually in this same place maintaining silence, and all night long he would chant and pray.”

“When the summer days were very hot, he would go to the seashore, sit on a rock, and bake in the sun all day. Many times, when someone would go to see him, he pretended to be crazy and would say: Yes! Yes! I know you came to kill me, but God sees you from above! and he would point to heaven with his finger.”

“My child, these are the accomplishments of the blacks,” Nephon said as he finished. “That's why you must not think that they are rejected by God. But just as the grapevine gives both black and white grapes, man was created the same way by God: some are black, some are yellow, and some white. Let's say, like the earth, because there is a great variety there, too.”

This is what the servant of God told me and got up to pray. He lifted up his hands to Heaven and began to supplicate.

PRAYER FOR ONE ABOUT TO DIE

“O Lord, the God of powers, great and awesome,
abundant in might and transcendent in goodness,
full of mercy and compassion,
incline and hear me who am vile and sinful,
O my Christ, Who saved Jonah out of the belly of the whale
and Daniel from the mouths of lions,
deliver me at the time of death
from the dreadful darkness of the prince of evil.
Do not let the devil come over the deathbed of Your servant.
May my soul, O Lord, never see the darkness of the demons,
neither in this life, nor in the future one,
neither in the agony of death, nor at my ascent to heaven.
May not the accursed dragon deride my miserable soul
when it abandons this depraved body.
Do not let the filthy spirit of fetor and stench snatch it,
O my Lord, my Christ, my Jesus, my God, my Light,
and carry it away to perdition.
O my Master, God of Heaven and earth,
may my eyes never see his hideous and darksome face.
But at the time of my end,
O my holy, thrice holy and glorified King,
send me Your mercy and Truth.
O my God, at that time send Michael, the commander-in-chief
over Your servant.
Send me Gabriel, Souriel, Raphael,
the great and bright generals,
with all their immaculate and thrice-blessed army,
to crush the insatiable dragon of Hades who gnashes his teeth
and wants to snatch and devour anyone living piously.
O my God at the time of my departure,
sink him and all his filthy army into the abyss, in Tartarus,
into outer darkness and the 'gnashing of teeth'.
At that time, O my Lord Jesus Christ,
my delight, my Resurrection,
send the merciful and philanthropic Comforter,
the Spirit of Truth,
to receive my own spirit
in His incomparable sweetness and immortal holiness.
Send him to strengthen me with a flaming sword
preceding me and crushing the evil rulers of darkness.
For, if these abominations of iniquity plunge into the fire,
into darkness, into the abyss, into Hades,
I will be able without pain to cross the ethereal spheres

to come close to You, the Triune Sun,
to fall before Your compassion, to kiss Your immaculate feet,
to be filled with the Deity, with Your Holy Spirit,
and confess the countless wonders You did for my sake:
How You brought me to repentance, gave me life, 'and
out of the depths of the earth again You brought me up'!
I will enumerate them all before the holy angels,
that I may be overcome by the effulgence
of the sweetest and most delightful divine pleasure.
And transported by your ineffable fragrance,
grace, and divine beauty,
I shall chant to You then the great Song of Songs!

Hear me, O my God,
even though I may transgress Your law before You every day.
Hear me, my King, My Redeemer,
and make me worthy to enter Your glory,
just as I beseech You night and day, and pray to You,
and supplicate Your immortal and life-giving majesty.
O my Lord Jesus Christ,
I ardently beg You again and always:
at the time of my departure, send me the resplendent Virgin,
the most pure temple, the sacred treasury of Your wealth,
O my Christ, to strengthen me.

Send me at that time
the holy Forerunner and Baptist John,
the luminous stars - the Apostles -
the prophets and the martyrs,
the preachers and evangelists,
confessors, ascetics, and righteous,
that Your creature may be glorified.
Yes, immortal Lord, hear me, the sinner,
and enable me to attain Your inexpressible, never aging and thrice blessed glory.
But, my Lord, give rest also
to every servant of Yours in the throes of death,
wherever this prayer will be heard,
that the foul demons be disgraced
Crush them, O mighty One, with Your flaming sword
Burn them with the lightning of Your fire-breathing power,
O You Who are the plenitude of greatness, loftiness and awe.

My God, may this prayer be for refreshment and comfort,
repose and tranquility, sweet fragrance and joy,
support and refuge, courage and help
to all those who are on their deathbeds.
Yea, Lord, God of my holy Fathers,
who pleased You from the beginning of time to the present,
do not scorn my petition, O Holy One.
Do not turn away from my supplication, O Compassionate One.
But implant within my prayer a double-edged sword,
divine, heavenly, deadly to the demons
and vengeful against the spirits of wickedness;
yet filled with sympathy, forgiveness, compassion and goodness.
If by chance the one dying has many sins
and this prayer is read over him,
may you lighten his burden at that time, O Lord
have mercy on his soul, O Holy One,
and sanctify his ascent toward You.
Crown him with your compassion,
inscribe him in the book of Your mercy,
grant him the bliss of Paradise.
Overlook his iniquities
with the immensity of the wealth of Your loving-kindness.
Forgive him, have mercy on his miserable soul and save it.
Have pity on him, help him, have mercy on him,
shield and protect him according to Your great mercy.
Show him Your love for man.
Send him angels of peace.
Send him Your glorious embrace,
flood him with all the immaterial fragrances, that
the loathsome and deceitful demons may flee from him in shame.
O Lord, turn them into ashes in the fire of Hades,
for they dare to disturb and frighten the poor soul.

O Lord, let this take place
wherever my poor supplication is heard.
Yea, O Master, Jesus Christ, Light of light,
hear me, O Good One, and impart grace and mercy to my prayer.
Be a helper and protector for salvation to everyone
who invokes the name of vile Nephon.
Hear me, O Lord;

Hear me, O Lover of mankind, Holy One,
and grant my request beseeching Your Mighty Name.
Amen!”

When he finished this prayer, suddenly an extraordinary light flashed around him and in it the Lord Jesus Christ appeared filling his heart with delight, because He embraced him three times with a holy kiss, while the saint with each kiss joyfully cried out, “Amen! Amen! Amen!” Then the Lord spoke to him:

“Good and faithful servant! I heard your supplication and I will grant liberally what you ask for the salvation of Christians! To anyone who commemorates your name, in his prayer or in church, I shall stand by him a helper in all his temptations, dangers and sorrows, particularly in the last moments of his life. I shall have bountiful mercy on all those who will glorify Me by your name, I shall strengthen and fortify all those who call upon Me in your name, and with My divine authority I shall crush every demonic battalion under their feet.”

“And when the hour will come for you to abandon this life, too, I, Myself shall come to you with My holy army of angels. I shall receive your spirit in My hands and give you ‘rest in peace’ in the bosom of Abraham.”

With these words the Lord blessed him flooding all his senses with His Truth and divine Grace. Filled with joy and delight, Nephon began to glorify God, saying:

“Sweet and beautiful Jesus, You came to the least of Your creatures! The life, joy, and fragrance of the immaculate angels, You came to delight Your vile servant. Welcome, You Who fill all things and transcend every delight! Blessed and glorified be He Who comes. Remember me in Your glory, in the beauty of Paradise. Remember me in heaven, in the songs of the angels. Remember me, O blessed by the Cherubim and the Seraphim, full of grandeur and light, divine reflection and perfect imprint of the Father. Remember me, O endless sea of immortal philanthropy. My Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me as long as I breathe. Never depart from my side. Shield me and show me the way to eternity.”

When the saint finished this outburst of doxology, the Lord looked at him with divine affection and bid him farewell: “Peace be to you, Nephon, My child!” and ascended into heaven.

The saint had finally finished his prayer and came out to me. He was filled with sweetness and goodness, and his face sparkled. He disseminated the fragrance of the Holy Spirit around him, and I thought I was in Paradise.

Then hastily I tried to write down this great and marvelous prayer as he was saying it, that all sinners may find comfort and relief when it is read over them on their deathbed.

He, himself, used to say that the prayers of the saints give much strength in every danger, sorrow, or need, if one says them with unhesitating faith, because they are filled with the Holy Spirit and with the knowledge and wisdom of God.

CHARITY AGAIN

Once when I was travelling with the saint through the town square, I saw before me a man who was mumbling something. Many poor people were following him asking him for help. And pretending to chase them away, he would put his alms in their hand. Thus he hid his virtue from the people. As soon as I noticed this, I nudged the saint and told him about this man's virtue. And he said to me: "He is great in the eyes of God I know him, because we have been together several times."

After a few days, I asked him about this virtue, and he related a strange wonder. "I was then," he told me, "a young child about 12 years old, and I had gone to the church of the Apostle Thomas to pray. There I found an elder teaching the people. Among other things, he talked also about almsgiving. He said that when one gives something to the poor, it is like placing it in the hands of the Lord. When I heard this, I was surprised, and I criticized the man of God as a liar. Because I said to myself: Since the Lord is in heaven on the right of the Father, how can He be on earth to take what we give to the poor?"

"But, as I was walking and reflecting on what I heard I saw, by coincidence, a ragged beggar, and over his head - what a miracle! - stood the figure of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"As the beggar was progressing, a charitable person met him and gave him a piece of bread. Then, as soon as that charitable one stretched out his hand toward that beggar, the Lord also stretched out His hand, took the bread and thanked him. Then He gave it to the beggar. However, neither he nor his benefactor were aware of anything."

"I marveled and I believed. From then on I knew that whoever gives to his brothers whatever they need, truly places it in the hands of Christ. I see this image of Christ standing over all the poor, and filled with awe, whenever possible, I practice the virtue of charity which pleases the Lord so much."

IN THE CENOBIA

Once the saint decided to go and pray in the venerable church of the holy great martyr Phocas. He also wanted to see the monks of the monasteries there, to get their blessing. He took me along and went down to the shore. We got into a small boat and travelled in the direction of Kaloï. However, in a little while, the sailors started to sing and use obscene language amongst themselves. I was very upset, but the saint was facing starboard and was smiling happily. During the entire trip he didn't speak, nor did I see him pray, as was his custom; only his lips would move slightly and he would smile.

When the sailors set the table, they invited us to eat with them, too. The saint, not wishing to reveal his asceticism, ate and drank whatever they served him. Besides, this was his usual habit, to eat "whatever was set before him," as blessed Paul exhorts. However, he had a different diet when he was alone in his cell.

When we were alone, I asked him what he saw in the ocean that made him smile so happily even when the sailors were singing indecently. "Tell me," he answered, "how could I not be happy and rejoice, since from the time we entered the boat, the Lord never left our side? I saw Him continually travelling with us."

I must say that in Constantinople no one revered him as a saint. Besides, this was also his prayer; that people consider him worthless. And God heard him. The majority, not only didn't consider him a saint, but may even so undeservedly made fun of him. However, he wouldn't become angry, instead he would sigh and say:

"Lord, have mercy on all who ridicule me or hate me. You know the evil one incites them to do this, just as he makes me continually embitter Your Divine Name. For this reason I beg You, Almighty God and Lord of mercy, to forgive and bless those who scorn me. Cause them to emerge as spiritual starts, great saints. Grant them goodness and gentleness. Give them peace, enlighten them, and enable him to enjoy Your eternal glory, O Lover of man."

Such prayers delighted and sweetened him. His face blossomed like the rose, and he would often say: "He who hates scorn and derision and insults of men does not live in the glory of God nor will he inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Let everyone who wants to be saved know this: Let us stand patiently where men humiliate and denigrate us, and we will be rewarded by God with incomparable glory. On the other hand, let us depart from any place where we find praise and glory. Only then will we be able to save ourselves and attain Paradise. Disgrace is as indispensable to the servants of God as the Gospel and chanting are to the Church. It is not to our advantage, then, to be glorified by men."

PART II: TOWARDS HEIGHTS

VISION: FUTURE JUDGMENT

One night after he finished his usual evening prayer, he laid down on the stones to sleep as always. It was midnight and he was still awake gazing at the moon and stars in the sky.

As he was alone, he was thinking about his sins and was weeping mournfully, because he would bring to mind the fearful hour of Judgment. Suddenly he saw the firmament of the sky pull back like a sheet, and the Lord Jesus Christ appeared in huge dimensions. He was standing in the heavens surrounded by all the heavenly hosts: angels, archangels, outstanding fearful battalions diffidently lined up.

The Lord signaled to the commander of one of the battalions, and he approached bright, fearsome, but also reserved. "Michael, Michael, lord of the covenant, receive the fiery throne of My glory and with your battalion go to the valley of Josaphat. There you will install it as the first sign of My Parousia, because the hour is approaching when each one will receive according to his deeds. Hurry, the time has come. I shall judge those who worshipped the idols and denied Me, their Creator; those who worshiped the stones and sticks that I gave them for their needs. All of them will be crushed 'like a potter's vessels.' The same will happen to my enemies, the heretics, who dared to separate Me from My Father, who dared to reduce the Holy Spirit to a creature. Woe to them, what punishment awaits them!"

"Now I shall also appear to the Jews who crucified Me and did not believe in My divinity. I was given authority, honor, and power. I am a righteous Judge. When I was on the Cross they said: 'Aha! He who would destroy the temple, save Yourself.' Now, 'vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' I will judge, I will censure, and I will punish harshly this evil and perverse race, because they did not repent. I gave them opportunities to repent, but they ignored them. Well, now I will take revenge."

"I will do the same with the Sodomites who polluted the earth and the air with their stench. I burned them then. And I will burn them again, because they despised the delight of the Holy Spirit and loved the pleasure of the devil."

"I will also punish the dumb and brainless adulterers, who resemble wild horses in heat. They didn't confine themselves to their lawful mates but turned foolishly to immortality, and Satan bound them and threw them into the abyss of the fire. Didn't they hear that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?' Are they not afraid that 'I will pour out my indignation upon them?' I invited them to repent, and yet they did not repent."

"I will condemn also the thieves who committed a great deal of evil, even murders! And all who committed a multitude of sins. I granted them opportunities to change, but they paid no heed. Where are their good deeds? I showed them the prodigal as an example and a model, and many others - so that they wouldn't lose courage because of their sins. But they scorned My

commandments and denied Me. They turned away from Me and embraced debauchery. They loathed Me and became enslaved to sin. Let them walk, then, in the fire that they themselves lit.”

“But I will also surrender to a fearful tempest all those who died resentful, because they did not desire My peace, but throughout their lives they stayed hot-headed, bilious and wrathful.”

“I will destroy and I will vent all My wrath on the greedy, the usurers and all who work in avarice - which is a second idolatry - because they fixed all their hope on gold and ignored Me as if I had not provided for them.”

“I will melt like wax in Hades those false Christians who either allege that there is no resurrection of the dead or that there is reincarnation. Then they will be convinced about the resurrection of the dead.”

“The sorcerers, witch doctors, and as many as generally busy themselves with divination will be crushed.”

“Woe to those also who get drunk, who live riotously with guitars and drums, who sing, dance, use obscene language, and think evil. I invited them, but they did not hear Me; instead they mocked Me. Now the worm will eat up their heart. I granted mercy and repentance to all, but no one would pay attention then.”

“I will also submerge into darkness all those who disregarded the Holy Scriptures which My Spirit wrote through the saints.”

“Furthermore, I will judge those who busy themselves in old wives' tales and superstitions and fix their hopes on dolls and needles and black cats and other similar things. Then they will learn that they should have hoped in God and not in His creations. They will be shaking and will object then, but they will no longer have strength, because ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’”

“I will also punish the kings and rulers who embittered Me ceaselessly with their injustices. They judged unjustly and proudly, scorning the people. Indeed, they could be bought. But My authority does not accept bribes. According to their injustices I will annihilate them. Then they will realize that I am the fearful One Who takes away the powers of the rulers. They will realize that I am more terrible than all the kings of the earth. Woe to them! What punishment awaits them! Because they gnashed their teeth and spilled innocent blood the blood of their sons and daughters.”

“But to what wrath should I surrender the hirelings who were not true shepherds, who ruined My vineyard scattered My sheep? Who tended gold and silver - not souls - and sought the priesthood for profit? How great will their punishment be! How great the lamentation! I shall pour out all My anger and wrath on them and I shall crush them. They tried to obtain corruptible sheep and oxen, but did not tend to My rational sheep. I will punish their iniquities with a rod and their injustices with a whip.”

“But also the priests who laugh or quarrel in My holy churches, what shall I do to them? I will reform them in fire and brimstone.”

“I am coming, and here I am. Whoever has the power let him confront Me. But woe and alas to him who is a sinner and falls into My hands! Because everyone will appear before Me ‘open and laid bare.’ Then, where will the impudence of the sinners dare to show its face? How will they face Me? Where will they put their shame? They will disgrace themselves before My Immaculate Powers.”

“However, I will also condemn all those monks who neglected their duties and betrayed the vows they took before God, angels, and men. They promised one thing and did another. I will throw them down into the abyss from the height of the clouds. As if their own perdition was not enough, they also caused disastrous scandals in others. It would have been better for them if they had not denied the world instead, they denied it and lived shamefully in dissipation. ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay’ those who did not want to repent. I will judge them like a righteous Judge!”

These words that the Lord thundered to Archangel Michael, filled the innumerable Powers of angels with awe.

Then He commanded that the Seven Eons of the formation of the world be brought to Him. Michael assumed the execution of this command also. So he immediately went to the House of the Covenant and brought them. They were like big books and he placed them before the Judge. Afterwards, he stood aside watching with respect how the Lord skimmed through the Registry of the Eons.

He took the first Eon, opened it and said: “Here it says, first of all, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God in three persons. The Son was begotten of the Father; He is the Creator of the Eons. Because by the Word of the Father, the Son, the Eons were formed, the bodiless Powers were created, the heavens were made firm, the earth, the places under the earth, the sea, the rivers, ‘and all that is therein.’”

Then after He read a little further, He said: “Here it says, Image of the invisible God is the first man, Adam, with his wife Eve. To Adam was given a command by All-Governing God and Creator of all things visible and invisible. It is a law that must be kept unerringly and with precision, so that he may remember his Creator, and not forget that there is a God over him.”

Again He went on a little: “Transgression into which the image of God fell because of deceit or rather because of carelessness and negligence. Man fell and was driven away from Paradise with the righteous judgment and verdict of God The vile transgressor should not be found in such good!”

Further down he read: “Cain fell on Abel and killed him, according to the will of the devil. He should be burned in the fire of Hades because he remained unrepented, while Abel will live forever.”

In the same way He skimmed through the six Books of Eons.

Finally, He took the seventh and read: "The beginning of the seventh Eon marks the end of Eons Hatred wickedness and cruelty become the norm. The people of the seventh Eon are wicked envious, liars, with hypocritical love, power thirsty, enslaved in sodomitic sins."

He went on a little, read something and immediately He looked up mournfully. He placed one hand on His knee, and with the other He covered His face and eyes and remained thoughtful in this position a long time. In a little while, He whispered: "Truly, this seventh Eon surpassed all the previous ones in wickedness and injustice."

Further down He read: "The Greeks and their idols were thrown down with the wood of the Cross, the spear, and the nails which they drove into My Life-giving Body."

