

## UNIT 3A: DOCTRINE

### 68: Theosis (Deification) - Applied Theology from the Life and Teaching of St Seraphim of Sarov

#### The Roots of Hesychasm in the Bible and the Desert Fathers

To appreciate the teaching and life of St Seraphim of Sarov, it is helpful to understand the roots of his prayer life found in the Bible, the Desert Fathers and the hesychastic tradition of the Church. Deuteronomy 4:24 warns that “the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God,” and Hebrews 12:28-29 affirms that: “Since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.” As a note in *The Orthodox Study Bible* explains: God “is called a consuming fire” because “He burns up sin and corruption in the repentant. He cleanses [us] with His purifying fire (St Athanasius the Great). He also gives [us] His water of life, which quenches [our] thirst that once burned with sins, but now yearns for His kingdom (St Ambrose of Milan).”<sup>1</sup>

These Biblical sources strongly support the meeting of two desert fathers in which: Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, ‘Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray, I meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he [Abba Joseph] said to him [Abba Lot], ‘If you will, you can become all flame.’<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, St Seraphim himself began his *Spiritual Instructions* with an opening section entitled “God” stating firmly that:

God is a fire that warms and kindles the heart and inward parts. And so, if we

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<sup>1</sup> The citation is drawn from a note in *The Orthodox Study Bible* on Deuteronomy 4:24, but the word “them” has been changed to “us.”

<sup>2</sup> Cited in the opening of Albert Haase, *Catching Fire, Becoming Flame: A Guide for Spiritual Transformation* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013).

feel in our hearts coldness, which is from the devil—for the devil is cold—then let us call upon the Lord, and He will come and warm our hearts with perfect love not only for Him, but for our neighbour as well. And from the presence of warmth the coldness of the hater of good will be driven away.<sup>3</sup>

However, to focus on this experience of God as “a consuming fire” who warms our hearts and “burns up sin and corruption” is to emphasise the end of the hesychastic experience, rather than how Christians can make themselves available to God and open to His purposes for their lives, which is where we need to begin.

Deacon John Chryssavgis begins his study, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, with a reflection upon a fourth century Eucharistic prayer of Serapion of Thmuis “that expresses the centre of the experience for the early Christians and of what their faith meant for them. The prayer addresses God: ‘We entreat you, make us truly alive.’”<sup>4</sup> Such a prayer is very much in keeping with *Little Russian Philokalia* and the desire of the author of its preface, Hieromonk Herman of the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, to provide help to anyone who is “a true seeker of salvation, a follower of Christ’s narrow path of unceasing toil and humility.”<sup>5</sup>

To understand the hesychastic approach to God and to life, consider in detail three writings by Metropolitan Kallistos from which this lecture draws only a few small examples. First, in 1995 in *The Orthodox Way*, Metropolitan Kallistos encourages his readers to deepen their search for God: “Reaching out towards the eternal Truth that lies beyond all human words and thoughts, the seeker begins to wait upon God in quietness and silence, no longer talking about or to God but simply listening. ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Psalm 45 [46]:10).”<sup>6</sup> Then in 2000 in an essay in *The*

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<sup>3</sup> St Seraphim, “The Spiritual Instructions to Laymen and Monks,” p.23 in *Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 1: St Seraphim (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 4th ed, 1996), tr. by Father Seraphim Rose from the 1903 and 1910 texts.

<sup>4</sup> (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Preface, *Little Russian Philokalia*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop [now Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1995), Rev.

*Inner Kingdom* titled “*Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hesychia*,” Metropolitan Kallistos sets out how hesychia can be interpreted at four different levels: (1) in the context of silence; (2) within the “watchful vigilance of a monk’s cell (whether a solitary cell or a cell of a monk living in community); (3) as the journey inward into the heart; or (4) as spiritual poverty.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, Metropolitan Kallistos has written a concise historical review of hesychasm in Father John Anthony McGuckin’s *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* which begins with a full definition of the Greek word *hesychia* as meaning “quietness,” “silence” or “inner stillness” and then considers the importance of the Jesus Prayer and the insights of St Symeon the New Theologian, St Gregory of Sinai and St Gregory Palamas.<sup>8</sup>

In considering the meaning of *hesychia*, Metropolitan Kallistos notes that:

Prayer is God; it is not primarily something which I do but something which God is doing in me – ... ‘Not I, but Christ in me’ (Galatians 2:20). The hesychast program is exactly delineated in the words of [John] the Baptist concerning the Messiah, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’ (John 3:30). The hesychast ceases from his [or her] own activity, not in order to be idle, but in order to enter into the activity of God.... [Therefore, the] silence [of the hesychast] is not vacant and negative – a blank pause between words, a short rest before resuming speech – but intensely positive: an attitude of alert attentiveness, of vigilance, and above all of *listening*.<sup>9</sup>

Such was the tradition that St Seraphim made his own.

