

"EVERLASTING JOY"

"We, who in a mysterious way represent cherubims and sing the thrice-holy song to the life-giving Trinity, let us for this moment forsake every worldly thought, so that we may lift up the King of all, invisibly borne on spears by hosts of Angels" (Hymn of the Cherubim). Such mysterious words are chanted at the Liturgy. Who can hear them without trembling? Just think - "we, who in a mysterious way represent cherubims..." is it not the like that is represented by the like? And we - represent cherubims. Then this means that in every one of us there is something that is akin to a cherubim, something resembling the many-eyed angel who sees everything - like our conscience. But this resemblance is not from the outside - it is not external. It is not visible, it is not bodily; not like the similarity between a man and his portrait. The resemblance to a cherubim is an inner, mysterious and hidden resemblance in the depth of the soul. It is a spiritual resemblance.

There exists a cherubic centre of our soul, its angelic kernel which is of great significance. But it is buried in mystery and cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh. God bestowed on man His most precious gift - His image. But this gift is preserved in the innermost treasury of the soul: it is concealed in an ugly shell, deposited in thick seaweed at the bottom of the sea of our soul. If God had not hidden His gift the evil forces might have succeeded in defiling the gift of God: and now it is only given into the hands of him who sees it, and only he who has toiled can see it...

All of us are in sin. But we are like unto clay vessels, filled with glittering gold. Outside - blackened and begrimed; inside - shiny and brilliant.

Take off a man's clothes - you will see his body subject to temptations, disease and death. Then, further, if we could remove this body we would see a thick layer of sins which have eaten away our soul, making it hollow like a shell. But, if further still, we could lift off from the soul this corruptible, evil-smelling portion, there, in the very centre, we should see - our Guardian Angel. With his many eyes he sees everything (even the slightest and most insignificant wish) notes every thought of man. This is the holy centre of the human being - the true "I" of the man. This is the mysterious, sacred temple, radiant with the beauty of heaven. It is inhabited by the Holy Ghost. Day and night, ceaselessly and constantly He intercedes for us before God

with inexpressible sighs. We ourselves even do not know what to pray for (Romans VIII: 26), while the Comforter prays for us, strengthening us in our weakness and, though we are not aware of it, He cries out for us to God: "Abba", that is "Father, Father!" (Romans VIII: 15 ; Gal. IV: 6). We are the temple of God and the Spirit dwells in us. Do you not know this? (I Cor. III: 16). We tread on earth, but our true being is in heaven: for heaven is there where the Spirit is. Did not the Lord say: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones: for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the Face of My Father, which is in heaven" (Mtth. XVIII: 10). Can one contemplate, after reading this, that anyone has the right of corrupting the temple of God? "If any man defile the temple of God, Him shall God destroy (punish) for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are". (I Cor. III: 17).

Man is magnified. By little is he less than angels: with glory and honour is he crowned (Ps. 86). He has even been given the power of making use of the understanding of angels, because the measure of a man is the same as the measure of an angel (Revel. XXI: 17). A man is holy in the hidden treasury of his soul, because the Lord sanctifies him, the Lord Who cannot be overcome by any external iniquity.

The most precious of all precious stones - the diamond, is found covered by a rough crust, a black and extremely hard residue. Only a master of the craft will guess that this is a diamond. But in the course of many months, sometimes years, the diamond-cutter removes this external crust and polishes the stone, and then - the hidden, the internal emerges - a kernel, as transparent as a drop of dew, it sparkles and plays in the sun with all the colours of the rainbow. And the same happens with man. Covered with dirt externally - but so beautiful inside that God, after creating man, rested from His labours; and, when man fell, through great love for His creation, God spared not His only-begotten Son, surrendering Him even unto suffering and death - to save His creation.

O brothers, if you could only realize how beautiful you all are! Does not the priest swing the censer to the Holy Ghost Who lives in you, when he turns to you with the incense? Is it not the altar of the internal temple that he envelops with clouds of incense? And is not man - also the self-same ikon of God? For, as in the ikon beyond the paints and the wood, the grace of the Lord is present, so behind the flesh of man, beyond it and the sinful soul, dwells in the innermost temple, in the many-eyed conscience - the Holy Spirit.