He was silent a few moments and again He bent over the book. "The twelve princes of the Great King, bright as the light, stirred up the sea, stopped the mouths of beasts, drowned the noetic dragons, gave light to the blind, fed the hungry and impoverished the rich. They caught many dead souls reviving them again. Great are their wages!"

And after a little: "I, the Beloved, chose also victorious martyrs for My sake. Their friendship reached up to Heaven and their love to My throne, their yearning up to My heart and their adoration inflames Me powerfully! My glory and dominion are with them!"

When He had turned several pages, He whispered with a smile of satisfaction: "The man who held the rudder of the Seven-Hilled City with piety and became its king was servant of My love. He is deserving of the Kingdom of Heaven, because he remained a zealot and imitator of his Lord."

Then skipping a lot, He exclaimed: "O most beautiful and most honored Bride! How many shameful people tried hard to pollute you! but you did not betray Me, your Bridegroom! Innumerable heresies threatened you, but the rock on which you are founded did not move; because 'the gates of Hades' shall not prevail against it."

Further down were written all the sins of the people whose death found them not cleansed through repentance. And they were so many, like the sand of the sea! The Lord read them displeased and shook His head sighing.

The countless number of angels were standing terrified with fear at the justified wrath of the Lord.

When the Lord reached the middle of the Eon, He observed: "This last one is full of the stench of sins, of the human deeds that are all false and filthy: hatred, murders, lies, enmities, resentments. Enough! I will stop it in the middle. Let the dominion of sin end."

And saying these angry words, the Lord gave the signal for the Judgment to Archangel Michael. He and his battalion immediately took the resplendent and indescribable throne and departed.

The battalion was so numerous, that it did not fit on earth. As they departed, they shouted: "Holy, holy, holy, fearsome and great, high and lifted up, wondrous and glorified is the Lord unto ages of ages."

Then Gabriel and his battalion withdrew chanting: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory!" And with that fearful shout heaven and earth shook.

The third great commander-in-chief, Raphael, followed with his battalion offering the hymn: "One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the Glory of God the Father. Amen!"

Finally, the fourth one also started out. Its leader was pure white and shining like the snow with a sweet face. As he was leaving, he, too, began to chant loudly: "The God of gods, the Lord has spoken, and He has called the earth from the rising of the sun and unto the setting thereof Out of Zion is the magnificence of His comeliness. God shall come visibly, yea, our God and shall not keep silence. Fire shall blaze before Him, and round about Him shall there be a mighty tempest."

And then the rest of the Psalm while his officers answered: "Arise, O God, judge the earth, for You shalt have an inheritance among all the nations." The leader of that battalion was Souriel.

After a while they brought before the Lord His Glorious Cross, which glittered like terrible lightning and exuded an ineffable fragrance. The Cross was accompanied with great honors by two battalions of Principalities and Powers. The spectacle was excitingly magnificent! The numerous powers chanted very harmoniously.

Others with great awe were saying: "I will exalt You, O my God, my King, and I will bless Your Name forever."

Still others were saying: "Exalt you the Lord our God, and worship the footstool of His feet; for He is Holy. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

Then a divine command was given for the mighty leader, Michael, to come again to stand by the throne of the Lord. At that moment an angel holding a thunderous trumpet appeared. The Judge took it in His hands, blew three times and spoke three words. Then he gave it to Michael and said: "Go to Golgotha, where I stretched My immaculate hands, and sound the trumpet three times there also."

As soon as Michael left, the Lord called the battalion of Authorities and turning to its leader He said: "I command you to take your divine battalion and disperse yourselves in all the world to transport the saints on top of clouds, from East and West, North and South. You will gather all of them so that they may welcome My presence, as soon as the trumpet sounds."

After all this, the righteous Judge glanced at the earth and saw fog and darkness, weeping and woes and many lamentations from the fearful tyranny of Satan. The beast raged and raved.

He destroyed everything crushing them like grass, because he saw the angels of God preparing eternal fire for him.

As soon as the Lord saw all this, He called a fiery angel with a strict and fearful appearance and without pity - he was the leader of the angels that watch over the fire of Hell - and said to him:

“Take My staff that binds and crushes with you. Take innumerable angels from your battalion also, the most powerful and fearful, who were promised as avengers of the damned. You will go to the noetic sea to find the traces of the black leader. Grab him with force and strength and strike him unmercifully with the staff, until he surrenders the battalion of evil spirits. And after you tie all of them tightly with the force of My rock according to My command, you will throw them in the most merciless and horrible punishments!”

Finally, then, when everything was ready, a sign was given to the archangel who was holding the trumpet to sound it loudly. Immediately dead silence spread out, as if the universe had become calm. With the first sound, all the bodies of the dead were raised. With the second, the Spirit of the Lord again restored the souls in the dead bodies. Awe and horror seized the universe. The celestial and the terrestrial trembled. And then the third and most horrible trumpet call resounded, which shook all the world. The dead were resurrected from their graves “in the twinkling of an eye.” What a fearful sight! They surpassed the sand of the sea in number. At the same time, like dense rain, the angelic armies were descending from heaven toward the “throne of preparation” shouting: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of fear and trembling.”

All the people and the countless armies of angels stood waiting. They were trembling and shuddering before the terrible divine authority which was descending on earth. However, while all were looking up high, suddenly earthquakes began to take place, thunder and lightning in the Valley of Judgment and in Heaven so that everyone was shocked. Then, the firmament was rolled up like a scroll: The Holy Cross appeared glowing like the sun and scattering divine flashes. The angels were holding it before our Lord Jesus Christ and Judge of the Universe, Who was coming.

In a little while a hymn was heard, a song never heard before: “Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord; God is the Lord, Judge, Sovereign, Prince of Peace.”

As soon as the thunderous doxology ended, the Judge appeared in the clouds, seated on a fiery throne. He set heaven and earth afire with His very pure splendor.

Suddenly, in the midst of the masses of the resurrected dead some began to glow like the sun! Immediately they were snatched from the clouds in the air to meet their Lord. The majority, however, remained below. No one brought them to heaven! They were weeping bitterly that they too weren't able to be snatched from the clouds and their grief and pain was like poison to their souls. They all fell on their knees before the Judge and rose up again.

The fearful Judge had finally sat on the throne of Judgment, and all the powers of the heavens gathered around Him with fear and trembling. Those who had been snatched from the clouds to be received by Him, were placed on His right. The rest were directed to the left of the Judge. The majority of them were Jews, nobles, bishops, priests, kings, and a large number of monks and

laymen. They stood very ashamed, deploring themselves and weeping for their loss. Their faces were wretched and they sighed deeply crushed. A deathly grief had spread over all and there was no comfort in sight anywhere.

But all those who were standing on the right of the Lord were cheerful, bright like the sun, reserved, glorified, white like the light, ablaze, as if by a flash of divine light. They resembled - if it isn't daring for one to say it - their Lord and God.

The fearful Judge immediately threw His gaze to the one side and to the other. On the right side He looked satisfied and smiled. However, when He turned to the left, He was troubled and very angry and turned His face away at once.

Then with a loud and solemn voice He said to those at His right hand: "Come, O blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me."

They were puzzled and asked: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?"

"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

He turned then toward the ones at His left hand also, and said to them harshly: "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me."

"Lord," they also asked Him puzzled, "when did we see You sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?"

"Truly, I say to you," the Lord answered them, "as you did it not to one the least of these, you did it not to Me. Get out of My sight, you cursed of the earth! to Tartarus! to the gnashing of teeth! That's where the endless weeping and wailing will be."

As soon as the Judge voiced that decision, at once an enormous fiery river spilled over from the east and went rolling violently toward the west. It was broad like a big sea. When the sinners on the left saw it they were very stunned and began to tremble frightfully in their despair. But the impartial Judge ordered everyone - just and unjust - to pass through the flaming river, so that the fire could try them.

The ones at His right hand started first. They crossed and came out gleaming like solid gold. Their deeds did not burn, but instead proved to be brighter and clearer with the test. That's why they were filled with joy.

After these, the ones at His left hand came to pass through the fire, so that their deeds might be tried. But, because they were sinners, the flame began to consume them and kept them in the middle of the river. Their deeds were burned up like straw while their bodies remained unharmed to burn for years and endless ages along with the devil and the demons.

No one was able to come out of that fiery river! The fire imprisoned all of them, because they deserved condemnation and punishment.

After the sinners were surrendered to hell, the fearful Judge rose from His throne and with all His saints set out for the Divine Palace. All the heavenly powers surrounded Him with much fear and trembling, chanting: "Lift up your gates, O you princes; and be lifted up, you everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall enter in, the Lord and God of gods, with all His saints, who will enjoy His inheritance forever."

Another army would answer and say: "'Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord' with all those that His grace enabled to be called the sons of God, 'God is the Lord,' and along with the sons of New Zion, 'has appeared unto us.'"

And the Archangels, who went before the Lord, glorified Him, chanting antiphonally a heavenly strain: "Come let us rejoice in the Lord let us shout with jubilation unto God our Savior. Let us come before His countenance with thanksgiving, and with psalms let us shout in jubilation unto Him." While another army responded antiphonally: "For the Lord is a great God and a great King over all the earth. For in His hand are the ends of the earth, and the heights of the mountains are His!" The holy angels chanted these and many more harmonious songs, so that those who heard them might rejoice indescribably.

Chanting like this, the saints with the Lord Jesus Christ entered into the heavenly chamber of the Divine Palace with hearts that leaped with joy, and immediately the gates of the bridal chamber were closed.

Then the heavenly King called the leaders of the angels. The first to appear were Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Souriel, and the commanders of the armies.

The twelve luminaries of the world, the apostles, followed. The Lord gave them shining glory and twelve fiery thrones so that with great honors they might sit close to their Teacher, Christ. Their faces radiated an indescribable eternal light and their clothing was glittering and transparent like amber. Even the leaders of the angels admired them. Finally, he also gave them twelve exquisite crystal crowns adorned with precious stones, which glistened blindingly, as glorious angels held them over their heads.

Then the seventy apostles were led before the Lord. They too received similar honors and glory, except that the crowns of the twelve were more wonderful.

Now it was the martyrs' turn. They took the place and glory of the great angelic army, which fell down from heaven along with Lucifer. In other words, the martyrs became the angels and leaders

of the heavenly armies. Immediately they were brought a large number of crowns which were placed on their holy heads. They glowed as much as the sun glows. Thus the holy martyrs, deified, rejoiced and exalted ineffably. Then the divine chorus of hierarchs, priests, deacons and the remaining clergy entered. They, too, were crowned with eternal and unwithering crowns, according to their zeal, patience, and pastoral activity. Each crown was different according to the glory, just as each star differs from the other. Thus many priests and deacons were more glorious and brilliant than many bishops.

They even gave each one a church, so that they may offer holy and perfect sacrifice pleasing to God in the spiritual altar.

Then the holy chorus of the monks came in. Their faces exuded a mystical fragrance and they shimmered like suns. The Lord adorned them with six wings, and with the power of the Holy Spirit they became like the frightful Cherubim and Seraphim. They began then to shout loudly: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." Their glory was great, unimaginable, and their crowns multifaceted and glistening. They received honors according to their struggles and sweat.

The chorus of the prophets followed. The King gave them the Song of Songs, the Psalter of David, timbrels and dances, immaterial, flashing light, ineffable delight, and the glorification of the Holy Spirit.

Then the Lord of the divine bridal chamber asked them to chant something. And they chanted such a melodious hymn that everyone leaped with joy.

After they received these gifts from the immaculate hands of the Savior, the saints still waited for "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived."

Then entered the entire chorus of people who were saved in the world: the poor, leaders, kings and private citizens, slaves and free men. They all stood before the Lord and He set apart from their midst the merciful and the pure, and He gave them the bliss of the Paradise of Eden, heavenly and luminous palaces, luxurious crowns, sanctification and exultation, thrones and scepters, and angels to wait on them.

Then came all those who for the love of Christ became "poor in spirit." Now they were greatly exalted. A very brilliant crown was given to them by the hand of the Lord and they inherited the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then came those who were mourning for their sins, and received the great comfort of the Holy Trinity.

They were followed by the meek and guileless, who inherited the heavenly earth, where the Spirit of God lets fall sweetness and fragrance. They, too, experienced ineffable delight and pleasure when they saw the blessed earth given to them. Their rose-like crowns gave off flashes of light.

The hungry and thirsty for righteousness were next and were given the wages of righteousness, so that they might be satisfied. And their good will rejoiced when they saw Christ the King extolled and greatly glorified by the holy angels.

Then came those persecuted for righteousness' sake. Divine praise and a very marvelous life was given to them. Indeed, for their sake even an ineffable throne was put up so that they might sit in the Kingdom of Heaven. Their crowns were of divine and immaterial gold which glowed so much that, due to their glory, the chorus of angels rejoiced.

Those reviled for Christ, the great God and Savior of our souls, entered next. He put them up on gilded thrones, and they enjoyed the praise of God.

After them entered a large number of idolaters who did not know the law of Christ, but by nature observed it by obeying their conscience. Many glowed like the sun because of their purity and goodness, and the Lord gave them Paradise and radiant crowns braided with roses and lilies. However, they were blind since they had been denied Holy Baptism. They could not see the glory of God at all, because Holy Baptism is the light and the eye of the soul. That's why, he who does not receive it, even if he does an infinite amount of good, he certainly inherits the bliss of paradise and experiences something of its fragrance and sweetness, but he sees nothing.

After them, righteous Nephon saw a host of saints who were the children of the Christians. All of them appeared to be about 30 years old. The Bridegroom looked at them with a gladsome look and said: "Indeed your baptismal garment is spotless, but deeds nowhere! What shall I do with you then?" Then boldly they answered Him: "Lord You denied us Your earthly goods, at least do not deny us the heavenly ones."

The Bridegroom smiled and granted them heavenly goods. They also received the crowns of purity and goodness, and all the bodiless hosts admired them.

It was wonderful for one to hear the holy angels, who, thoroughly pleased, sang sweet songs as they saw the hosts of the saints.

After all that, Nephon saw a Bride bathed in divine light approaching the Bridegroom. She dispersed heavenly fragrances and divine myrrh around her. On her very beautiful head she wore an incomparable, radiant, royal crown. The angels looked at her astonished and the saints dazzled.

The Grace of the Holy Spirit held that heavenly diadem upon the immaculate head.

As she went into the divine bridal chamber, she was followed by a countless number of virgins who with doxologies and chants were praising the grandeur of God.

When she came close to the Bridegroom, the Great Queen bowed down three times along with the holy virgins. Then the One "comely in beauty" saw her and rejoiced. He bowed His head and honored her as His Immaculate Mother. She approached with great reverence and grace and kissed His deathless and sleepless eyes, as well as His merciful hands.

After the divine kiss, the Lord gave the virgins gleaming dresses and luminous crowns. Afterwards all the rational powers came praising, blessing and glorifying her.

Then the Bridegroom rose from His throne and, with His Mother on His right, and His great and very admirable prophet and Forerunner on His left, He came out of the Bridal Chamber, and went into the divine chamber where “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” was prepared for all those who love God. All the saints followed also. As soon as they saw them, they were overwhelmed with ineffable joy and began to circulate festively in the spectacular chamber.

But the servant of God Nephon wasn't able to describe them to me. Even though many times I pressured him, he didn't tell me the slightest thing. “My son,” he would say with a sigh, “I can't portray those there with my words, nor compare them with any earthly thing. They were beyond every thought and imagination, beyond everything visible and invisible.”

Therefore, when the Lord divided all the unutterable and unheard of goods amongst the saints, He commanded the Cherubim to surround the eternal chamber, as the wall surrounds a city. Then He commanded the Seraphim to surround the Cherubim, the Thrones the Seraphim, the Principalities the Thrones, the Authorities the Principalities, and finally the heavenly Powers the Authorities. The armies surrounded each other the same way that a wall surrounds a city.

To the right of the eternal chamber stood Michael and his battalion with every grandeur. Gabriel with his army stood on the left. Souriel established himself on the west, and Raphael in the east.

All of this took place with the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, the great God and Savior of all the saints. Those four ranks were very big. And with the host of the immaculate powers they girded the chamber of God with great splendor.

When all this had finally been carried out, then the God-Man Jesus Himself was “also subjected to Him Who put all things under Him,” and gave Him all the authority and sovereignty and dominion which He had received from Him; while He, along with all His saints and co-heirs, entered into the divine and inaccessible chamber, heir of the Father, King, and High Priest.

At the end of all the mysteries that Saint Nephon saw, he saw even the most frightful revelation: The Father of the only begotten Son, the Parent Himself, the inaccessible and incomprehensible Light, rose suddenly shining over that boundless chamber, over the immaculate Powers, over all their circles and ranks. He gave light to the most pure chamber like the sun gives light to the world. That is how the Father of mercies shone. And just like the sponge absorbs and retains wine, that's how the saints were inundated by the ineffable godhead of the Father and reigned unceasingly with Him in all the ages.

From then on there was neither night nor day for them. There was only God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, effulgence and bliss, life and light, delight and pleasure.

Then there was deep silence. Clear and pure light was given to righteous Nephon that he might see: a song like a continuous and endless inheritance was given to the first army that surround the Chamber. Its pleasure was incomparable and more than good. The divine and fearful army immediately started an inexpressible doxology. The hearts of the saints leaped with joy and pleasure.

From the first rank the superb hymn of doxology was passed on to the second rank of the Seraphim. It, too, then began to chant a very artful and incomprehensible hymn. Its doxology sounded like sweetest honey to the ears of the saints, and they rejoiced boundlessly with all their senses: Their eyes saw the inaccessible Light. Their nose smelled the fragrance of the Godhead. Their ears heard the divine hymn of the immaculate powers. Their mouths tasted the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ new in the Kingdom of Heaven. Their hands felt the eternal God and their feet danced in the chamber. Therefore, in this way they were filled with ineffable exultation.

Shortly that divine hymn was passed from the second rank to the third and from the third to the fourth, down to the last one, causing enjoyment and pleasure in the hearts of the saints with that sweeter-than-honey melody. And it was amazing that one hymn was chanted unceasingly by the heavenly hosts, yet there was an indescribable variety and originality in that ode as they chanted it.

When the seven circles of the angelic armies completed their pure doxology, then the rank of the archangels also began the thrice-holy hymn: Michael chanted and Gabriel responded; and again, Raphael hymned and Uriel concluded. One would hear such harmonies as never heard before. The four fiery pillars, the archangels, stood out and their chanting was ardent and thunderous.

Incited then by that infinite bliss all the Saints started extolling the splendor of God from the heavenly chamber.

Thus a hymn resounded from within, a hymn from without, a hymn everywhere: most sacred songs that inflamed the holy hearts with blessed joy to the endless ages.

When thrice-blessed Nephon had seen all this and was in ecstasy and contemplation, he heard the voice of God saying to him: "Nephon, Nephon, your prophetic vision was beautiful. Write in detail everything you saw and heard because that's how it will be. I revealed them to you because you are a true friend My beloved son and heir to My Kingdom. Rest assured therefore, now that I have enabled you to become an eye-witness to the dread mysteries of My great love towards all those who worship in humility My Kingdom and My authority, for I delight in looking to him who 'is humble and meek, and trembles at My words.'"