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Ed., pp.121-122. A later edition of *The Orthodox Way* is available, but the text is the same as this edition, with an expanded bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Bishop [now Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2000), pp. 89-98.

<sup>8</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, “Hesychasm” in Father John Anthony McGuckin (Ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 241-247. For a detailed consideration of the writings of St Gregory Palamas, see the previous lecture, as well as the bibliography in this encyclopedia.

<sup>9</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos, *The Inner Kingdom*, p.97. Italics in original.

## The Life of St Seraphim

St Seraphim of Sarov remains one of the outstanding examples of Christian holiness. As Helen Kontzevitch has written in her biography of St Seraphim:

People must have deep faith in God and burning hearts, ready to burst into flame and give light. But rarely does one find this heartfelt burning, the name of which is humility. When humility abides in a man's heart he is able to see that fire which descends from heaven, and everything around him appears in a new, spiritual light.<sup>10</sup>

St Seraphim was born on the 19th of July in 1759, was named after St Prokhor and was a native of Kursk in Russia. Strikingly, the very name "Seraphim" means "flaming ones" in Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> Brought up by devout Orthodox parents, he was encouraged to attend Church regularly. When he was a child, a miraculous healing was attributed to the Kursk icon of the Theotokos. He entered a monastic community at the hermitage of Sarov when he was 19, was recognised as a monk at 27 and ordained a deacon. St Seraphim received visions of both angels and Christ, notably during the Divine Liturgy.

St Seraphim was ordained a priest when he became 34; and from then onwards he took up the spiritual guidance of the Diveyevo convent. Shortly after this, he left the community for a hermitage in the forest. His life was organised around maintenance of a small cabin in the woods and dedicating as many hours as possible to prayer, fasting, and the reading of the Scriptures and the Holy Fathers. St

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Kontzevitch, *Saint Seraphim: Wonderworker of Sarov and His Spiritual Inheritance* (Wildwood, CA: St. Xenia Skete, 2004), p. 7. In contrast to Helen Kontzevitch's balanced, careful prose, a more poetic interpretation of the life of St Seraphim can be found in Julia de Beausobre's *Flame in the Snow: A Russian Legend* (London: Constable 1945/Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1996). See also Chapter 1, "The *starets*: Saint Seraphim," pp. 11-66 in Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997) and Donald Nicholl, *Talking with St. Seraphim: A meditation with St. Seraphim shared in the context of The St. Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality, March 1992* (Histon, Cambridge: The Saint Francis Trust Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia*, p. 18.

Seraphim returned to the Monastery Church on Sundays to receive Holy Communion and participate in monastic fellowship.

St Seraphim was attacked by bandits in 1804. He was almost beaten to death and received permanent injuries. His spine was damaged; and he found it difficult to walk without the aid of a stick. His response was to pray more fervently and consistently. It is recorded that he prayed incessantly for a thousand days and a thousand nights. He spent much time kneeling on a stone close to his cabin and would cry out aloud: "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Following this, he spent three years in absolute silent seclusion. When requested to do so, St, Seraphim returned to the monastery of Sarov (in 1810). Here he continued to live in prayer, and silent seclusion for 10 more years.