Therefore nothing more precious exists than the human soul "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mtth.XVI: 26) Is it not God Who dwells in the soul? He Who has created all the treasures of the world? But of what value can they all be if the Creator and Master Himself is with us? What are they all worth, if God Himself can reign in the soul? In truth did the Lord say: "Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field" (Mtth.XIII: 44) Everyone's treasure is buried in the field of his soul. And if anyone has found his treasure, then, with bated breath he leaves all his occupations so that he can dig up his treasure and bring it up. For in this lies the supreme happiness - the highest good for man. In this lies everlasting joy.

The Kingdom of God is the divine part of the human soul. To find it in ones self and in others - become convinced with your own eyes in the holiness of God's creation, in the kindness and love of men - herein lies eternal blessedness and eternal life. Who has once partaken of this is ready to exchange for it all other goods: "Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls; who, when he had found one pearl of great price went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (Mtth. XIII: 45-46). The pearl that was sought by the merchant man was not far away, man everywhere bears it with him, only he himself is not aware of it. And with a treasure in our bosom everyone of us wanders with a longing over the face of the earth, and often we do not even believe that it is possible to find such a pearl - even far, far away. Blessed is he who has discovered his own treasure.

But who, in truth, sees it? Who sees his own pearl? Earthly things are perceived by him who has a clean and healthy bodily eye; a heavenly thing can only be seen by one who keeps his heavenly eye pure - that is his heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart - for they shall see God" (Mtth.V: 8) - will see Him in their own heart and in the hearts of other men - will see Him not only in the everlasting life to come, but also here, in this present age - will see Him now. Let them only go on purifying their soul... And the minute our heart is lit up in the very least, lit up by the Divine lamp - the image of God shall shine forth and sparkle like gold. And then they will see in themselves and in others Guardian Angels standing before the face of God. Then it is that they will hear the sighs of the Comforter mediating for us and calling on the Lord - "Father!"

In this one word lies the sweetness of all prayer and of all the joys. Blessed are the pure in heart for they always see God, always walk before His face amongst their brothers the angels. They treat each other with care for they see the holiness in their brothers, they see that in them which their brothers themselves cannot see. They worship and cannot rejoice enough on seeing the holiness of everyone; they lament and weep over the layer of dust which has concealed this treasure in their brother man.

In everyday life this hidden and mysterious holiness of the soul is not visible. But at times, suddenly, all at once, the evil-smelling core is broken through, the core which has been surrounding the soul, and glittering light blinds the eyes. And at times of the greatest inspiration the face shall become as the face of an angel: "And all that sat in the council looking steadfastly at Stephen saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts VI: 15). By all sorts of paths God leads man to such an understanding, to a knowledge of his holiness. Sometimes this takes place through a great trial. We think that a man has completely perished, we give him up - he is so completely immersed in uncleanness of all kinds, so immersed in evil. His fall appears to be the last downfall from which there is no recovery. But through great suffering the dirty cover wears off. All of a sudden amidst all the mud we see something sparkling. It is the Guardian Angel who has given him a push and with a firm hand leads him out on to a new and holy path. And in heaven there shall be more joy about this one repentant sinner than about 99 righteous men, who need no repentance (Lk.XV: 7) Such is the way through great trials and suffering.

And at other times - a great undeserved happiness, a sharp joy which pierces through the whole being and overwhelms the soul, ripping off the despised cover which encloses it. When it was said to the great sinner - the woman taken in adultery - "Go, and sin no more". Do you think she returned to sin again? No, "for the word of God is quick, and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and the joints of marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and open unto the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do. To Him shall we bear record" (Heb. IV: 12-13). One can rest assured that after this dazzling joy of forgiveness the soul of the poor sinner was kindled with its beauty. And one can be sure that there was joy in the presence of the angels (Lk.XV: 10) because another angel was joined unto them. This is what is meant by: "We, who in a mysterious way represent cherubims...."

Father Paul Florensky. (word, spoken
after the Liturgy, Jan., 1907).
(to be continued)