After the Lord said this to him, He freed him from the dread and most marvelous vision, which had absorbed him for two weeks.

When he finally came to himself he sat terrified and cried and wailed. His tears would run like a stream and he'd say: "Woe to me, the prodigal! What awaits my miserable soul! Woe to me, the

wretch! I wonder in what condition I, the sinner, will find myself there! How will I defend myself to the Judge? How will I answer for my sins? And where will I hide the multitude of my iniquities? Oh, the profane and miserable one! I have neither sighs nor tears. But neither can I find repentance. Charity nowhere! Prayer, none! Love, zero! Guilelessness and meekness stand very far from me! Alas! What can I, the wretch and vile, do? From where can I be snatched that my soul may be saved? I soiled my garment, I polluted my Baptism, I plunged my soul into the mire. I clouded my mind, my heart 'is weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness.' Ah! sinner that I am, I don't know what to do! My eyes see obscenities. My face is thoroughly ashamed My ears delight in demonic songs. My nostrils seek sweet odors. My mouth inclines toward gluttony. Woe to me the wretch! My hands take pleasure in sin. My body desires to roll in the mire of immorality, seeking soft beds and good food."

"Oh, the lawless, dark and foul one! I don't know where to go. Who will pull me out from that bitter fire? Who will rescue me from the outer darkness of frightful Tartarus? Who will deliver me from the outer darkness of frightful Tartarus? Who will deliver me from the gnashing of teeth? Woe, woe to me, the disgusting one! The lawless one! It would have been better if I had not been born! Oh, what glory I, the black one, am about to be denied! What honor, what crowns, how much joy, how much gaiety will I lose, because I became a slave to sin! Miserable soul! Where, then, is your compunction? Where are your struggles? Where are your virtues? Woe to you profane and mournful one! Where will your place be on that day? Did you do anything good that may be pleasing to God? You'll go into the furnace. How will you stand the woes and lamentations? O miserable soul, that always desired to roll in corruption, that unceasingly served the stomach!"

"Lawless and immoral one, what shame you will experience in the sight of Jesus! With what eyes will you look at His sweetest face? Tell me, tell me! You saw those marvelous visions which the Lord will one day fulfil. Tell me then, O my soul, do you have deeds worthy of that glory? How will go in there, since you defiled your divine baptism? Woe to you then, my polluted soul! You deserve to inherit eternal fire; and where will sin and its father be to save you then?"

"But, my Lord, Lord, save me from the fire, from the gnashing of teeth, from the furnace."

With these words the blessed one reproached himself prayerfully. On the days that followed, you would see him walking dragging his feet with bitter sighs, tears, and lamentations. He would reflect on the marvelous things he saw, and did whatever he could to obtain them.

Often - when he would meditate about his vision more deeply and clearly - he would be beside himself. He was ablaze with the presence of the Holy Spirit and would cry out: "Oh, what joy, what glory, what splendor awaits the saints in Heaven! I'm so afraid that I may be denied them!"

He would sigh deeply and add: "Lord, help and save my confused soul."

THE WILD DOE

What can one say in reference to the virtues of the saint? God had granted him such faith and love, that he beseeched Him with frankness to open the eyes of the souls of the idolaters, the heretics, and the Jews, that they may see and understand the Triple Sun of the Holy Trinity. The grace of the Holy Spirit granted him such humility and meekness, that he thought he was the one that was polluting the world. That's why when he was discussing a topic that would benefit the soul, or whatever else, with his mind he would fall at the feet of his companion. He spoke with a contrite heart and humble spirit. If sometimes he appeared angry, and said a harsh word with his lips, his heart, however, would be full of spiritual honey.

Listen to an unusual example of his virtue which I saw with my eyes: Once we visited the house of a nobleman who had a great deal of respect for the saint. One of his does was by nature wild and aggressive. Whenever she came face to face with someone, she would lift herself up on her hind legs and with the front ones she would strike him right on the head. As I said, we went to this rich man for the sake of gaining some benefit. As soon as we crossed the courtyard, we met the animal lurking in a corner by which we would be passing. When it saw us coming, it rushed at me - because I was walking ahead. The saint, who realized that the doe was enraged, threw himself quickly in our midst to save me. As soon as he hit her with his hand, she became tame like a lamb. When the saint saw that she had been humbled and submitted to him, he immediately repented that he had struck her and fell at her feet and very humbly said: "I have sinned Forgive me!"

The doe, in her turn, seeing what the saint had done, was ashamed and went away, running as if someone were chasing her.

Then puzzled, I said to the saint: "Tell me, Father, why did you humble yourself to an animal?"

"So that you may learn the secret power of humility, that it is the great staff of God When we humble ourselves before everyone and we consider ourselves very sinful, like manure, then this staff comes down from heaven and stands as our helper crushing our enemies: those who hate us, the demons, the monsters, everything! But when we start to puff ourselves up, to be proud and conceited, then the staff turns on our heads and strikes us, until we repent and acquire a "heart that is broken" and a spirit of humility."

While he was saying this, an old lady with a swollen cheek due to a toothache met us. Immediately she started begging the saint to give her some relief. "Mother," he answered her, "we are sinners in words and in deeds. Let God bestow on you His mercy."

Then he entered the church, took a little oil from the vigil oil lamp of the Theotokos, and anointed all the swollen area. The old lady was immediately healed, and with all her heart she thanked All-Merciful God and His servant.

THE CROSS IS THE GLORY OF ANGELS AND THE WOUNDER OF DEMONS

A pious Christian related to me the following amazing incident: He told me that one Saturday night, when he was praying in the narthex of St Anastasius during the usual resurrectional vigil, the servant of God Nephon also came, because he always observed vigils every Saturday night in the churches of the saints.

“Well,” my companion said, “I see a large number of white-clad men travelling with him, some in front of him and others behind him, rejoicing that they were surrounding him. But even more dread, a cross as tall as he and glittering as if made of pure gold was rising in front of him. Similar glittering crosses were on the right and left, in back and over the saint's head. They were entwined and built a wall around him. When a temptation came, during that moment of the battle, the Lord, wanting to test him, permitted the crosses to part. Thus they left a small opening amongst them through which the enemies were able to throw their arrows. A great number of angels and demons watched the battle. The saint would raise his hands toward the Most-High God and with his pure mind would ascend to Him. He would remain up there praying. Seeing him and fearing the wrath of God, Satan would tremble and say to his army: ‘Let's go, boys, away from this Nephon, because he has ascended to heaven and is praying against us to the Great One. Let's disappear then before His wrath comes down and tortures us.’”

“And immediately they would vanish. Then that blessed one would come down to earth after the prayer, come to himself and, not finding any enemy, he would thank the good Lord Who shielded him.”

“Then the angels also departed happy, while the precious crosses came together again closing the entrance and guarding the righteous one.”

“Many times,” that good Christian continued, “the devil would come with a large number of demons to throw him in a passion but couldn't, because, surrounded by the power of the cross, he would ridicule them and spit on them. Thus the dark demons, thoroughly ashamed, would disappear, while he glorified God even more for granting him such power against the invisible enemies.”

HOW SOULS TRAVEL TO HEAVEN

Once when he was praying and had his gaze turned to Heaven, a divine light shone in front of him. At the same time a white-clad angel, dressed as a deacon, appeared. He was holding a gold censer and tensed first in the direction of Heaven and then Nephon. Suddenly the gates of Heaven opened and the angels of God ascended and descended like bees, transporting the souls of people who had died. The evil spirits of the air were struggling to grab them and throw them down, but the angels resisted violently, whipping them and saving the souls.

Astonished the saint saw a soul being taken up to heaven. But as soon as they approached the toll booth of immortality, its leader started to shake and become wild. "With what right," he was shouting, "do you take that soul which belongs to us?"

And the angels answered him: "Prove to us what authority you have over this man."

"Up until his death," the demon said, "he was wallowing voluntarily in all kinds of indecencies. And not only this, but he also judged others. What crimes more horrible than these do you want?"

"Yes," the angels admitted, "he was a slave to these passions, but he cut them before he died."

"No! It's not the way you're telling me," the demon squealed. "He died unrepented. To his last breath he violated the law without ever confessing his sins. He was and still is mine."

Then one of the angels said: "We are not about to believe you, who are entirely wallowing in falsehood Let's call his angel. He will tell us the whole truth."

They called him, because he was still guarding the body until its interment. As soon as he came, they asked him: "Tell us, brother, did this soul repent for its sins or did it die with them? Tell us the whole truth."

Then the angel answered: "I am neither human nor an impudent spirit to tell lies, but before God I assure you: from the time he became ill, even before he took a turn for the worse, he thought of death. Then he began to cry and confess his sins to God Continually he would raise his hands toward the Most High asking for mercy. If God wills, He will forgive him. If not, glory to His righteous judgment!"

As soon as the angels heard this, they laughed at the devil. Thus the humble soul was liberated from the snares of its enemies.

In a little while the saint saw another soul being carried up. It belonged to a blasphemous and hard man. The demons were accusing him a lot reminding him one-by-one of the improper words and grave curses he used to say to the people when he was alive.

The angels said in rebuttal that he had a few rights to salvation. Many times, for example, even though he was thinking of doing something bad, he would immediately repent, reproaching and degrading himself. Often he would sigh bitterly and sometimes he would tear. Once in a while he would even give a little charity to the poor. Having this in mind, the angels of light claimed that

God would have mercy on that soul. Angered then the demons said: "From his youth he did things that were not right for a Christian: He polluted himself with different sins and, indeed sodomitic ones. Where shall we place his curses and anger? And the worst, he even committed murder. If therefore he must be saved, then take the whole world and all the sinners of the earth and save them gratis; because we are laboring and getting upset in vain!"

"Keep in mind, wretches, that he cut all his youthful sins and God forgave him. And if sometimes he did something bad, he cleansed it with repentance. What do you want then, wild beasts? that this soul be condemned? Impossible, since God forgives the sins people confess tearfully and humbly and do not repeat. 'Anything that becomes visible is light.' The righteous Judge punishes only those sins they take with them."

Thus the angels defeated the spirits of wickedness and entered into the gate of Heaven. Therefore, that creature of God was also liberated from the claws of the demons, and He Who saves freely, granted him salvation.

Again the blessed one saw them lifting still another soul that was very devout and God-fearing. She spent all her life in purity, modesty, and a great deal of charity. She showed love toward all. The dragons of the air threatened her gnashing their teeth. And that poor thing, terrified by their wildness, shriveled up in the bosom of the angels of God, while the angels descending to take other souls kissed her with love.

When that holy soul ascended into heaven, a large number of good spirits gathered around her, embracing and kissing her tenderly, and saying joyfully: "Glory to God Who delivered this soul from the dreadful dragon!"

It was a delight to see them. The heavenly powers always do this: they rejoice and celebrate for each Christian who is saved. When they reached the throne of Grace, they brought her to the feet of the Lord Jesus, and He permitted her to worship His Father and to be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Later He turned her over to Michael, the lord of the covenant, to guide her to eternal rest, as indeed it happened.

Down further, however, the servant of God saw the demons dragging a soul to the infernal regions. It was the soul of some servant who had hung himself. Behind him followed his guardian angel weeping bitterly for his loss. In the midst of his tears he was saying: "Ah, the foxy demons who make people do such evil! There, this servant's master, obeying the demons, would become angry, hit him terribly, and let him starve to death. And this poor soul became desperate, took the rope and hung himself offering his life wholly a sacrifice to Satan. Ah, alas! The Almighty gave him to me to guard after his baptism, and the filthy dragon snatched him from me suddenly and devoured him! How will I appear to my Lord in this grieving and bitter state? But also, how will I face my Maker sorrowful for the loss of this soul?"

While he was painfully saying this, another angel appeared from heaven. "Our Father, the Lord of hosts," he told him, "commands you to go to Rome, where this very moment the son of a soldier is being baptized. Take charge of him and guard him through the Holy Spirit given to him at baptism. And I shall punish the master of this servant and teach him not to become angry nor hit his servants nor let them starve to death."

The angel said this on behalf of God and ascended into heaven, while the former set out for Rome according to the divine command.

That instant Nephon saw them bringing up a soul with a lot of commotion. Multitudes of demons were making noise and were attempting to snatch the unfortunate soul. It was the soul of a clergyman who had spent his life in immorality. He even committed murders! He would lie in wait in the street at night and kill the passers-by. Then he would take their clothes and sell them to feed his jesters!

Therefore, as that wretched soul was ascending, it didn't make it through the fourth station: the dragon stretched out his hands with impudence, snatched it from the angels and cast it down to earth. The demons took it then, lowered it into the abyss and turned it over to the prince of darkness, so that it might remain captive there along with similar sinful souls, until the day of the common resurrection.

As the dark demons were returning again, they were puffed up and put on airs saying amongst themselves: "Look, we even beat the clergy of the Nazarene and trample them under foot!"

Then one of them sadly whispered: "Why are we bragging that we destroyed one unfortunate soul? I can show you a large number of priests who shine with virtue; we can't even touch them."

"If they didn't have the mark of Jesus," the others answered, "and His help all around them, then you'd see our power!"

"And why should we fear the wood on which the Nazarene was nailed? This is an example of complete decadence!"

"It's not the wood, but the terrible lightning which pours forth from it. The bad part is that the lightning which burns us doesn't come only from the wood but the same thing happens when the Christians sign themselves with this symbol."

Then to trap him the others said to him: "And when did you experience all this?"

"In Constantinople there is a relentless enemy of ours named Nephon. I and others of us threw ourselves at him from his youth. We used to send him provocative temptations all day. We inflamed him so terribly that in the end he fell into sin. And while we registered his defeat with a lot of pride, he repented at the same instant and started reproaching himself and weeping: 'Oh! for this body that the worms will eat, I yielded to my evil desire. Woe to me, it is this that will throw me into the fire.' And saying this he became like a maniac. We laughed at his expense. But he who was very foxy and knew our tricks shouted to us: 'Now I'll show you, corrupt demons!'

he got up at once, and with his hand he traced the sign of the Nazarene on us. Oh! It was as if fire passed through our hearts immediately. Terrorized we dispersed instantly. Only one of us dared to stand far off, to see what he was going to do. He saw him enter the church quickly. He prostrated himself to God three times and said: 'Lord, I am a sinful man, young in age, still struggling with my passions and the fire of the flesh. Therefore, do not count this fall of mine as a sin. You are Lord and have authority to forgive my offences with only Your word.'

"As soon as he said these words, an angel crowned him for his repentance and contrition. In spite of all this," the demon continued, furious with his flesh, he began to strike his face with all the strength he had. Later, he lifted his hands again to heaven and beseeched God, saying: 'You, the fearful God, Who gave birth to the fearful Son, and rule everywhere with Your Fearful Spirit, hear me, the filthy one. And torture those abominations who roar with laughter at my expense. For against You only have I sinned, I, the filthy and corrupt one.'

"At once the angel who had crowned him threw a rope and tied us all together. Then taking us out one by one, he gave us each a thousand blows. With our cries and woes we raised the roof. As he was hitting us, he was saying: 'So that you may never be the reason again for the servants of God to hit their bodies!' And after that compassionless angel tortured us a lot, we barely got away. From that time, then, whenever I see that Nephon I vanish, because I fear the beatings!"

When the demon finished his tale, the others started making fun of him and calling him wretched, unfortunate, and a coward.

In the meantime, in his vision Nephon was following everything the evil spirits were saying about him, and laughed at them.

After a little while he saw an angel descending toward Constantinople, the seven-hilled city. He was holding a terrible flaming sword. Someone, tormented pitifully, was dying at that hour. He was a compassionless usurer. In addition, he used to gossip scandalously about Nephon: he called him a heretic, a hypocrite, etc. "Why is he this and that? Why does he do this or that?" The miserable one didn't look at himself but concerned himself with others.

Well, the angel of fire came and stood by his bed looking toward heaven, as if waiting for something. Indeed a voice was heard: "Quickly, punish the antichrist severely and cut the prodigal soul from the bonds of the body. While he lived this good-for-nothing never did My will. And not only that, but he also judged My servant Nephon. Hit him fiercely! May he never again choke the poor by lending them gold."

As soon as the punishing angel heard the voice, he heartily struck the miserable usurer with all the strength he had, and he gave up the spirit at once gnashing his teeth and groaning from the depths of his soul. The angel took his soul which was terribly tormented and turned toward the abyss.

Then St Nephon came to himself. Dumbfounded and sad for all he had seen, he thought and said: "Ah, how much misery we, humble and sinful, hide! And then Judgment and the terrible fire come

wherever we go for all eternity. We must aim for salvation at all costs, forcing ourselves to do good. Only in this way we will please God and not violate His commandments.” And immediately he prayed:

“O Lord, my God, I've placed my hope in You: deliver me from those who pursue me and save me. The treacherous prince of darkness, like a roaring lion, will snatch my miserable soul, if You, my Christ, do not deliver it and save it by Your Holy Spirit. Blessed is he who obeys You, Who became poor and destitute for our salvation; because at the time of his death You will redeem him from the corrupt spirits of wickedness who, like evil censors, shameless accusers, compassionless overseers, stand and seek to devour his poor soul. O fearful and Almighty Master, Who shake everything and they tremble, deliver the race of Christians from those tyrants. Have mercy on all those who have placed their hopes in You, O Holy One, and forgive them who grievously transgress Your law and ceaselessly embitter Your compassion.”

He was still tearful from the thought of that poor usurer whose soul was taken by the avenging angel with the flaming sword. He was thinking how bitter his death was without any pity from God - even though he occasionally gave something to the poor from the interest he collected! Because, as Nephon said, at the time his miserable soul was being tormented, he cried out: “Remember, O Lord, the alms I gave to the poor.” But a voice was heard saying: “Yes, wretch! You drank the blood of the poor and watered other poor men with it! Shall I be merciful to you for that, or because you slandered the one I love? Night and day he prays for the sinners. He wouldn't stop beseeching even for you. Then, why did you speak evil of him? Learn now that you should not have judged anyone!”

Nephon related all this to his acquaintances and advised them: “Be careful, my children, not to judge anyone, especially if he is a man of God. I beg you, guard yourselves from this sin. Look after yourselves and be conscious of your own faults. With this consciousness we will be able to repent. Some of the servants of God show and some hide their virtue. Certain people criticize those who have the courage to be seen. However, these will be punished harshly on Judgment Day. For God has placed before all men those who scorn human glory, so that they may confess their faith with courage, and thus benefit many. ‘Let your light so shine before men,’ He commanded them, ‘so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.’ And conversely, to those who lean toward conceit He says: ‘Those who do the works of righteousness openly to be pleasing to people and not to Me, truly, truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.’ For he who willfully is vain will not receive mercy. Keeping this in mind, then, my children, let us not judge anyone, and let us not pay attention to the slanderers, whether they criticize a righteous person or anyone else. ‘Judge not the Lord commands: You who sit on the throne, do not scorn your servant, for he may hide within him the Spirit of God and without realizing it, you find yourself the enemy of God.’”