St Seraphim ended this silence and began to preach and counsel his fellow Christians, but only when instructed to do so in a vision. He would greet all who came to him with a prostration, a kiss, and the words of Pascha: "Christ is Risen!" He called everyone, "My joy." Eventually (in 1825) he returned to his forest cabin and made himself available to receive all and sundry. Thousands of pilgrims came to consult him from across Russia and beyond. It was believed that he had "knowledge of hearts and minds." and that his prayers and intercessions worked wonders. St Seraphim of Sarov died on January 2, 1833, while kneeling before an icon of the Theotokos. Motovilov wrote: "Batushka was on his knees in prayer with arms folded in a cross ... [and] he had actually passed away in that position on his knees."<sup>12</sup> His guidance, consolation and example had successfully transformed the direction of many lives and rekindled Russian Orthodoxy. The immediacy and warmth of both his teaching and example sustained Russian Orthodoxy through the terrible upheavals and persecutions of the twentieth century. He was glorified in Sarov by the Russian Orthodox Church on the 19th of July 1903. Remarkably, his

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<sup>12</sup> Cited by Helen Kontzevitch, p. 188.

body was kept by the Bolshevik authorities in a drawer in the Museum of Atheism, and was identified in 1990 by an Orthodox attendant because of the copper cross he wore all his life that had been given him by his mother in 1778 and still adorned his skeleton; his relics were then returned to the convent in Diveyevo.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Meeting of Nicholas Motovilov with St Seraphim**

Nicholas Motovilov met with St Seraphim in November of 1831 and faithfully recorded their conversation. These notes were later published by Sergius Nilus.<sup>14</sup> In the preface he declared that St Seraphim's revelation was truly extraordinary and a gift to the entire world already drifting towards materialism. Alongside the radiant goodness of St Seraphim's personality and life, the dialogue with Nicholas Motovilov provides an "excellent entry" into the reality of deification as defined in the Orthodox East. The text is a "must-read" for anyone seriously exploring the implications of the theology of Hesychasm. Rather than initiate a running commentary it is appropriate to highlight certain quotations for consideration and discussion, and then to consider the impact that St Seraphim and this dialogue has had on the lives of many persons over subsequent years.

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<sup>13</sup>The details about the finding of the skeleton of St Seraphim are given by Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia*, pp. 63-64. For numerous photographs of St Seraphim (including his relics), see Helen Kontzevitch, *Saint Seraphim*, pp. 198, *passim*. Donald Nicholl explains: "The reason why Seraphim's reliquary had to be taken to the convent in Diveyevo rather than to Sarov was because Sarov lies within the military zone Arzama 16, entrance to which has for many years been strictly controlled since it was here that Sakharov and his scientific colleagues invented the Soviet Union's nuclear bomb. Not surprisingly, the contraposition of Seraphim's relics and the nuclear bomb holds apocalyptic significance for many Russians." p. 64. Intriguingly, on 19 October, 2016, part of the relics of St Seraphim were launched into space aboard the Soyuz MS-02 rocket, with a plan to return them from the International Space Station to earth in April 2017 when the mission ends, and the rocket and its relics will then go to a church in the Star City region of Moscow. For a photo of an Orthodox priest blessing the launch, see "Spacecraft with new ISS crew, relics of Orthodox saint launched from Baikonur spaceport" at: <http://tass.com/science/907294>.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 2, "The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit," pp. 63-111 in *Little Russian Philokalia*, Vol. 1: St Seraphim (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 4th ed, 1996). Note that this collection of the writings of outstanding teachers in Russia is quite distinct from the better-known Greek *Philokalia* and is intended to present the Russian Fathers of recent centuries "as intermediaries between ourselves and the great Fathers of the Greek *Philokalia*." p. 9, Preface by Hieromonk Herman, St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.

It should be noted that Nicolas Motovilov had recently been healed at an earlier meeting with St Seraphim and was deeply touched to be invited by one of the sisters of the community of Diveyevo once again to visit St Seraphim, known in the Russian tradition as “Batushka”— an intimate, affectionate way of saying “Father.” However, following the invitation after Vespers on the Tuesday evening at the Cathedral beside the convent, Nicholas and his companion had to wait for many hours in the forest outside St Seraphim’s hermitage. His companion feared that “wild animals might attack us,” but Nicholas was firm, refusing to leave, telling his companion: *“You should travel back alone if you fear that; but though the beasts may tear me to pieces here, I will not go away from the doors of Batushka Seraphim.”* This was no ordinary meeting, as even that very day *“thousands of people came to the great Elder, and after having stood a while in his vestibule they all departed, not having received his blessing.”*<sup>15</sup>

### **The Dialogue of St Seraphim and Nicholas Motovilov<sup>16</sup>**

It was Thursday. The day was gloomy. The snow lay eight inches deep on the ground; and dry, crisp snowflakes were falling thickly from the sky when St. Seraphim began his conversation with me in a field near his hermitage, opposite the river Sarovka, at the foot of the hill which slopes down to the river bank. He sat me on the stump of a tree which he had just felled, and squatted opposite me.