The saint said this to them and begged them once more to look to themselves and not judge anyone. But also they should not lend money with interest, for how does it profit a man to say he is a Christian, when he has stored up gold and lends it out with interest? First of all, he does

not have his hope in God. Second, he is an idolater. Third, he suffers of avarice and drowns night and day in cares. He doesn't even get enough sleep! Finally, death comes, too. Oh, what foolishness!

TWO MIRACULOUS HEALINGS

At that moment someone came and told him: “Father, did you hear that the daughter of your benefactress is suffering with a grave illness? If you can, therefore, run over to show her mercy, because she is already dying.”

“I'm going to show her mercy? What are you saying, my son?” the saint scolded him. “That is not my job! Mercy belongs to God. If one blind man leads another blind man, both of them will fall down the cliff. However, let's go for the sake of Him Who said, ‘I was sick and you visited me.’”

As soon as he arrived in front of the bed, tears came to his eyes and he began to pray silently. While he was praying, the patient who was dying, suddenly lifted her hands toward God. The people who had gathered began chanting, “Lord have mercy.” With the help of God the agony of death immediately ceased. The girl made the sign of the cross and glorified God. Fear gripped those present, and they thanked the good Physician of souls and bodies.

From there Nephon went to visit another sister who respected him and very often served him. She, too, was seriously ill and was beseeching God to cure her through the prayers of the saint.

Then Nephon said to her: “It is better for you to thank God, my daughter, because ‘the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ But since you want to regain your health, and you desire it so much, behold, in the morning you will be well and on your feet. Thank the Lord Jesus Christ for this.”

He left after he said this. And indeed, in the morning by the grace of God the sick girl was healthy, and she thanked the only Savior and true Physician.

WHEN ILLNESS SAVES

As soon as Nephon returned to his cell, they brought him another patient named Nikon. "I'm ill. My limbs are paralyzed," he complained. "I spent my fortune on doctors and as you see, I was not helped I beg you, pray to God to cure me."

"My son, your language and your evil behavior brought this on you," the saint noted. "You were very perverse, inclined to drunkenness, censure and slander. Moreover, you promised God that you would become a monk and you did not keep your promise. You got that far, but again you turned back. For all these the philanthropic God sent you a little chastisement: the paralysis. If you endure it without grumbling and with repentance and confession, you will receive mercy on Judgment Day from the righteous Judge. It's not to your benefit, my son, to get well, in case you are cured here and in the life to come the fire consumes you; because, it seems to me that over your head I see written: 'Quick death; O Lord help.'"

"Father, what does 'O Lord help' mean?" the paralytic asked.

"Help, so that the soul may not be lost," the saint explained. "Because you still insist on the same passions. Therefore, don't criticize me, my son, for advising you of this. I want your salvation and to correct you with this advice."

"You are right about everything, Father," he admitted. "But what can I do? A lot of force is necessary to cut all these, and I'm ill both in soul and in body!"

"Don't you know," the saint told him, "that 'the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and men of violence take it by force?' Start fasting and praying. You only have a short time yet. Death is at hand. However, I place my hope in the compassion of God that you will have a good journey. You must know, that the passions are demons and do not go away except with 'prayer and fasting,' according to the word of the Lord. With these weapons, then, arm yourself against them and you will beat them."

With this type of advice he saw him off peacefully. And that paralytic with the help of God did whatever the saint told him. In a few days he travelled to Heaven. The Lord Who loves man welcomed his return more than he welcomes those who grow old in asceticism.

THE DEATH OF SINNERS IS EVIL

Once he was sitting on a church stool. (His cell was close to the church of St Hypatia and later it became a coenobium). The service had ended and many gathered around him to benefit. Someone asked him about the different types of death: why some die in torment and others in peace, some abroad, others in the desert, and still others at sea. Indeed, some say that it is written how and where each one will die.

“Brothers,” the saint began, “what is indispensable is to mourn for our sins and with repentance to ask for the mercy of God. As to the other things, they belong to His Judgment and it is dangerous to concern ourselves with them. Instead it is better to weep and lament for our offences, so that we may find mercy and be able to enjoy even one little drop of salvation. Evil days are coming, ‘when no one can work.’ Therefore, before they come, let us work for good that we may live eternally.”

“Your words are right,” said the ones with whom he was conversing. “But, if our question was not improper, we beg you to give us an answer.” Then Nephon related this to them:

“I had a certain friend, who was named Theophilus. Many times he would bless my wretchedness, not knowing that my iniquities surpassed even those of the demons. From my youth I would talk to him often and tell him beneficial words for his soul, but I did not succeed in pulling him to what is good. He would only listen and be content. But he wouldn't carry out even one of the things I told him. He worked in a factory and his job was to do the weighing. He was resentful and abusive in his language. He didn't have a door of enclosure round about his lips. He didn't fear God at all, because he worked in sin. In his weighing he was dishonest cheating the poor out of their labor.”

“But then the sickle that would cut him off this life arrived one month before his death, he came down with dysentery. His bowels spilled out; he was in the agony of death chewing his tongue until he cut it. The judgment of God was so severe that for seventeen days he was rending and rolling on the bed gnashing his teeth. He plucked his chin hair by hair until he made it bare like his palm. Then he would count his fingers, he would shake his head miserably, wildly he would open his eyes wide, he was seeking consolation! But there was none. And again he would repeat the same: he would shake his head, pluck his hair, count his fingers, groan. How was he able to endure that frightful torment? In the end he chewed up his lips and left his head without hair. In spite of all this, he continued to count his fingers, groan, and gnash his teeth. An angel was standing there invisibly. He had drawn his fearful sword from the sheath and was torturing wretched Theophilus.”

“He agonized and suffered this way for seventeen days, as I said counting the injustices of the scales with his fingers. And the avenging angel was saying to him:”

“Wretch, you had no compassion at all. You burned everyone with your shameless balance. You got away from the true faith, and you would even swear at the drop of a hat by the dreadful Name of God! Then, why did you curse and slander the honorable people? Well, see now what

all these things have caused you! Why did you spit on the ground fearlessly after taking Communion? Why did you cheat and wrong the poor on the scales? Now then, if all the weights do not come before you, your soul is not about to come out, but you will be tormented continually.”

“However, with a cut tongue he could not ask for a scale, but would add with his fingers and shake his head No one understood what he wanted.”

“Just one saintly and discerning man, who happened to be there, heard the angel, understood, and asked for a scale to be brought. As soon as the dying man saw it, he sighed deeply and started shaking his head vigorously, as if confessing that with the scales he had committed all his transgressions. And immediately he expired The avenging angel took his soul and surrendered it to the judgment of God.”

“Therefore, what conclusion do we draw from such a death?” Nephon asked. “He was punished according to his deeds. Since he was so sinful and lawless - like me, the wretch - he was punished here, so that in the future judgment he might experience lesser suffering.”

When the people who were talking with the saint heard all this, they sighed, each one thinking of his own sins.

“You fear the judgment of God,” the saint observed, “just as it happened several times to gentle David Listen to another similar incident.”

But before beginning he got up, prostrated himself to them and said: “Forgive me, brothers, for polluting you with my sins. I am not worthy even to be sitting near you. And yet I am, and as if this isn't enough for me, with my vainglory, I the blind want to give light to you who see.”

The others were shaken by these words and fell at his feet crushed. They feared that God, seeing his measureless humility, might throw fire and burn them because they knew that he was a saint, while they were sinners.

BITTER DEATH, PURE SOUL

The saint lifted the people who had fallen at his feet and had them sit on stools. Then he began an amazing narration:

“There lived a young man in Constantinople, Basil by name. He was crafty, filthy, and very shameless. He would spend all day and night in the dens of iniquity. On the other hand his master, Patrick, was an exceptional person, charitable, merciful, compassionate and lending to those in need as the Scripture commands. Basil, his employee, was eighteen years old Patrick sent him often to fill orders, and with that excuse he would go to the centers of depravity, polluting the beauty of his soul and body. But look how God, Who has ‘no pleasure in the death of the wicked,’ arranged his salvation.”

“At that time famine had fallen over all the land. With hunger came a very severe Winter, so severe that daily nearly a thousand people would die in our city. The number of dead was so high, that they were unable to bury them. Then when Winter prevailed for good along with famine - both evils together - all were forced to release their employees and some even their servants. Many even sold their children, so that they could get a nickel for food Since things became so tight for all, they were tight also for Patrick, about whom we were speaking. He, too, was forced to release his employees. ‘How will my children, my servants, and I be able to support ourselves?’ he thought, because he had a lot of personnel. Thus, young Basil along with all the other employees was also released The very first day he sold his tunic in a tavern and used up the money. In the same way, little by little he sold and spent everything he had; until, finally, naked and lamenting, he started begging here and there. He suffered so horribly from the cold, that blood would drip from his extremities. Day by day his torments worsened. But now he would say nothing more than ‘Glory to You, O God.’”

“Who can describe his lamentations or the bitterness of hunger and the horror of the God-sent cold which he endured thanking God?”

“All this torment lasted for a long time until once, while he was walking, he fell exhausted in an alley of the town. He lay sighing, trembling, dying of hunger. His feet froze completely from the horrible cold and his toes fell off, because the nerves and joints had rotted. And that amazing boy, true to his name, the unshaken rock, the bright star, suffered everything without grumbling, like another Job, without being indignant against God. Famine tormented him and the cold caused him excruciating pain. The wounds would freeze, since he was naked, and caused him unbearable suffering. In a word, he was gripped by suffering. But he continued to glorify God, the Lover of man.

“Of course, there was no one to help then, because all were lamenting their own deprivation and misfortune. After a few days, a pious man named Nicephorus happened to pass by that alley. He saw him and his heart ached for him. Immediately he ordered his servants to lift him up and take him to his house. There with his own hands he prepared his bed and laid him down gently. He

offered him every attention with all his heart. Indeed he charged a maid to wait on him, because he was in dire need of help, since his entire body had been burned by the cold.”

“Two weeks went by like that at Nicephorus' and finally, the time came for Basil to travel to his Lord and God It was Saturday, around 9 o'clock in the morning. Resting as always in his beg he started to whisper: ‘Welcome, welcome, you beautiful. The Lord sent you! Welcome, wait just a little, and we depart.’”

“Please, come quickly, we beg you. The Lord is calling you!”

“‘I beg you, good friends of God,’ Basil again whispered ‘be patient a little, a man loaned me ten obols, and I must return them to him. The prince of the air may find this as an excuse to take me into the abyss and my soul will be lost.’”

“Then the angels waited, because the Lord had commanded them to receive his spirit with every comfort and consolation. Immediately, pious Nicephorus called a maid, gave her the money, and ordered her to return it. Then Basil lifted up his hands, glorifying God, and surrendered his soul to the angels.”

“Therefore, you see, my children,” St Nephon concluded, “how the will of God provides things according to our intent. Good God examines the internal struggle of each one and rewards him accordingly; because many times it happens that outwardly a man seems sinful. Inside him, however, he can be struggling or reproving himself with sighs and considering himself vile, or showing compassion and humility toward others. In other words, many inwardly do what is pleasing to God, even if outwardly they are sinners. And God, Who looks deeply, does not permit them to be lost in the end While all those who are prisoners on the inside, full of hatred and wickedness, derive no benefit at all, even if on the surface they do good, because in their case God's plans are wasted.”

“That young man, Basil, belonged to the first category. His whole being was illumined by an inner light, the wholehearted compassion for all those he would see sad That was his secret good point, even though outwardly he sinned That is why in the end God did not permit him to be lost. He saved him in the way you heard.”

THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF GOD

Then the brothers said to the saint: “Your words were wise and instructive. We confirmed what the Lord says: ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ Thus, since you too abide wholly ‘in Christ,’ you have His Spirit within you. For this reason, we beg you, answer another question for us. How can it be that sometimes a large number of people from different places travel on a ship and during a storm everyone drowns? Could such a bitter end have been destined for all of them?”

“Your question is difficult,” the saint answered. “Only God knows. But with His help I have something to tell you about this: “

“In the old days there was a certain shipping magnate named Theognostos, who had many big ships and a good number of sailors. They travelled traded transported passengers, and they did whatever work sailors do. But they also committed a lot of iniquities, which were not pleasing to God: they watered down the wine, adulterated the other merchandise, etc. Indeed, if there happened to be a rich passenger aboard, they unhesitatingly went so far as to grab his money and throw him overboard. In other words, they were entirely without compassion. Only one of them, as soon as he did the evil, would repent momentarily for the most contemptuous of his transgressions.”

But overtaken by the miserable habit, when his companions divided the filthy loot, he would take his share also.

“The good Lord Who desires the repentance of all of us, was waiting for his repentance as well. But the wicked devil was not satisfied with all the evil they did: he would always push them toward the worst.”

“When the Lord finally saw that not only they did not abandon evil, but always contrived worse things drawing more fire upon their heads, He decided to intervene as soon as possible and destroy them. This, too, because of His love, that they would not multiply their punishment living on earth and sinning continually. Listen to what happened to them:”

“One day they docked in the harbor of Serid. They sold their ship's merchandise and embarked with rich gains for their place. When they arrived they pulled the boat to land to secure it and repair it, as sailors usually do. After preparing it, they notified each other that they would embark for the capital, Constantinople. Then one of them asked not to go with them that time, because his wife had just given birth to a son only three months earlier, and he did not feel right leaving before he was baptized. But because his companions were pressuring him, he was forced to pay a sailor to take his place. (The one who stayed behind was the one I told you felt a little remorse in the depths of his heart after the wrong-doing).”

“Therefore, as the rest of them were sailing out in the open, suddenly a terrible sound rent the skies. Thoroughly frightened, they continued their journey with their attention strained. But in the midst of the thunder and the storm, it was as if an invisible rod came out, struck the boat, and reduced it to fragments. All of them sank in the sea and drowned!”

“But the most frightful of all is the one that stayed behind to baptize his child also fell dead at the same instant that his companions were drowning; while the hired sailor - what a miracle! - grabbed a board and was saved! He came as far as here and related the details.”

“What can one say about all this? Why did all of them perish at once? It was very clear that they were condemned by God for their sins. Since all together acted in evil, so all together experienced the horrible drowning. As for him who had a heart attack in his place, it was because he was found to have had a little - even though fleeting - repentance. That's why he surrendered his soul on land, in his home. God's righteous judgment, in other words, did not permit him to drown along with his companions, but gave him a better end God judged that the hired sailor had nothing in common with those criminals, and so He saved him with the board.”

“For this reason, my children, let us avoid the very painful sin which gave birth and gives birth to lamentation and the entire sea of calamities for the human race.”

FERVENT ENTREATY

After all this, he set out for his cell. I saw him teary-eyed. When I asked him the reason, he said to me: "My son, as I was returning from church, I saw someone beating his animal unmercifully, so much that the wretched thing moaned and groaned, and I wept. Because, if even the animals condemn us, though irrational, what will we sinners do on Judgment Day, when we will give an account for each of our actions? Then we will hear: You were not merciful; you will not receive mercy!"

He went into his cell, turned to the east, raised his hands and prayed:

"O Lord and Master, forgive my sins, and by Your love for mankind enable me to keep myself pure from every defilement of body and spirit all the days of my life. 'Judge them, O Lord that do me injustice; war against them that war against me. Take hold of weapon and shield, and arise unto my help. Draw out a sword, and shut the way against them that persecute me; say to my soul: I am your salvation, your Creator and your Maker. Let them that seek to devour My creature be shamed and confounded'. Yea, my Lord Jesus Christ, if You say these words to Your servant, You will gladden his soul. Once Your faithful servant Moses beseeched You and You stopped the righteous threat You were about to burst upon the sons of Israel. O my God listen also to me, the sinner who entreats You, and keep me sinless in unwavering spiritual wakefulness. May Your grace, O Compassionate One, illumine me. May Your peace, Most Merciful One, adopt me. May your wisdom, O Holy One, spring forth from my lips. May Your prudence, O Sinless One, crush my insidious thoughts. May Your Good Spirit 'lead me in the land of uprightness.' May the Paraclete abide with us who love You, O Lover of mankind May the peace of God the Father, and the wisdom of the Son, and the grace of the Holy Spirit abide within me. Yea, O never-setting Sun of the heavenly powers! Look upon me, the poor. For up to now it was from You that I received all the gifts and not from, my own struggles."

Before he finished his prayer and while he was saying these last words with tears, the devil came with the intent of striking him. He didn't succeed, however, because the fearful power of the invisible God guarded the saint. Then, beside himself, the evil one shouted: "O ruthless one, you have nullified all my tricks with your treacherous incantations! What am I going to do with you when you are chattering again and again about the heavenly powers, the heavenly powers! Ah, and you have vanquished my own powers! Ah, and ah again! Him who I had as a slave, the Nazarene has placed boss over me!"

And Satan disappeared; while Nephon continued his prayer more fervently:

"O Lord my God, You Who filled the atmosphere with oxygen and brightened it with the rays of the sun, flood also my heart with Your own sweetness and the effulgence of Your glory. O great and fearful God, before Whose power all creation shudders! Whom the six-winged Seraphim and the many-eyed Cherubim glorify, hear me, the vile sinner, and illumine my soul and body. May my mind and heart and all my senses be flooded with heavenly light. O Lord, render me a pure vessel, worthy temple of the Holy Spirit. Grant me Your purity, forbearance and peace, wisdom

and meekness, prudence, sanctification and tranquility, Your good Spirit to enlighten me, true God that He is, and show me superior to impure passions. My Lord, I shall not cease fervently to beg Your Paternal compassion. You created the holy and heavenly powers: Cherubim and Seraphim, Thrones, Dominions, Principalities, Authorities, Powers, Michael and Gabriel, Raphael and Souriel, and all the immaculate angels whom You alone govern. Forgive me for angering the great and ineffable sea of Your mercy. I am the stench of sin, the den of passions, the repugnance that makes all mankind ugly. Deliver me, O Master, from the fire of Hades. Save me from the gnashing of teeth. Free me from bitter Tartarus, for You alone are merciful, my Immortal, Holy and Heavenly Father! And as You accepted Abel's offerings and the sacrifice of Abraham, accept also my prayer which I cry out this very hour in glorifying tones. Help me, the all-defiled one, in my wicked way of life. Receive my prayer upon Your spiritual altar in the heavenly Jerusalem. O Lord, remember me always along with Your holy and heavenly powers, so beautiful and humble, for whom my soul yearns so."

Then a light from heaven flashed around him, and he was flooded with an ineffable fragrance. Suddenly, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared and said to him:

"Hail, Nephon! May your spirit rejoice, your heart leap, and your senses delight, for I will save you. Feast, then! I have ordered the holy angels to remember you always in all sacrifices they unceasingly offer to My Father. Since you commemorate the holy powers in your prayers, each host separately, so each one of them in their turn commemorates your name and prays to My Father - Who delights in their angelic fragrance - to deliver you from the snares of the devil. Therefore, you owe Me gratitude, because I also granted you this favor. Rejoice, then!"

And with these words the Lord ascended gloriously into Heaven; while the righteous one, feeling ineffable delight, remained looking in the heavens and whispering.

GREAT DOXOLOGY

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, ‘the lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world.’”

“Blessed are You, O Lord, God of our fathers, and to be praised and highly exalted forever;” the divine reflection and image of God the Father. You are one God, ‘Who covers Yourself with light as with a garment,’ the all-delightful Beauty, the Father without beginning and the Son begotten without flesh before all ages. Glory to You, my great and fearful God, Whom all creation reveres, Who make the universe tremble and delight the ends of the world! You are the immortal love of the Father, the succulent branch, laden with all manner of goods. With one nod You shake the foundations of the earth. You gladden the face of the angels with Your loving kindness. You are the comfort of the Paraclete; the enormous, never-sleeping eye; my God and Man, one yet double, the fearful birth, the Beauty of the beautiful, the Holy of holies, transcending space and comprehension. Glory to You!

“You rule from east to west and to the ends of heaven and earth, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the God Who holds together all creation, visible and invisible, who controls and governs, nourishes and waters all the countless offspring of Your Omnipotence. I shall open my mouth and speak to You, o wise and eternal God, Who renews the world; Intellect ineffable, impenetrable, unapproachable; Logos; peace, sweetness, fragrance, grace, pearl, star, dawn; ever-luminous, strong foundation, incomprehensible, light, unfathomable depth, the Source of riches Who became poor, power, strength, authority, without beginning, Giver of life, Creator, Maker, Inventor unshakeable, Who builds and again tears down, makes wise and renders foolish, All-governing, Sovereign, Bridegroom! Hail, You Who granted us a new heaven and a new earth! What shall I call You, the Maker and Creator of the ages? How shall I address You, O Immeasurable Love of the Father? How shall I greet you, Who hold my poor breath in the palm of Your hand? O Holy, Thrice-Holy God, I glorify You! Amen!”

After such a doxology and such a song the heart of the saint indescribably rejoiced and was sweetened, especially since he heard that the Lord had commanded the celestial host to commemorate him in their heavenly and bloodless sacrifices. It was primarily because of this that the saint rejoiced and feasted and exalted from glory to glory.

CONVERSING WITH AN ANGEL

Once we visited the revered church of our Father among the Saints Nicholas, which is close to the palace. When we arrived, the saint began to pray to the Lord praising Him and enjoying mystical visions.

In a little while, after considerable prayer, I heard him conversing with someone. I was puzzled, because I knew no one was in the church as yet.

I wanted to find out with whom he was conversing; but I didn't ask him, because in the meantime the priest came and the Divine Liturgy began. While the entire congregation was chanting, the saint had fixed his gaze persistently on the altar and was so delighted, that his face bloomed like a rose.

During the Small Entrance he lifted his hands and started to pray with special fervor and intensity. Shortly, divine ecstasy overtook him, so that he wanted to fly close to the Holy Mysteries; but, in order not to scandalize anyone and out of defiance to order, he avoided this and remained motionless in his place glorifying God.

After the dismissal, on the road, I implored him to reveal to me with whom he was conversing in the church. Like a loving father he didn't keep anything from his child. That is why I, too, for the glory of God, will describe to my spiritual brothers and fathers what he told me.

Well then, the one with whom the righteous one was conversing in church was the angel who guarded the holy altar. Here's what the angel said to the saint:

"For some time now I desired to see your eminence, and I'd implore God for you to come here sometime to pray, so that with that opportunity I would meet you and delight in your prayer."

"But, divine one," Nephon was puzzled, "how do you know me and why do you have such desire to see an old man rotted in sin?"

"This is exactly why I wanted to meet you," the angel answered, "to see your humility. I had heard precisely about it in heaven: that our Lord Jesus Christ gave it to you with His own hand."

"But where did you hear this? And is it possible for a monstrosity like me to be mentioned in heaven?"

"I'm telling the truth about everything, beloved of God. There is no guile on my lips. As you see, I serve in this holy altar. When I travel to the heavenly altar to carry the prayers of the Christians to God, I hear whatever the angels of the Lord are saying about you: that Nephon is beloved to the Most High because with his deep humility he reduces the demons to ashes; that he remembers the bodiless hosts in his prayers, and that is why the Lord commanded each angel and archangel to commemorate him unceasingly in their spiritual sacrifices. These things I've heard about you in heaven. And this is why I wanted so much to meet you. And, see, the Lord heard me."

“So, brightest star, is this what you say you heard about me? If you only knew! Undoubtedly, you must have heard about some other Nephon, because for me only this is written: I have done nothing good.”

But after this the angel praised the elder's humility even more and then vanished. In the meantime, after the angel disappeared, Nephon said to himself: “Be careful, humble Nephon! Your state is relatively good and the toils of your asceticism are commendable. But you resemble a ship filled with all the goods still travelling in the open sea. No one knows if you will reach the harbor to meet Christ, or if you will be in danger of losing the good merchandise. And then? What a calamity! Perhaps you resemble a field already white for harvest. Who knows if you will last until the harvest, or if wild birds eat your ears of corn and fire consumes the remaining hay?”

This is what the blessed one said to himself and sat in his pew.

ATTENDING THE DIVINE LITURGY

What was he seeing when the Liturgy began? He saw fire coming down from heaven and covering the altar and the celebrant, without the latter realizing it. Later, when the thrice-holy hymn was being chanted, four angels descended and chanted along with them. When the Epistle was read, blessed Paul appeared and guided the reader. And during the Gospel, each one of the words came out of the mouth of the priest like a flame. Then the mystical alleluia started. All the voices intertwined in a rope of fire which reached up to heaven. A little before the Great Entrance, when the Holy Gifts were about to come out, suddenly he saw the heavens open and an ineffable fragrance pour out. Angels were descending chanting hymns and doxologies to the Lamb and Christ and Son of God. Immediately, an Infant with the purest and sweetest face appeared. The Cherubim brought Him in their palms and placed Him on the holy paten where the Holy Gifts were. Around Him gathered a large number of white-dressed men reflecting His bright beauty. The priest approached to take the Holy Gifts for the Great Entrance. He raised them and placed them on his head. Two Cherubim and two Seraphim preceded, and an infinite number of other angels followed chanting ineffable melodies.

As soon as the celebrant placed the Holy Gifts on the holy Table, they covered it with their two wings. The two Cherubim were standing on the right of the priest and the two Seraphim on his left. Finally, after the Creed, when he blessed the Holy Gifts and said, “changing them by Your Holy Spirit,” the saint saw an angel take a knife and slaughter the Child. He poured His Blood into the holy Chalice, while he secretly cut His Immaculate Body into pieces and placed them on the holy Paten.

Then the priest elevating the immaculate Mysteries exclaimed, “Holy Things are for the holy,” while the faithful chanted, “One is holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.”

At that moment a Christian asked the saint: “Why does he say, ‘Holy Things are for the holy?’ He is addressing us, my son, and says to us: ‘Whoever is holy, let him draw near!’”

Then he who was illiterate asked again: “And what is holiness, Father?”

“My son, if you are immoral, do not dare to participate in such a great sacrament. If you hate someone, do not approach. If you scorned or slandered your fellow man, do not come near the members of Christ. First examine yourself, who you are, and then draw near. If you are virtuous, come forward If you are not, stay away!”

The wise one said this to the one who was illiterate and was silent, because the priest had already exclaimed: “Draw near.”

Nephton was now observing those taking Communion. Some of their faces turned black like the Ethiopians. Others, however, when some sinner would come, they turned away from him. Thus he received disgrace and left completely black.

After everyone had received Communion, the Chalice was consumed - always with the attendance of the holy angels - and the Liturgy ended. Then the Divine Child was again found intact in the open palms of the Cherubim who lifted Him with hymns and praises to heaven, exactly as they had brought Him down.

My brothers, the saint saw these incredible things in church and related them to me on the road. Talking in this way we arrived at our cell.

The Lord revealed many mysteries to him. Half of them were written down, as the Gospel says, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen." I'm going to add just a little more, to glorify the name of the Lord.

THE CITY AND THE DESERT

Many times the saint would depart alone from the city and go to the northern regions. He lived there in the midst of absolute conversing with God. He always loved isolation, and once he smilingly said to me: "Silence hides great spiritual pleasures, my son. And we leave it and live in the mouth of the devil losing enjoyment so rare for this present life."

"Father," I disagreed, "what harm did it do to you, who live in the city with the grace of Christ?"

"Only God knows, my son, that Satan tempted me so much, that my Lord Jesus Christ took many pains, humanly speaking, to pry loose the wicked thoughts from my mind. Sometimes He admonished me with His own mouth and taught my unworthiness. Other times He sent His Spirit in the form of a white dove that sat on my shoulders filling my ears with divine mysteries. And in spite of this, the evil habit would still pull me into sin. Blessed Paul came often and advised me from the teeth of the dragon. I committed so many evil deeds, my son; may God, the only Mighty One, deliver you from them."

"I was still young and a slave to my passions. One day, when I was in the church of the Theotokos, suddenly ecstasy and fear overtook me. I heard a voice from heaven saying to me: 'Nephton, how much longer? Enough! You've committed much evil!' The voice was such that the pew was shaken powerfully and left me terrified."

"Therefore, my son, since God testified that I am sinful, what can I say for myself? And even if He gives me such power - something that cannot be - as to create another heaven and another earth, so that people may say, 'Behold the work of Nephton,' reflecting upon my iniquities I will not cease to believe that they've reduced me to an evil demon."

"How can you tell me then that I wasn't harmed by living in the city? If you knew my indecent deeds, you would disappear from my side instantly. Just think that once when I fell into a great sin, the Lord Himself came to chase me away from the church warning me that I would not be saved because of what I was doing. Immediately, I fell at His immaculate feet and kissing them again and again, I whispered with a painful soul: 'Lord will I not find salvation even in Your infinite mercy?' And He, won over by His own measureless love, lifted me up and said to me with compassion: Yes, you will find salvation in My mercy. Only return to Me with humility whenever you fall and say, I have sinned and I will cure your passions and stand by you as your helper. The Lord infinite in mercy and with ineffable compassion said this and disappeared from my sight."

These words of the saint also humbled my own heart. I would think about them and say: "Woe to me, the wretch! If such a luminary has such a humble opinion of himself, where will I slang when I don't have even a trace of virtue?"

The saint always had this habit of reducing himself to nothing before God. Many times as he was walking by himself, he would reproach himself. "Wretch, it's not enough that you've polluted the people in the city by your indecent acts, now you've come here in the country, too, to fill it also with stench and wilt the plants by your sins?"

Then he would descend to Hades with his mind and tie himself with chains under Satan's feet. "That's what you deserve, filthy one! I tied you under the demons, that you may realize you've committed worse deeds than they." Tears would stream from his eyes, because he feared eternal damnation.

Another time when he was again in the country, he lifted up his hands to pray. Suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Lord sitting on a glorious throne surrounded by the apostles and a multitude of angels. Dazzled he stood looking at them. He wanted to fly like a bird, if he could, because he was ablaze with the desire to be close to them.

But they, too, were observing him with satisfaction, saying among themselves: "There's our beloved friend, Nephon! Look, with what longing and love he looks at us! Rightly we also commemorate him during our divine and sacred Offices."

The immaculate angels were saying these things. And when he came to himself, flooded with exhilaration, he extolled them with praises and songs full of sweetness. "Oh, how the holy angels love the Christian race! They help us in every good deed. Then why shouldn't our desire and longing remain unfulfilling for them, the precious stones, the glittering pearls, the heavenly beauty, the immortal flowers? They intercede for us unceasingly and they supplicate the Lover of man to pity us and deliver us from eternal fire. Night and day they stand by us: when we eat, they guard us and defend us; when we sleep, they cover us with their wings; when we work, walk or travel, they are always near us, protectors and helpers in everything!"

THE COMPLAINTS AND JOYS OF THE DEMONS

In Constantinople there is a church that Nephon built. It is in very good taste and elegant - worthy of the Most Holy Theotokos. Its marvelous appearance is due to select materials.

One morning when the saint, along with other people, was chanting Matins, with the eyes of his soul he saw a black leader of the demons, followed by another twelve demons, passing suddenly by on the side street of the church.

As soon as those disgusting beings heard the people's praise, they were shaken and dissolved with malicious envy. Then, on their way to tempt the saint, they began to complain to their leader: "Do you see how the Nazarene is glorified by His servants? He even snatched away from us those whom we had first in idolatry and who sang hymns to us. Where is our famous power then? It's gone! We have been terribly beaten. Everyone has abandoned us and scorns us. Our power is crushed, and the kingdom of our father is destroyed. While he was free and joined our lines in battles, we, too, had courage and willingness, and we defeated the people. But from the time the Jew chained him in Hades and stomps on him like a grape, our race has pinned away and our kingdom has been annihilated! The worst is that the end of the world is near, and what's to become of us wretches?"

Those were the complaints of the demons, and their leader answered: "Was it a blow to you to hear the crucified Christ glorified in the House of Mary? This is a small nail. Other times they hit us worse. But why do you stew? Many times these who are now praising the Nazarene worship us also. And if this isn't enough for you, wait and I will show you others who serve us devotedly, just to gladden your hearts and so you won't pout."

Then he took them to the District of the Ox. As soon as they arrived, they started being rowdy and to spread discord. At that moment some thirty Paphlagonians were passing by. One of the demons put a shameful thought in the ear of their leader. At once he began to talk obscenely and to sing, while his companions answered him by dancing and stomping their feet noisily. That's all the demons needed! They, too, started to dance enthusiastically with them.

"Do you see? What did I tell you?" the leader said triumphantly. "There are people who worship us, too. Celebrate, then, now that we are glorified."

In a little while they were on the square. There they met a man who was playing the lyre. A lot of people were following him and listening to him with pleasure. Blessed Nephon, however, saw that a demon had tied all of them with their hands behind their backs and was dragging them behind the player.

As soon as the other demons saw him controlling such a crowd, they rejoiced with a malevolent joy. They, too, started to disturb and upset the people. They made some dance and others create a disturbance with shameful songs.

At one point a rich man who was watching from his window, prodded by the devil, called out to the musician to stop and play his lyre in front of his house. The rest of them were clapping their hands and warmed the cockles of the demons' hearts.

In the end the rich man gave him a silver coin which he took and put in his pocket. The demons grabbed it from there and sent it with one of them to hell, saying. "Here's what you will say to our great father, whom the Nazarene has bound: The noble Lazion sends it to you as a sacrifice through your minister Hyptiolus, and worships your authority. We, your children, continue the struggle against our enemies, the Christians."

Along with the silver they gave him many coins which Hyptiolus gathered from the crowd, because the evil demons had accepted this money as pagan sacrifices. That's why they were all so puffed up.

Then the messenger of the demons descended to the dragon in the heart of Hades, and gave him the filthy offerings. He took them and very happily said: "I accept sacrifices from idolaters, but they cannot delight me like those of the Christians." And saying this the filthy one returned the silver and the coins to the player. "Let all of mine increase the struggle," the arch-devil commanded, "so that we can beat the depraved Nazarenes!" (The enemies did not dare call the Lord Jesus Christ by any other name than Nazarene Jesus).

The demon ascended very quickly bringing the orders of the dragon. At the same time he replaced the silver and the coins in the musician's pocket without the latter realizing it. And so they scattered for other temptations.

When Saint Nephon saw all this, he was sad and his eyes filled with tears, pondering the plight and perdition of the Christians, because God had actually given him the grace to see the invisible as visible with his spiritual eyes.

"Therefore," he used to say, "just as the bugle gathers the soldiers, and pure prayer gathers the angels of God, likewise those who sing bad songs gather the dark demons around them; and whoever enjoys guitars and lyres honors the priests of the great dragon. What will all of us who are slaves to such habits answer on Judgment Day, when Godwin arise to crush the earth and to render to each one according to his deeds?"

That's why the saint advised everyone to desist from the tricks of Satan and not to offer him their money as a sacrifice. Otherwise, he added, they would be whipped eternally with him.

"If you have money, lend it to Christ, and you will also receive a hundredfold and eternal life. Why do you offer your money to Satan filling him with satisfaction, when you have nothing to gain than the woes of hell? What does the Scripture say? 'They sacrificed to demons and not to God.'"

"My brothers, let's not abandon God Who gave us a new birth through 'water and the Spirit.' Let's not forget Him Who nourishes us and cares for us. Instead, let us offer Him our souls and

bodies, our mind and heart, as the fruits of our gratitude, for He died and was resurrected for us. Let us please Him by working the virtues with His help.”

THE GIFTS OF CHRIST AND THE INGRATITUDE OF PEOPLE

When the saint was still in the first steps of his repentance, before three years were up, a bad thought came to him because he was careless. "I have been beseeching my Lord Jesus Christ for such a long time, and I still haven't received the slightest gift. Apparently God isn't paying any attention to me because I polluted my holy baptism with many immoralities."

After these thoughts he felt a little dejected and fell asleep right where he was. In his sleep he saw that he was in an enormous church praying to Christ. As he turned toward the east with his hands raised, a strange throne appeared before him.

The Cherubim and Seraphim and a multitude of white-dressed figures were standing around it. While he was ecstatically observing this, suddenly he saw on the throne Someone pure, luminous, and very mild. Nephon realized that it was Christ, the Son of God! Then he raised his hands and his gaze toward Him and prayed: "Give ear, O God, unto my prayer, and disdain not my supplication" - and the rest of the Psalm - while He inclined His head and accepted the saint's prayer. The saint was asking Him to crush the spirit of cowardice and banish it.

When Nephon finished his prayer, the Lord raised His head and turned his face toward him, showing in this way that He had heard this petition and accepted it. Then He said to him: "You saddened Me this afternoon, Nephon, when you complained: 'I beseeched my Lord so many times but He didn't give the slightest gift.' All right, aren't you the one who tells Me every day, 'Lord do not permit me to be glorified in this present life?' Then, why do you complain now? And then, who do you think gives you the air you breathe? Isn't that a gift? What did you give Me to purchase such gifts? You nailed Me on the cross, you slapped Me, you gave Me vinegar and gall to drink and so much more which you know."

"Are not My Immaculate Body and My Precious Blood which I gave you, gifts? Even the good of the earth, the trees of the field, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea, aren't they gifts either? Didn't I die and wasn't I buried so that you might be redeemed? What are all these, then? Who else did so much good for you?"

"Particularly you, Nephon, don't forget that I forgave many of your grave sins. Did you observe that I bowed My head during your prayer? I do the same to each man who prays, even if he doesn't see Me."

"Do you want another greater gift? Look from now until the end of the ages you will be the consolation and help of anyone in the throes of death, and many will enjoy salvation by invoking your name. Look where I bound the demon of cowardice, from whom you asked to be delivered!"

Nephon turned and saw a bull tied to a post by the horns and legs. He was so tightly bound that he couldn't even move. Only his eyes were furious and he would turn them here and there with mania as if he wanted to tear the saint apart

Nephon realized that this was the dark spirit which so many times had made him a coward from his youth. So much so, that often he wanted to go to church or on an errand and was afraid. But also in sleep it would bring him countless frightening fantasies.