“The Lord has revealed to me,” said the great elder, “that in your childhood you had a great desire to know the aim of our Christian life, and that you have continually asked many great spiritual persons about it... But no one,” continued St. Seraphim, “has given you a precise answer. They have said to you: ‘Go to church,

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<sup>15</sup> *Little Russian Philokalia*, pp.75-78.

<sup>16</sup> These extracts are drawn from the text by S. A. Nilus as set out in *Little Russian Philokalia*, pp. 78-111, published in Russian in May 1903, with an Afterword published in 1911. The dialogue is entitled “The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit,” and the first section is titled “The Aim of the Christian Life.”

pray to God, do the commandments of God, do good—that is the aim of the Christian life.’ Some were even indignant with you for being occupied with such profane curiosity and said to you, ‘Do not seek things which are beyond you.’ But they did not speak as they should. Now humble Seraphim will explain to you of what this aim really consists.

Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian practices however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of the Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. **The true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.**

... “What do you mean by acquiring?” I asked Batushka Seraphim. “Somehow I don’t understand that.” “Acquiring is the same as obtaining,” he replied to me.... “God the Word, the God-Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, compares our life with a market, and the work of our life on earth He calls trading.... Earthly goods are good works done for Christ's sake and conferring on us the grace of the All-Holy Spirit.”....

Antony the Great in his letters to monks says... “we are influenced by three wills: the first is God's all-perfect and all-saving will; the second is our own human will which, if not destructive, yet neither is it saving; and the third will is the devil’s will—wholly destructive.... The first, God’s all-saving will, consists in doing good solely to acquire the Holy Spirit, as an eternal, inexhaustible treasure which cannot be rightly valued.” The acquisition of the Holy Spirit is, so to say, the oil, which the foolish virgins lacked. They were called foolish just because they had forgotten the necessary fruit of virtue, the grace of the Holy Spirit, without which no one is or can be saved, for: “Every soul is quickened by the Holy Spirit and exalted by purity and mystically illumined by the Triune Unity.”

How great is God's compassion on our misery, that is to say, our inattention to His care for us, when God says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20), meaning by 'door' the course of our life which has not yet been closed by death!...Woe, great woe to us if He finds us overcharged with the cares and sorrows of this life! For who will be able to bear His anger, who will bear the wrath of His countenance? That is why it has been said: Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation (Mark 14:38), that is, lest you be deprived of the Spirit of God, for watching and prayer brings us His grace...

Great is the power of prayer, and it brings most of all the Spirit of God, and is most easily practised by everyone. We shall be happy indeed if the Lord God finds us watchful and filled with the gifts of His Holy Spirit. Then we may boldly hope "to be caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17) Who is coming "with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26) "to judge the living and the dead" (1 Peter 4:5) and "to reward every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27).... it is said: "Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 45[46]:10). That is, I will appear and will continue to appear to everyone who believes in Me and calls upon Me, and I will converse with him as once I conversed with Adam in Paradise, with Abraham and Jacob and other servants of Mine, with Moses and Job, and those like them...

The soul speaks and converses during prayer, but at the descent of the Holy Spirit we must remain in complete silence in order to hear clearly and intelligibly all the words of eternal life which he will then deign to communicate. Complete soberness of soul and spirit, and chaste purity of body is required at the same time. The same demands were made at Mount Horeb.... For our God is a fire which consumes everything unclean, and no one who is defiled in body or spirit can enter into communion with Him...

And the work of God is: “Believe in God and in Him Whom He has sent, Jesus Christ” (John 14:1; 6:29). If we understand the commandments of Christ and of the Apostles aright, our business as Christians consists not in increasing the number of our good deeds, which are only the means of furthering the purpose of our Christian life, but in deriving from them the utmost profit, that is in acquiring the most abundant gifts of the Holy Spirit...

It is said of Abraham and Jacob that they saw the Lord and conversed with Him, and that Jacob even wrestled with Him. Moses and all the people with him saw God when he received the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai from God. A pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, or in other words, the evident grace of the Holy Spirit, served as guides to God's people in the desert. People saw God and the grace of His Holy Spirit not in sleep or in dreams, or in the excitement of a disordered imagination, but truly and openly...