When the servant of God awakened from this marvelous vision, he was still in ecstasy. He was thinking that he was deemed worthy to see the Lord in His incomparable divine beauty, and his heart filled with delight. Especially, because, as the Lover of man, He delivered him from the fearful spirit of cowardice which tormented him so much. He was further amazed that the Lord bowed His head to hear his prayer and upbraided him, rather He set him straight about what he had thought.

From that time on, as he used to say, he never felt fear or cowardice, because the Lord was his almighty help.

ADVICE TO A YOUNG MAN

Once when he was in a church of the Theotokos, he was approached by a very virtuous young man who always ran tirelessly to the sacred services. "Father," he asked him, "what shall I do to gain salvation?"

"My son, you are a pure soul. Why do you want to hear a salutary word from an old man who has rotted in sin?"

"Father, the word of God says: 'Ask your father, and he will show you.' That's why, I, too, ask to hear a good word from you. Therefore, don't turn away from me the unworthy"

"Are you thinking of becoming a monk or pleasing God by following the ordinary life?" the saint asked him.

"Father, I'm thinking of training myself first in life and later, whatever God wills."

"My child, if you want to live amongst people, you must watch the following: Do not criticize anyone at all; do not ridicule anyone; do not become angry; do not despise anyone. Be very careful not to say 'so-and-so lives virtuously', or 'so-and-so lives immorally,' because this is exactly what judge not' means. Look at everyone in the same way, with the same disposition, the same thought, with a simple heart. Accept them as you would accept Christ. Don't open your ears to a person who judges. More so, don't be happy nor agree with whatever he says, but keep your mouth shut. In other words, be slow to speak but quick to pray. Neither condemn in your thoughts the one who judges. Of course he is doing something wrong. But you should look at your own shortcomings and criticize only yourself."

"Father," observed the youth, "what you told me is for the seasoned fighters. How will I, worthless that I am, be able to attain that in order to please God?"

"My son, if youth has humility and purity, it is enough. God asks nothing else of it. For this reason, my lag be pure and humble. Place yourself beneath everyone else. Then truly you will live in fellowship with Christ."

"Also struggle not to imagine that you've reached the heights of the saints, but say continually: My soul, do you know that we've surpassed even the demons in sins, and up to now we haven't done any good deed for God? Woe to us, wretch! What will become of us on Judgment Day?"

"That's why you must always consider your prayer as that of the worst sinner. For we sin worse when we think that our prayer is holy and pure. Besides, even if one performs signs and wonders, he should consider himself without defiance because he will sin in prayer anyway, either with the inward movements of the heart or with careless thoughts, in other words, when the mouth says one thing and the mind runs elsewhere. That's why you should remember to say continually: 'From my secret sins cleanse me, and from those of others spare Your servant.'"

“You must also keep this in mind: Never be happy with your good deeds nor become too smug because of them. You don't know whether you are pleasing or repulsive to God. It's better to place your trust in Him and in His power, considering yourself useless dirt. Ah, my son, how many sins do we commit unaware!”

“When you see your fellow man sin, you should blame yourself. And if someone insults you, criticizes you, or scorns you, even to the point of humiliation, humble your thought and criticize yourself as a sinner and unworthy of living! Hey, correction and salvation will follow all this.”

Then the young man again asked him: “Father, how can man overcome each of the devil's temptations?”

“Silence and humility is victory in each temptation. All the deeds of the humble person are known to God and praised by His angels. That's why they are horrible and frightful to the demons. Therefore, become humble and broken in heart, that the Holy Spirit may yearn to dwell within you and give you strength to repel all worldly cares. For I perceive that mostly these draw you away from God's way distracting you with useless things. On Judgment Day, these will not help us at all, my son. The Lord didn't send us to this life to drown ourselves in cares and excessive concerns enticed by the devil - God forbid! Better turn your whole self to God, caring only for your soul; He cares for your material needs as well. Because, as the Lord said, no one ‘can add one cubit to his span of life,’ no matter how much he worries about his body in this life. What benefit do we have from worldly things, even if we happen to collect everything in our storehouse? In the end we leave it here. And stripped of virtues we dwell in the grave! What material gain can save us then? Certainly none. Darkness, woes, and eternal punishment will surround us from everywhere. That's why it is absolutely necessary for us to pray unceasingly with a great deal of concentration and peace. Understand therefore, my child and place everything I am telling you well in your heart, and from here on cut the worries and live sensibly and pleasing to your Lord and God.”

With this advice the blessed one brought deep compunction to the heart of the young man. Finally, as he was leaving, the young man fell at his feet and asked for his blessing. Nephon did the same. He, too, fell at the feet of the young man and then gave him his blessing to leave.

This young man was the son of one of the great nobles of the palace. From then on he spent most of his time with the saint before the latter was honored with the episcopal office. He also found out his cell and frequented there gathering the divine teachings ‘sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.’ Thus his soul was nourished, and from his youth he became a useful tool in the hands of God. He was well pleasing to God with his spiritual accomplishments, and when the time came, he gave up his soul to Him and rested in His divine arms. His name was Neophytes.

AN ALL-NIGHT CONTRITE PRAYER

Once, during Great Lent, the Monday after Cheese-Fare found Saint Nephon in prayer.

“O Lord, Master, God of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible, look down and behold the prodigal and sinner, who once more stands before You shaken, despairing because of the multitude of his iniquities. O Merciful Lord, have mercy on me who am defiled in soul and body. Forgive my many sins, which surpass every measure and defile the people. O great and fearful God of all the universe, cast me not away from Your presence and protection! But as You blessed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, bless me also, Almighty One.”

“Sanctify my soul and body, my mind and heart, lips, eyes, and ears, and turn all my senses away from the corruption of evil thoughts.”

“Yes, my Lord, God of the holy Powers, Principalities, and Authorities, with whom You surrounded Your fearful throne, that they may praise and glorify You unceasingly! Despise me not, though I am but a foul and malodorous passion. Do not leave me unprotected, but help me, O Lord, the insignificant and slothful, for You are full of compassion.”

“O my God, who accompanied Jacob into Egypt; Who saved Your servant Joseph from the hatred of his brothers and the treacherous attack of the Egyptian woman, and showed him a king in Egypt, show me also a king over ‘every defilement of body and spirit.’ Save me from adulterous sin and from filthy and profane passions. Hear me, O Holy and Mighty One. You Who glorified Your sweetest name in Your servant Job, deign, O Good One, that the might of Your kingdom be glorified also through me.”

“You Who through Moses delivered the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage and guided them to the promised land with the pillars of fire and cloud You are even now the same, the Lord and God of all. Stretch then Your mighty hand from Your holy dwelling place and bless me, my Christ and my Savior, my Life and my Light! Gladden me with Your divine love. Send me Your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to enlighten and bless me.”

“Whatever sins I have committed great or small, voluntary or involuntary, overlook like a good God, excuse; have pity, mercy and compassion; remit and forgive my transgressions. Bury my passions in the sea of this vain and loathsome life, and usher me into dispassion as into another promised land, leading me into eternal life. Instead of a pillar of fire, illumine me with Your Holy Spirit. Instead of a pillar of cloud, shine in my heart with the rays of Your divinity. Instead of Moses, O Lover of man and my compassionate Protector, the only-begotten Son and Word of the Father, lead me to the great palace of the heavenly mysteries and beauties, and deliver me from the fire of Hades!”

“O Lord and God of Powers, Who received the blood of the prophet Zechariah as a holy sacrifice, accept the sighs of my miserable heart on Your spiritual and bloodless altar. Make me glad, full of light, fragrant, dispassionate.”

“O Lord, Who sent the holy Apostles to all the world telling them, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’ through their prayers sanctify, soften, soothe, and make wise my callous soul, which suffers unceasingly from a multitude of sins.”

“You Who showed most holy Peter as the leader of the holy Apostles and keeper of the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, through his intercessions open to me the door of Your mercy. Support me on the solid and unshaken rock of Your commandments, on the rock which is You, my Christ, God, and Savior. ‘For they drank,’ it says, from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Secure me on this rock, O Lord, that the evil dragon may not shake Your servant who chants to You: Holy are You, O Lord, and all the powers of Heaven praise You.”

“My Christ and my God, Who showed Paul to be the sweet-voiced and mellifluous teacher of the universe, by Your blessings make me also an enlightened theologian, appealing, adorned with all wisdom. Re-mold me with Your Holy Spirit and, like Paul, make a precious chosen instrument devoted to Your godhead.”

“O glorious and fearful Lord, hear me, the wretch and sinner! Jesus, the most immaculate Offspring of the Father, Who gave Moses the divinely engraved tablets confirming the mystery of the bramble bush, let Your Holy Spirit breathe on me also, to make me spiritually wholesome, ‘full of grace and truth,’ and knowledge of God.”

“You Who gave Joshua the trumpets with which he brought down the walls of Jericho, richly grant me Your wisdom also, that I may be nourished by it in the active and contemplative life, to defeat the evil demons and crush them like ‘a potter's vessels.’”

“You Who became a priest ‘after the order of Melchizedek,’ through the prayers of that blessed man make me an imitator of Your example, that as You were obedient to Your Immortal Father ‘unto death, even death on a cross,’ in the same way I may also become obedient to Your commandments ‘unto death, even death on a cross.’”

“You Who received the prophet Elijah as he traversed the skies in the fiery chariot, receive me also, O Giver of Life, in the light of Your righteousness. You Who gave double the grace of Elijah to Elisha, grant me that grace also.”

“You Who delivered the prophet Jeremiah from the cistern of mire, deliver me also, Jesus Christ, from the mire of debauchery and from the quicksand of vanity.”

“You Who lit the fire of Your love in the depths of David's heart, so that the blessed one was ablaze with Your Holy Name, I beg Your Godhead O Lover of man, to inflame also my own mind and heart and light Your desire in all my being, that ablaze with the fire of the Comforter I may chant to You, Who sees all, ‘Who searches mind and heart’: ‘My heart grew hot within me, and in my meditation a fire was kindled;’ meaning that divine fire, God the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth.”

“You Who proclaimed Isaiah a great voiced prophet, thunderous trumpet, make me a trumpet also proclaiming loudly the mysteries of Your love.”

“You Who crowned, honored, and sanctified the chorus of prophets, apostles and all Your saints, through their intercessions save every Christian soul, my Christ, and especially help every monk in his temptations. Give rest also to all who came to You from this temporary life. O Lord alleviate also the burden of those who do not know You, and give repentance to the vain and libertines ‘of whom I am the first,’ and foul and filthy one.”

“Do good to all, have mercy and pity on all who acknowledge You as the true God, ‘Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God;’ that all may praise and the most honorable and magnificent Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen!”

THE OPPOSING ARMIES

When he finished his prayer, suddenly he heard a voice saying to him: "Nephton, turn toward the west and look." He turned immediately and saw an enormous field flooded with blacks. One of them, gigantic in height and very dark in complexion, started hurriedly to count his armies and line them up according to the categories of sins. At the same time he gave orders to his officers to begin the war with courage and skill: "My strength will be with you. Look at me, so that you won't be afraid!"

In the meantime, other demons came bringing from Hades weapons and different uniforms for each one. The number of colors and styles was approximately 365, because, as they say, that's more or less the number of passions and sins, with which we, miserable people, provoke God, the Lover of man.

Therefore, when the evil spirits took their weapons and prepared, the dragon began to give his magical preparations for the various passions. In this way he let them loose in the Christian churches throughout the world. However, as he was sending some of his co-workers to Byzantium, he seemed very upset. "I have no power there," he was muttering hopelessly, "because the Lady of Byzantium protects the city. She doesn't abandon it for a second, but watches over it personally. In this way the Nazarenes grow bold, especially the more aggressive ones, and they don't allow mine to stick their nose out"

He roared furiously, and chose approximately thirty thousand demons to send against Byzantium.

Nephton turned toward the west, as we said, saw all this, and sighed because of the tricks of the wild demons. Then for the second time he heard the same voice saying to him: "Now, Nephton, turn to the east."

He turned and saw a field which surpassed the first in area and was bathed in light. Multitudes of all-white angels, more than the blacks, very sweet and beautiful in appearance, were lined up in thousands and thousands. Someone stunning in height as well as in beauty lined up these invisible columns and urged them to fight on behalf of the Christians and to guard them. With these words he sent two battalions to every area of the Church.

When that excessively beautiful angel divided his armies everywhere, he ascended into heaven. Then, after the vision, the saint came to. He was dazzled, and shaking his head he said: "Oh, how much help our God, the Lover of man, gives us, and we don't even know it! Look, He even sends us allies from heaven, but we, wretches, are negligent and lazy!" And he prayed tearfully:

"Holy Father, the life-creating God, give us all power against the evil spirits I just saw with my own eyes, that with Your strength and help we can crush them, and be victorious over the crafty barbarians. And after we received the fragrant crown from Your hands, O Holy, Thrice-Holy Master, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, let us dance together with Your angels, celebrating around Your dreadful and almighty throne."

DIALOGUE WITH HIMSELF

Tears were again rolling from his eyes, because he was afraid he might lose his soul through the “stumbling-blocks of them that work iniquity.” This was his perpetual worry: to ponder the demons' malefactions and to attach himself to God continually. Because, even though the Lord revealed to him many supernatural mysteries and enabled him to enjoy the loftiest visions; even though He informed him like a beloved friend, “you shalt not dash your foot against a stone; upon the asp and basilisk shall you tread, and you shalt trample upon the lion and dragon,” he did not become bold for he was afraid of the fire of Hades and the maliciousness of the evil spirits.

The following incident further affirmed his policy: One day when he was sitting in his cell meditating on the word of God, suddenly the death of one of his acquaintances was announced to him. That unfortunate man died on the road as he was returning from his property.

As soon as Nephon heard it, he started to cry and lament for him, because he knew that he had lived and died in sin.

The saint was deeply hurt by that incident, and shaking himself said: “My soul, I adjure you by the God of heaven and earth to walk sensibly. Foul body, you be careful, too. Walk prudently in the present life. I beg you to follow what is good with eagerness. Otherwise, I shall torture you harshly. And you, wretched Nephon, ‘look carefully how you walk.; See that you do not go astray, humble one, or get lost! Despise the present things. We have nothing here. Everything is alien, everything is corruption and deceit, a dream and shadow, smoke and ashes. What do the world and worldly things have to benefit us? Don't forget that wealth is dung and glory is stench. You know that worldly goods are bonds: they are nets and ropes which squeeze the soul tightly. Avoid pride also. Never say that you may have done something good Be assured: we would not be able to be saved if it weren't for the ineffable mercy of God Miserable soul, put on the new creation: unceasing prayer and unfeigned love. Examine yourself continually and humble yourself Keep in mind that for fifty years you have been wallowing in the Hades of sin and the eternal woe awaits you. For ‘if the righteous man is scarcely saved where will the impious and sinner appear?’ Death comes to receive us, to throw us in the fire. Then, let us turn eagerly to repentance. A miserable and awful state awaits us, wretched soul, and we're not even worried. Struggle, do the utmost. As you see, the world passes away with lightning speed and Judgment is getting ready. Do good with all your strength, my humble soul, so that you won't be condemned A great deal of good has been prepared for us in heaven, if we go through our earthly journey with diligence. Therefore, let us walk on the holy and blessed road of Christ. Look here, the end is near and the angels of God are waiting to receive us into ineffable pleasure, if we do His works. And then, endless kingdom, shining crowns, garments full of light, divine palaces and the joy of the saints! Then we will enjoy the riches of the Father, the beauty of the Son, and the fragrance of the Holy Spirit. And thus honored and glorified we will celebrate in Christ's palace. Keep this in mind, my soul, and do good to taste the joy and delight in the eternal abode of God.”

Tearfully saying these things to himself, the righteous one decided from then on to commemorate in his prayers the friend who died suddenly, so that the Lord might have pity on his miserable soul.

MISFORTUNES AND THE INNOCENT INFANTS

At that time there were a lot of deaths on earth. People were snatched unexpectedly and abandoned this life miserably. Then Gregory, a friend of the saint, asked him: "Tell me, Father, where did this evil come from? Please explain it to me."

"As you know," the saint answered, "we commit many sins and we embitter our God, the Lover of man, by not doing His will. That's why He sent us this sickle which cuts us down. For it is written that 'disobedience breeds death.' Yesterday I saw a dreadful man threatening the earth and saying to her: shall destroy all the immoral who walk on you, all the drunkards, gluttons, the greedy, usurers, and especially those wallowing in sodomitic sins."

"And He said a lot even more serious that you cannot bear to hear! He threatened to destroy us with sickle and sword, because we show no repentance nor any trace of improvement. His glorious Mother and a bald bishop ardently pleaded with Him, but He refused to put it off 'Are you more compassionate than I am?' He said to them. 'Or do you feel more pain than I? Yet you see almost all of them ignore My divine law and no one observes it!'"

"Gregory, my son," the saint added, "that's how the awful sickness afflicted many. For it is written: 'You have cast them down in their exaltation.' While for the healthy virtuous it says: We heal the broken-hearted. For if God did not have pity on Paul, the great luminary, but permitted a 'messenger of Satan to harass him, to keep him from being too elated,' due to the abundance of revelations that he had, why wouldn't He permit the devil to crush us sinners with sickness, until we learn to be humble? It's not enough that we are sinners, we're proud as well! Besides, the Scripture says that 'what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.'"

Then Gregory asked again: "But what about this, Father? I saw a great number of infants bed-ridden, tormented a long time with awful illnesses. What pride did the innocent infants have, that they 'were cast down in the exaltation?' How can one conceive of pride in infants?"

"The children are tormented because the iniquities of the parents have multiplied so that in this way they may become conscious of their sins and repent."

"Yes," Gregory retorted, "but what about the saying that one will not receive the other's condemnation or justification?"

"Listen, my son. While the infants may be tormented here because of their parents, in the future life they will win crowns and eternal glory. The present punishment will not harm them at all, because God's Judgment will be according to each one's deeds. Besides, you see that people sin and God destroys their vineyards and their fields and if they don't repent, He annihilates their animals. If in this way they do not come to themselves either, He affiliates their servants, if they have any. And if they still do not realize their error, He puts to death their children who weren't to blame for anything. This is like a prodding for the people who sleep absorbed in their worldly cares. Maybe in this way they will realize that they are sinners and take refuge in repentance. Because there are many immersed in sin and, nevertheless, due to their many cares, they are not

aware of their faults. They worry only about the earthly and do not look after their souls. Thus, God strikes many who are innocent (yet crowning them for the blow) in order to awaken the rest. If they do not repent in this way either, they will remain unpardoned on Judgment Day.”

Gregory marveled at the wise answer the saint gave him. “I heard many,” he said later, “speculating about this subject. However, no one was able to clarify it and give a logical interpretation.”

“Truly, honorable Father,” he said to the saint, “the Spirit of God spoke through your mouth.”

And the saint answered him humbly: “My son, God, not wanting to sadden you for your good intention, enlightened me to say these things, not because of my own insignificance, but for the sake of your virtuous life.”

“Rightly you are named Arephon, beloved servant of God,” Gregory said enthusiastically. “Because, like a truly sober and lofty mind, you receive the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and offer it to those who grope in the darkness of ignorance. But, please tell me this also: how is it that the saints of the whole world have increased so much in our time? Many shine like the sun lately. Arid first of all Anthony, Hilary, Symeon, Paul the Simple, and many others, whom the Lord knows and His eye rests on them. How did they become so great?”

“My son, the prophets of the Lord God will not disappear till the end of the world just as the workers of Satan will never be absent. In the last days, however, all that work truly for Christ will hide from the people wisely. And if they don't perform signs and wonders like today, nevertheless, they will always walk on the narrow path in all humility. In the Kingdom of God they will be greater than the wonderworkers, because in their time there will not be anyone performing miracles, to incite them to spiritual struggles, since those who will occupy priestly offices throughout the world will be completely unsuitable and will have no trace of virtue. But the leaders of the monks will also be the same. They will have surrendered to gluttony and vainglory; consequently, they will constitute more of a stumbling block than a model. That's why virtue will be neglected. Avarice will reign everywhere. But woe to the monks who will prosper with gold because they will be disgraced in the eyes of the Lord and will not see the face of God.”

“Monastics and laymen will lend money with interest. They will not prefer that God multiply it for them through alms to the poor. For this reason also, if they do not withdraw from this greed they will sink to the abyss. Then, as I said before, the majority will be misled by ignorance into the chaos of the broad and wide road of perdition. You see, my son, like the chatter box that I am, I told you a lot of things. But forgive me, the miserable sinner, and do not cease to pray for me, the profane, who wasted both my youth and old age in a multitude of sins.”

Gregory, however, marveling at the humility of the elder, fell at his feet asking himself for his prayers. For he, too, was a pious man, merciful, with a lot of love, wise, and especially monastic-minded. He loved the elder very much and was excessively devoted to him. He imitated him in silence and meekness, in abstinence, sleeping on the ground, in hospitality and humility, and

generally in everything. Struggling thus sensibly, he advanced in truth and in the grace of Christ
“from glory to glory.”

CONVERSATION WITH A NOBLE

One day when blessed Nephon was resting in his cell, a noble came and said to him: "I came, Father, to profit some by your holiness. For my soul is grieved with a thought whose origin I do not know."

"Satan has deceived you," the saint answered him. "He told you that you are not going to receive any reward from God or all the children you've baptized. But, indeed, whoever baptizes children is blessed. The Lord says in the Gospels, 'He who receives you receives Me', and 'He took a child and put him by His side, and said to them, Whoever receives this child in My name, receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives Him Who sent Me.'"

"Who then is more blessed than you, who through children receive Christ, and through Christ His Father? Go, my son, and do good as you have up to now. Your work is pleasing to God. Know that all the children you've received from the baptismal font, at the Second Coming will walk before your soul to the gate of Heaven. That will be a great glory for you and great disgrace for the evil spirits in the air. Angels holding candles equal in number to the children you've baptized will direct you to the throne of God, and from there to the place of your rest. They will honor you, in other words, in the same way you also received and honored Christ in the person of these children. The baptismal font is like another Virgin who holds Christ in her arms. Then, you become like Simeon who will receive the Divine Babe in the person of the newly illumined babies."

The man stood with his mouth open before the gift of the discerning insight of the saint: before he could repeat his thought, the saint had revealed it to him. When the first shock passed, the stranger again said to the saint: "Please, Father, since you know all my inner world, tell me where that unpleasant thought originated. Did it come from me, or from somewhere else?"

"It was born of the devil, my son," the saint answered, "for he wanted to distort your right thinking. But you were right in revealing it before it penetrated your heart and became difficult to uproot. Because, to be sure, man has good thoughts, but also depraved ones. Therefore, if he examines his thoughts which go in and out of his mind he can separate what the enemy sows and send it away."

"However, if man's mind is dimmed by the cares and pleasures of life, then he will incline toward evil, for he will not distinguish the stone from the bread. Such a man never understands what his deeds are, nor does he know whether he does good or evil. The devil clouds his mind so that he cannot distinguish between the sweet and the bitter, but mixes absinthe and honey. Who can eat such a concoction?"

Then the visitor wondered: "But if that's the way it is, Father, who can be saved?"

"On our own, this is impossible," the righteous one answered. "God, however, can do everything for our salvation. Many offer gifts and honors to the earthly king, and in this way they get what they want. Others again are helped by the king because he favors them, even if they don't offer him anything. It is the same with God: He glorifies some for their deeds, to others He is merciful

because of their deep repentance, and He is compassionate to others because of the prayers of His saints. Then, again, He tries some here, and in the other world He grants them eternal good provided they endure the sorrows patiently.”

“Tell me, Father,” the stranger asked again, “why is it that even though some waste their bodies with abstinence, nevertheless they are seized by passions? For example, anger, enmity, resentment, envy, and worst of all, cruelty and miserliness? Conversely, there are many virtuous who both eat everything and drink wine, and nonetheless you can't find even a trace of sin in them. How does this happen?”

“As it seems to me,” the saint said, “all who fast a lot and do not improve at all, are not going to improve because of their tongue. For whoever doesn't have a stopper for this mouth, even if he fasts all year, he will profit nothing. Does the devil incite you to anger? Don't speak at all and you control the passion. Or does he urge you to envy? Don't judge and you will beat the evil one because, naturally, judgment is the fruit of envy. If again the malicious one incites the Christian to immorality, let him not open his mouth to speak to a woman nor to eat or drink a lot, and surely he will turn him to flight. Let him also take a small stick to hit himself, and the pain will chase away the warfare. It is in your interest to lose one of your members and not have your whole body thrown into the fire of Hades.”

“If someone insults you or harms you in a similar way, remember that sinful people spat on Christ, the Son of God, mocked Him, and hit Him with a reed. Then think that you are unworthy even to live. Therefore ignore him who insults you.”

“If someone poor asks you for something he needs from the perishable goods of the world, don't be too stingy to give it to him, so that you may not be denied the immortal and eternal goods which ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.’”

“If the treacherous enemy brings you vainglory, conceit, arrogance, glance at the older generations and see: did any arrogant people ever prosper? All of them had God as an enemy and were thoroughly crushed. It says: ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ And elsewhere: ‘All my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths.’ And elsewhere: have seen the ungodly man highly exalted and lifting himself up like the cedars of Lebanon. But I passed by, and lo, he was not; and I sought him, and his place was not to be found. Whisper these words unceasingly to your soul and you will remain humble.”

“If the ‘wild boar’ opens your appetite for sumptuous food, go to the bathroom and smell their stench. As for the virtuous who eat everything and drink wine, be very careful, my son, they are brave soldiers. They trampled on the passions and sins, and now are masters of themselves, because they received the gift of dispassion. You must know that the gifts of God are stable. For this reason those who have them, even if they eat and drink they do everything without passion.”

For, having first exercised self-control and discretion, they are now clothed with the armor of God and there is no one anymore who can defeat them.

“Fasting is a great weapon of the soul, but it needs unceasing prayer, quiet and silence. And all these require meditation: ‘If Your law had not been my meditation, then should I have perished in my humiliation.’ Go therefore, my son, and struggle to receive the gift of dispassion with continence. Then, whether you eat or drink you will be free from passions. In addition, know that the saints do this only in front of others, while when they are by themselves, they carry out the rules of piety. And so in their cells they make up the fast they broke in front of people.”

IS THERE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD?

This advice astonished the man as if he had never heard such teachings before. That's why he again said to the saint: "I have something else to ask your holiness also, but I'm afraid I may tire you."

"No, my son, it's no trouble! Ask whatever you want."

"I heard two people quarrelling about the resurrection of the dead. The one was saying that at some time the dead from of old will be resurrected and each one will receive according to his works, while the other maintained that it is not so, and was saying: No! For the Prophet said, But the dead shall not see life, neither shall physicians by any means raise them up. With this line of thought he convinced the first one who had the opposite opinion. Since then my mind tries to convince me not to count the resurrection of the dead. Tell me something then, servant of God, to strengthen my faith that I may not waver."

"Do you believe right away everything you hear?" the saint scolded him. "Listen, my son, the same prophet somewhere else says: The dead shall rise, and they that are in the tombs shall be raised, and they that are in the earth shall rejoice. Do you believe this?"

"Father, I believe whatever you tell me," the man answered, "because I perceive now that you are a prophet who knows the depths of men."

"But if this is so, with one word you will crumble and with another you will be edified again!"

"Since I don't know well the teachings of the Holy Scripture," he answered, "I believe whatever I hear. However, answer me, servant of God: Why does the prophet say, Rut the dead shall not see life while here he says, 'The dead shall be raised?' This baffles me."

"Be a little patient, my son, and the Lord will give you the answer. Of course, 'The dead shall be raised!' You must believe this. While by saying: 'The dead shall not see life,' he means those dead in the soul, who worship the stones and sticks, while Christ is Life. At the resurrection of the dead, then, what kind of life will the ungodly see: will they see Paradise or the eternal fire?"

"Now that you received the answer, believe that when the consummation of the age comes, there will be resurrection of the dead. For woe to the man who does not believe this."

"But, Father, how can this body, which will have become dust, be recreated whole? It's important to find this out also."

"It seems that you like discussions. But I will calm you about this issue also. Bring to mind a vine with rich foliage and fruit, how beautiful it is! However, when all the grapes are gathered it is left only with leaves. Little by little it throws them off also, and then it is left bare: a graceless stump whose past beauty fell on the ground and rotted. What happens then? It is withered all Winter. It looks dead. But its time comes at a certain point. They prune it, take good care of it, and mysteriously, this vine that stood dry and bare suddenly has new beauty. It throws off new shoots

and leaves and is all dressed up. Indeed little by little the grapes appear. And so, by July it becomes again like it was before.”

“You tell me, then, who accomplishes all this and with what power? Tell me how the juicy grape, which by the way has sweet juice, comes from a dry stick, while the plant as well as the leaves have a sour taste! Explain how all this happens and by whose providence, and learn that He Who dresses up the vines with such grace, Who adorns their withered trunk with leaves and fruit, the same One can resurrect the bodies of the dead alive and whole at the final hour. Therefore, my son, be faithful from now on, and follow the dogmas of the holy apostles to gain the Kingdom of God!”

That man's faith was strengthened a great deal with these thoughts. He fell at the feet of the saint, saying: “Father, I believe everything you've taught me with such wisdom. But I beg and beseech your holiness to remember me always in your unceasing prayers. This way I, too, will be able to carry out somewhat the commandments of God.”

“It's true, my son, that we all have the obligation to offer prayers and supplications to our Holy God for each other. Woe to that Christian who not only doesn't pray for his neighbors, but neglects his own self, too. However, if again we care only for our own soul and are indifferent toward our fellow man, punishment awaits us for this also.”

“Go in peace, my son. Pray for me and I 'll pray for you. Perhaps God, the Lover of man, will forgive both our transgressions. Since He is Good and easily appeased even with only one little prayer, He can save His creation from critical circumstances, as it is obvious in the lives of the pious.”

And saying this, the saint blessed the brother and bid him farewell.

PART III: THE HIERARCH

WHEN GOD SETS TRAPS

Now, brothers, since we've related all we could about his life, it's time to present also the end of our blessed Father Nephon.

One night he said his prayers as always and lay down to sleep. When sleep had just overtaken him a little, he dreamed vividly of a green pasture filled with countless white sheep. The shepherd, however, was nowhere in sight. Nephon wondered why they left the sheep to graze by themselves. There was danger of a wolf falling on the flock and the sheep being lost. While he was thinking about this, an impressive half-bald man with apostolic attire came and, after looking at Nephon squarely in the face, said to him: "Why are you standing and examining the King's sheep?"

"I'm looking at them, Father," Nephon answered, "because they are pretty, and I'm puzzled why they are grazing by themselves without a shepherd."

"These are royal sheep, as I told you. And I was sent for the express purpose of putting you as their shepherd."

"Am I the King's servant to tend his sheep?" the saint asked perplexed. "I have no idea how to tend sheep and goats. Besides, as you see, I am very weak. How will I be able to tend the royal sheep?"

"I've received this command," the strange man insisted, "to surrender this flock into your hands! So, never mind the excuses. The King has appointed you a member of His palace. Indeed He will even give you good wages, if you tend His flock well."

With these words he placed the shepherd's staff in Nephon's hand. And after he turned over the sheep and the fold to him, he vanished.

The saint woke up immediately and fell into deep thought. What a strange dream! After a little thought, his mind was enlightened: Yes! The man he saw was blessed Paul. The sheep are God's people, and the fold is the Church. The saint then was visibly disturbed that they might make him Archbishop of Constantinople. He was very much afraid of this. (At this time the throne of the Queen City was adorned by his all-holiness Alexander, the successor of blessed Metrophanes. Constantine the Great was reigning). Tears came to the eyes of the saint in his sorrow, and he said to himself: "And as much as I implored God not to allow me to receive any power or office! It seems that this is about to happen to me! But I'm not better than the prophet Jonah! I'm going to leave this city."

Without delay he went out of his cell leaving it empty, and got on a ship. The weather was favorable. We started out for Alexandria. On the very same day we arrived, the people of Constantinople went to the Archbishop of Alexandria, St Alexander. They begged him to

consecrate for them a bishop, whomever God revealed to him, for their bishop Christopher had passed away.

That venerable hierarch asked them for a little time and began to pray to God to reveal the worthy one to him. That night in his dream he saw a man with a beautiful countenance, who said to him: "Whom are you thinking of making bishop of Constantinople?"

"I don't know; that's why I'm begging God to enlighten me."

"God heard your prayer and will reveal to you His elect, who up to now lived in obscurity. Tomorrow, therefore, get ready to go to church with your clergy. Whoever you see that resembles me in appearance, except for the baldness, consecrate him bishop over the fold of Christ, even if he doesn't want to."

The next day the patriarch, ready in every respect, went to church. His gaze was nailed on the icon of the Apostle Paul - because it was he who had appeared to him - while at the same time he was observing carefully all who were entering, in case he saw someone who might resemble him.

Righteous Nephon knew nothing. God kept this from him because he disliked public acclaim. In the morning he said to me: "My son, let's go to the church of God to pray. At least here we are unknown."

When we arrived, he said to me: "I don't know why my heart filled with sorrow! But it is peaceful again ... I wonder what will happen to me?" And he went into the church where a large number of people were already gathered.

From the moment the archbishop saw him, he fixed his gaze on him, and then he would look first at the icon of the Apostle and then at him. This comparison left him amazed. He turned and whispered in the ear of his archdeacon: "Athanasius, do you see what an astonishing resemblance that man has to St Paul?"

"Truly, Master, he does resemble him. And it seems to me that he is worthy of shepherding Christ's sheep, because I see the angels of God accompanying him, and on his head he has a crown of precious stones."

Then the patriarch summoned the saint and gave him a holy kiss, without telling him anything more except: "Bless, Father, to sit down."

Puzzled by all this, that blessed one was asking himself: "But how did they find out so fast about me here, too? I'm amazed!"

As soon as they sat down, the archdeacon Athanasius said to him: "Without knowing it and without wanting it, Father Nephon, you came and found what you were avoiding! The Lord brought it about this way, since you dislike high offices because of your boundless humility. But

you must not refuse what He has appointed for you. Since we are His servants, we cannot resist His commands.”

“Now I understand the power of the saying, ‘Fleeing from honor, he came into honor!’” the saint whispered sadly. “I was careful not to have it happen to me somewhere else and it happened to me here. But I am unworthy and I don't know what to do! For the responsibility of souls is, as I believe, for Moses and Elijah the great prophets, or for Peter and Paul, and for you worthy ones.”

“Father,” the patriarch finally interrupted officially, “God has appointed you to tend His sheep, which you see surrounding us seeking a shepherd.”

“Honorable Master, hear me, your servant: Of course I am not worthy for that which you tell me. However, I do not dare oppose the will of God Therefore, do whatever He commanded you.”

“Ah, my Father,” Alexander replied, “I wish I were as worthy as you are!”

They got up from their seats. All the preparations were made and, later, while tears were rolling from Nephon's eyes, they ordained him a deacon. In a short period of time they made him a priest, and finally a bishop. Everyone's joy was indescribable. Blessed Athanasius saw the Spirit of God descending like fire on both hierarchs, and in his soul he felt ineffable joy. The people embraced blessed Nephon like an angel of God.

We stayed in Alexandria three days. The Elder taught the sayings of the Lord to large crowds, and all marveled at the sweetness of his teaching.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Finally, on the third day he set out for his diocese. He was accompanied by St Athanasius and other saintly men whom the patriarch sent to enthrone him. And that's how it was. It was September 4 when they enthroned him after first offering to God the bloodless sacrifice.

They stayed with Saint Nephon, now a bishop, for a few days, and their souls were spiritually nourished. Later they departed for their city after fervently begging him to remember them in his prayers.

In Constantinople the Church of God celebrated the arrival of its bishop. Many sick who turned to him with deep faith found their health, and the people of God were happy that they were blessed with such a shepherd.

From then on, the saint shepherded and cared for his flock with a great deal of zeal. Sometimes he would teach the people from the pulpit and at times he would retire to silence and compose edifying homilies interpreting the Old and New Testament. These writings exude the fragrance of the Holy Spirit.

But above all, he did not cease one moment to pray to Good God for his flock, to save it from the bloodthirsty wolves, the heretics, and the wild demons. Day and night he instructed his Christians in the law of Christ with every holiness and especially with a great deal of love toward all. But the people also, from the youngest to the oldest, loved and respected him so much that it were possible, they would hold him in their hands so that he would never step on the ground. Very enthusiastically they would say: "Truly God gave us a star of heaven which glows and illuminates our Church!"

The saint cared especially for the widows and orphans of the town. But he also consoled the mourners, and with the grace of Christ he healed the sick, and towards all he behaved with exceptional goodness and love.

What can I say first? I don't have the strength, as much as I may desire it, to describe all the mysteries which God revealed to him here, too. Even so, I shall try to tell you some of them. And thus I shall come to the falling asleep of my venerable Father and teacher whom I hope to meet soon, wherever he may abide, as he wished me upon his departure.

One day - at the beginning of his episcopal ministry - he was praying that God would guard his flock safely and soundly from the devil's guiles. He interrupted his prayer a little and threw a glance in the direction of the town square. It was after dinner and everyone was resting. Then the saint saw an excessively big black man loaded with filth, holding a big rod and walking deplorably. Every few steps he'd stop as if to rest.

As soon as the saint saw this, he realized that it was the devil! Immediately he shouted to him angrily: "I mean you, rotten corruption! Where are you going? How did you dare, shameless one, to come as far as here?"

As soon as he heard the voice, he stopped, turned, and frowning at the saint answered him: "I heard that your illustriousness had come here, and I came to crush both you and your flock with my rod!"

"And why, perchance, if you have such power, are you forcing yourself to slither like a putrid carcass?"

"From the time I made the stupid mistake of convincing the Jews to crucify the Nazarene, my bones have been broken. I don't have my former strength anymore. If I had it! This second I'd put you down and break you in pieces!"

"And yet you have the effrontery to threaten that you will crush me and my flock with your rod as you say. And this, filthy and most evil rogue, when you are yourself a wreck as I see and as you also admit. How then did you dare, abominable and shameless one, to turn on the flock of Christ? I shall implore my God now and on the spot the fiery angels will grab you, whip you mercilessly, and throw you into the fire!"

"No, I beg you" Satan jumped, "not that! I admit you can do it. Look I'm leaving your town immediately, and I give you my word I'll never step foot again."

The righteous one cursed him and made him vanish. "What Christian", he said to himself; "believes the words of the devil! He's a liar, the criminal, a treacherous liar. But he doesn't have the power even of a mosquito."

"I knew a sensible man," he said turning to me, "who decided never to yawn again, when he realized that yawning in prayer comes from the demons. As soon as the evil spirits got wind of his decision, they raised a terrible battle against him. But he also fought them with wit and didn't do their bidding. It was enough to make you laugh with the demons: they went back and forth trying to make him yawn. They tried their darnedest for nothing. Who wouldn't make fun of them? Shift after shift went against him every day! And yet, they couldn't do one iota!"

The saint said this to my unworthiness with great pride and rejoicing. I suspect, however, that he meant himself; because from the time I saw him embark on the road of God I never saw him yawn.

THE SEA, THE SWIMMERS, AND THE TWO WOMEN

Another time when he was praying for the salvation of his flock, the thought passed through his mind that soon he would abandon this temporary life, to travel to the timeless bliss. And while he was thinking this, he suddenly fell into ecstasy: he saw a big sea filled with countless people. It seemed that they were all in a hurry to cross over to the other side. But many, as they were swimming, were carrying huge burdens on their shoulders: rocks, mud, sticks, ashes, copper, silver, gold, and all kinds of material. Some of them were drowning under the burden of their load. Others had small loads, but as they swam they gathered more. And even though they were sinking, they kept gathering continually.

The sea was stormy. Fog and darkness everywhere. So much that despair took hold of the travelers.

Several of them did not have loads, and so they travelled comfortably and quickly. Some were walking on the sea; while others who had wings flew above the water with a great deal of joy and enthusiasm, and quickly reached the other side. Others sometimes stopped and sometimes went on. Even though many were drowning, they were shouting loudly for heavier loads. Some were throwing them little by little on the way, and thus they were unburdened, while certain others who were coming behind them, were gathering what the former threw away.

This was a sad sight. One was pushing, another was drowning his neighbor. Even though many had the strength to get into ships, they preferred to drown along with their loads.

The saint was wondering what meaning all this could have. Then he heard a voice saying to him: "The sea is the world the swimmers are the people, the variety and differences in the trip denote the levels of materialism in our care-burdened lives. He who wants to arrive quickly to everlasting life ought to be renewed in Christ and cross the sea free from possessions; while the one who tries to cross burdened with material things will be quickly lost in the depth of Hades."

Now Nephon began to understand the vision, and with this knowledge he looked on his left and saw an enormous valley full of a multitude of men, women, children, young people, monks, and clergy: An alluring woman was standing in the midst of the valley: She was wearing a gown interwoven with gold and adorned with pearls and countless other precious stones and jewels. Around her was a table set with sumptuous food and drink. She had big eyes but saw no one in particular. She would promise everyone: "You will inherit me. Everything is yours." But she didn't keep her word to any of them. She deluded all of them by twisting their minds so that they would devote themselves to her. And while all looked after her, the servants of some great king would come from time to time and slaughter them with their swords, burying their bodies in the ground.

But the king's servants respected all those who were not taken in by this woman, but spat in her face because they realized how sneaky her promises were. This vision also seemed very strange to the saint.

Then turning to his right he saw a beautiful and fragrant place all lit up. A glorious throne was there shining like the sun. A resplendent woman who illuminated everything with her radiance was reclining on it. A multitude of beautiful white-dressed youths surrounded her singing her praises. Her attire was flowing like the clouds, and she was enveloped by shimmering light. Flowers of paradise adorned her with their beauty and aroma.

A small tunnel led from the valley to her throne. As we said, all who scorned the promises of that deceitful woman and spat in her face took this narrow passage, and reaching this woman they kissed her with a holy kiss. Immediately she covered them with light as with a garment, crowned them and sent them to the royal courts where they enjoyed ineffable pleasure and indescribable sweetness.

When the saint came to and delved into these visions, he understood what they meant. The evil woman is this temporary life which promises riches and pleasures to all, totally enslaving their will. She doesn't allow them to worship God, because she mesmerizes them. And so death, finding them unprepared, snatches their soul and surrenders their bodies to earth.

While the other woman reclining on the throne was eternal life, toward which the saints travelled following the difficult path. They scorned worldly things as if they were deceit and dust. They constrained themselves and snatched the Kingdom of God. Because, when the natural end for all people comes, these jump over to eternal life. And kissing them she clothes them with splendid garments and gives them rest in the blessed courts, where the sweet voices of the celebrants resound.

Living this vision and understanding it deeply led the saint to sigh. "Ah, when will I also be able to attain this and see the face of my God? I wonder if I, the immoral, will be able to see my Lord. Woe to you, Nephon! You are about to go into the fire, wretch, for your evil works. Heaven will protest to God because you polluted it with your look. But also the earth, miserable one, will accuse you, because you polluted it with your abominable feet. The air considers you dung, lawless man! You are a burden to the people also, because you defile them by circulating amongst them, profane one! The stones and the dust of the earth will cry out against you, rotten one, because you have made everything dirty and useless. And what haven't you polluted? Everything visible and invisible considers you useless. That's why the fire of hell will turn you into ashes!"

He would say all this tearfully and with compunction he would implore God to pity his sins and to deliver him from eternal fire. He feared and trembled before the ferocity of death. And by death I mean separation from God. But if one such great luminary feared that he might be lost and fall from the grace of God, I wonder what we, who are nothing and have done nothing good, should do?

TOWARD THE JOURNEY'S END

Righteous Nephon anticipated his departure from this life in the following way. One day after he dismissed the clergy from church, I saw him very downcast and melancholy. He was sitting like a sparrow submerged in a strange isolation. Very puzzled by this, I asked him directly why he was so changed. At times his face would be flushed like a rose and at times it would darken deeply. Sometimes he would smile and other times he would frown. It was as if he was having a consultation with himself.

Persistently I begged him to explain to me what was going on. "Look, my child," he said at last, "your father, whom you love so much, will soon leave you bodily."

My heart skipped a beat. "No, my Father, don't leave your child," I implored him. "You know that from the time I first saw you I never departed from you, wanting to find mercy along with you on Judgment day."

"Don't be afraid, my son!" he encouraged me. "If I find boldness near Christ, rest assured that soon I will direct you also wherever I will be. But if I do not find boldness! Struggle then, my son, with all your strength, to save your father from the fire, and also for you to gain salvation's."

"Father, tell me, I beg you, how did you find out that your end is near?"

"I will not hide it from you, my beloved child A little while ago, when I had finished the Office of the Sixth Hour, I felt a little listless and I bent my knees to sleep somehow. Immediately I was overtaken by divine ecstasy. I saw that I entered into a luxurious and divine palace. Its throne was fiery and glittered Royal crowns and the glory of the Lord surrounded it like a ray of light. It exuded manifold and sweet fragrances everywhere delighting the Heavenly Powers. Thousands on thousands encircled it, and myriads on myriads ministered around it."

"Michael! Michael! I heard a calm voice from the throne, 'show our beloved the place of his rest.' And immediately a great and fearful fiery pillar took me to a place where there were countless dazzling mansions. The gate which led to them was high, beautiful and very ornate. Suddenly it opened and we entered. Oh, what infinite light and intoxicating fragrances met us! A multitude dressed in white surrounded us asking me to go there as soon as possible."

"Master Michael," they said to my guide, "how long will you deny us our beloved Nephon?"

"The will of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is for him to be given to you in three days."

"As soon as they heard this, they started to leap and be joyful in the Holy Spirit. Some of them even began to make the heavenly preparations. The ineffable love of Him Who had mercy on you, ordered your final rest to be here, my guide said to me."

"Truly, how much that delightful chamber enchanted me when we went in further! After it there was another and still another, and countless others with unimaginable beauty which we passed

and admired: thrones of light which brought the mind to ecstasy, heavenly ever-blooming flowers of Paradise, golden phials filled with divine perfumes, multi-colored glowing crowns! But what am I saying, my child? There was so much beauty and such that it surpassed the mind and the imagination.”

“In a little while the archangel again said to me: ‘Christ is giving these to you because you loved Him and us. Look now you have thrones, garments like light, and delightful recliners, because you spent all your life sleeping on the bare ground! Your eyes will see signs and wonders that only the wise and prudent will comprehend Look! Countless rooms and chambers! The Good Lord has prepared everything with His own hand.’”

“And truly! I watched and I was amazed. From each one of the rooms I was able to enjoy the grace of all. The one seemed to pass it on to the other. And again, the beauty of all was in each one. Obviously those things of beauty weren't built with stones, sticks, and bricks. Their material was a divine cloud and the Holy Spirit. Those chambers were somewhat like the fiery rays of a brilliant sunset.”

“When at last, my son, with the help of the archangel who was guiding me, I understood all this, I woke up. Then, without delay in three days I'm going to Christ. And after a while, I myself will come to take you also, that we may be together. Don't cry because you will be separated from me. Instead be joyful and happy.” He told me this and was silent.

Little by little the news was spread throughout his diocese. Inconsolable lamenting and tears spread everywhere. But the saint calmed them all down with his counsels. He even persuaded them to rejoice and celebrate, “because,” he said, “since I will be closer to God, I will implore Him more ardently for the salvation of all of you, provided of course you continue in the kind of piety I've taught you.”

The great Athanasius was also informed about the approaching end of saint Nephon through divine revelation, and came to him with many other brothers. (Blessed Alexander had already gone to the Lord, and Athanasius had succeeded him to the throne).

As soon as he arrived, they kissed each other with a holy kiss, and the saint said to the archbishop: “Father, why should your holiness go through so much trouble for my sake?”

“I came, most honorable Father, to bid goodbye to your holiness. Tomorrow you travel for the heavenly Jerusalem! I beg you fervently, remember me also when you worship our God and Father and all His angels.”

“And you, my son,” the saint begged, “whenever you celebrate the Divine Liturgy, at the Prothesis, don't forget to commemorate also the name of sinful Nephon, the nonentity, before the holy Mysteries of God. For it is a great benefit for the departed to be commemorated at the holy Prothesis! Whoever then does this with sincere faith after my death will see God's help visit him when his end comes. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will cover the multitude of his

transgressions and will call him to the Kingdom of heaven. For I won't forget him in my rest, until I bring him near me; so that wherever I am, he may be also.”

After that he was silent. That night he started to pray at length.

REMEMBER, O LORD

“O Lord, Master Jesus Christ, our God, incline Your ear and hear Your servant, who always loves Your name. Receive me, as I will address the might of Your sovereignty and power. I pray, beseech, and supplicate Your goodness: O Jesus, Light of Light, come now at the setting of my life. O Holy One, descend to receive my soul. Have mercy on me, O Lover of good, and come to me in light, in beauty, and in bliss. It was You Who promised me: ‘I shall come Myself to receive your spirit in peace.’ Let not my sins then obstruct Your true promise. Turn not Your face away from me. Remember that You pulled me out of the stench of the dragon. When I was buried in his insatiable belly, You brought me back to life; by reviving me You illumined me; by enlightening me You sanctified me; by sanctifying me You glorified me; and by glorifying me You deified me.”

“Remember, O Lord, that all the days of my life I never ceased beseeching You not to turn away from me, but to come to Your servant at his departure. Remember, O Lord, that I loved neither father nor mother more than You. Remember, O Lord, that for Your name I renounced everything, and this of course was not my doing but Yours. Remember, O Lord, that for Your name was humbled exceedingly. Put me not to shame since many times You said to me: do not consider your vigils or your fasting to be anything; Hove you for your total humility! Could I perchance have done anything good on my own? It was Your grace that did all this. Remember, O Lord, that I loved no one but You. But even this was a gift from You, because You granted me countless blessings - both heaven and earth marveled at them!”

“Remember also, O Lord, everyone who will commemorate Your servant. Breathe Your Holy Spirit in their hearts. Grout them repentance, virtue, and dispassion. Crush the evil dragon under their feet. Into Your hands I surrender this flock which Your right hand entrusted to me. Keep it faithful to Your name. Shepherd it by Your mighty hand, O Most High God Keep it invulnerable until the consummation of the ages.”

“O God, my God again and oftentimes will I pray to You: Remember, O Lord the travelers by land and by sea, the sick, the suffering and captives. Help them and save them. Remember, O Lord the widows and the orphans, the strangers, the proselytes, the sojourners, the poor, and those who hunger and thirst for Your divine and rich mercy. Remember, O Lord those in prisons and in bondage, the needy, those who grieve and mourn, and all who hunger: let Your great mercy surround them, O most-merciful One. Remember, O Lord the sick in spirit and those wounded by the evil arrows of sin. Remember those in sorrow, in tribulation, and those afflicted with bitter anguish. Instill the joy of Your Holy Spirit in their hearts, that they may glorify Your beneficence. I know that You do this, O Lord especially to those who without complaining endure toil and labor, oppression, need and suffering, whether voluntary or involuntary.”

“Remember, O Lord bishops, priests, deacons, and all the clergy. Through their prayers, O Lover of man, forgive the multitude of my sins. Remember the ascetics in deserts and mountains, and in dens arid caves of the earth, and in general all the venerable monks who wear the holy schema. Through their prayers come to the departure of Your servant. Remember the kings and the

virtuous nobles. Grant rest to all who departed this life with faith and hope in You, and make lighter the burden of the unfortunate ones not initiated in the faith.”

RECEIVE ME

“Receive, O Master, the prayer of Your servant in the heavenly and spiritual altar of the Jerusalem above. O Word of God Who are wholly in the Father; Who hold everything and brought everything out of nothingness into being; Who were begotten before all ages; Who have the Father wholly in You, and the Holy Spirit ‘Who proceeds from the Father’ rests in You; Who created the hosts of angels, the waters, light and darkness, the sun, moon, and stars of heaven, the heavenly, earthly, and infernal; Who hold the universe in Your hand (who doesn't tremble before You, O Lord unless he is totally buried in passions like me, the dregs of stench?); Who created the spiritual and the material out of nothingness; the Lord Who ‘bath done all that He has willed in heaven and on earth, in the seas and in all the abysses’, Almighty Lord, receive my prayer that ‘in peace in the same place I may lay me down and sleep, for You, O Lord, alone host made me to dwell in hope.’”

HEAVENLY VISITORS

With these and many more words he would pray continuously. He was silent for a while. Then an angel of the Lord said to him: "Rejoice, rejoice! He Who gave the promise is truthful. He will come to you." And the saint rejoiced upon hearing these gladsome words.

The bell resounded in the mournful stillness. Everyone went to church. The saint was burning with a high fever. At one moment he said to me: "Spread out my mat on the ground, my son." I fulfilled his wish and then I laid him there, while he was whispering something.

At daybreak all the clergy as well as the townspeople gathered with Athanasius at their head. They sat deeply saddened by the condition of the saint. The fever had exhausted him.

"Father, I wonder, does an illness benefit man in anyway?" the patriarch asked the saint at one point.

"Yes, my lord Just as gold heated in the fire expels rust, so it is with man also, if he thanks God for his sickness, he sheds his sins."

Saying these words he cried and smiled. Suddenly his face shone like the sun, so that everyone was afraid, while he whispered: "Welcome, luminaries of the world, the God-bearing apostles."

His face shone again: "Hail, martyrs of the Lord who did not refuse to come to an old sinner!"

Then his face shone even more, that many were again frightened, while he continued mumbling: "I thank you, honorable prophets, for you came to a wretch rotted in sin." At the same time Athanasius, also caught up in ecstasy, saw them one by one kissing the saint.

After a few seconds the face of Saint Nephon flashed like lightning and they heard him murmuring with a smile on his lips: "Rejoice in the Lord all the hierarchs of Christ, the saints, and the righteous."

He was silent, and then, suddenly, flooded with boundless joy, he said lively: "Hail, O Lady full of grace! My light and my support. I thank you, O Theotokos! Unceasingly I remember your favors."

He was silent for a while again and then said: "My divine protectors, the soul of humble and sinful Nephon blesses you." And he stopped talking.

A short time elapsed and a most delightful fragrance overflowed everywhere. Suddenly his face lit up very much, like terrible lightning. Frightened, everyone went out into the courtyard! Horror had overtaken them from that divine glow. Along with the fragrance a beautiful voice filled with sweetness was also heard: "Come to Me, soul clothed in My humility. I am your Christ, to Whom you would say with so much desire: My Christ, my Christ. Come to Me then!"

At the sound of the voice of the Lord, everyone shuddered terrified, while the saint stretched out his hands at once and said these great words: "O Lord, 'into Your hands I commit my spirit!' You are my Christ, the Son of the living God!" And at once he surrendered his spirit.

Oh, what happened then! Everyone started to mourn bitterly and lament the loss of the teacher. The patriarch, however, begged them to thank rather and glorify God Who enabled them to have a holy and chosen vessel in their city.

After the initial shock passed, the people out of piety wanted to grab the clothes that the saint was wearing. The great Athanasius, however, did not allow them. But after he quickly did the funeral service of a bishop, he buried him - as he had begged him - in the great church of the holy Apostles.

Since then many cures have taken place there by the grace of God and with the intercessions of the saint. Christ cured countless incurable diseases, thus glorifying His servant Nephon. We aren't writing all of them, however, because the volume of the writing would become enormous. Besides, even this small edifying narration was a big sea, which we crossed with a great deal of labor due to our weakness. However, whatever would benefit the struggling Christians I didn't deem right to surrender to oblivion. And so with the blessing and guidance of the saint I, the worthless monk-priest Peter, crossed the big sea.

But I went through a lot with the demons who terrorized me and made many attacks on me, because they always hate the servants of God. When I finished this life of the Saint, they went so far as to plainly say: "Ah, what a nail that pupil of that hardhead drove through our heart! The evil things he did to us when he was alive didn't hurt us as much as the writing of his book now. It's all over He will make us totally obsolete! For this reason let's throw ourselves on the sly disciple and banish his memory from the earth!"

But as soon as they had made this decision, the demon that was ready to put me to death suddenly shouted crying in his misfortune: "Ah, that miserable Arephon! He came even here to whip us with his prayer!" As soon as the rest of them heard this, they vanished like smoke!

Saint Nephon fell asleep on December 23. May God bestow His mercy on all of you who read or copy this book and forgive your sins on Judgment Day, by the grace and love for man of our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom and by Whom be glory to 'the Father, together with the Holy and the life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.