Owing to this very gift of the supernatural grace of God which was infused into him by the breath of life, Adam could see and understand the Lord walking in Paradise and comprehend His words, and understand the conversation of the holy angels, and the language of all the beasts, birds and reptiles and all that is now hidden from us fallen and sinful creatures, but was so clear to Adam before his fall. To Eve also the Lord God gave the same wisdom, strength and unlimited power, and all the other good and holy qualities....

The grace of the Holy Spirit acting externally was also reflected in all the Old Testament prophets and saints of Israel. The Hebrews afterwards established special prophetic schools where the sons of the prophets were taught to discern the signs of the manifestation of God or angels, and to distinguish the operations of the Holy Spirit from the ordinary natural phenomena of our graceless earthly life. Simeon

who held God in his arms, Christ's grandparents, Joachim and Anna, and countless other servants of God continually often had, quite openly, various divine apparitions, voices and revelations which were justified by evident miraculous events. Though not with the same power as in the people of God, nevertheless the presence of the Spirit of God also acted in the pagans who did not know the true God, because even among them, God found for Himself chosen people. Such, for instance, were the virgin-prophetesses called Sibyls who vowed virginity to an unknown God, but still to God, the Creator of the universe, the all-powerful ruler of the world, as He was conceived of by the pagans. Though the pagan philosophers also wandered in the darkness of ignorance of God, yet they sought the truth which is beloved by God; and because of this God-pleasing seeking, they could partake of the Spirit of God, for it is said that nations who do not know God, practice by nature the demands of the law and do what is pleasing to God (cf. Romans. 2:14). The Lord so praises truth that He says of it Himself by the Holy Spirit: "Truth has sprung from the earth, and justice has looked down from heaven" (Psalm 84[85]:11)...

But when our Lord Jesus Christ condescended to accomplish the whole work of salvation, after His Resurrection, He breathed on the Apostles, restored the breath of life lost by Adam, and gave them the same grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God as Adam had enjoyed. But that was not all. He also told them that it was expedient for them that He should go to the Father, for if He did not go, the Spirit of God would not come into the world. But if He, the Christ, went to the Father, He would send Him into the world, and He, the Comforter, would guide them and all who followed their teaching into all truth and would remind them of all that He had said to them when He was still in the world. What was then promised was "grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

"Then on the day of Pentecost He solemnly sent down to them in a tempestuous wind the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire which alighted on each of them

and entered within them and filled them with the fiery strength of divine grace which breathes as with a dewy wind and acts with gladness in souls who partake of His power and operations (cf. Acts 2:1-4)...

And in fact, the Lord has frequently demonstrated before many witnesses how the grace of the Holy Spirit acts on people whom He has sanctified and illumined by His great inspirations. Remember Moses after his talk with God on Mount Sinai. He so shone with an extraordinary light that the people were unable to look at him. He was even forced to wear a veil when he appeared in public. Remember the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor. A great light encircled Him, "and His raiment became shining, exceedingly white like snow" (Mark. 9:3), and His disciples fell on their faces from fear. But when Moses and Elijah appeared to Him in that light, a cloud overshadowed them in order to hide the radiance of the light of the divine grace which blinded the eyes of the disciples. Thus, the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God appears in an ineffable light to all to whom God reveals its action."

Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?"

I replied: "I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain."

Father Seraphim said: "Don't be alarmed, your Godliness! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am."

...After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure,

but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snowflakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder. You can imagine the state I was in!

"How do you feel now?" Father Seraphim asked me.

"Extraordinarily well," I said.

"But in what way? How exactly do you feel well?"

I answered: "I feel such calmness and peace in my soul that no words can express it."

"This, your Godliness," said Fr Seraphim, "is that peace of which the Lord said to His disciples: 'My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do it give to you (John 14:37)...."

What else do you feel?" Father Seraphim asked me.

"An extraordinary sweetness," I replied.

And he continued: "This is that sweetness of which it is said in Holy Scripture: 'They will be inebriated with the fatness of Thy house; and Thou shalt make them drink of the torrent of Thy delight' (Ps. 35:8). And now this sweetness is flooding our hearts and coursing through our veins with unutterable delight. From this sweetness our hearts melt as it were, and both of us are filled with such happiness as tongue cannot tell. What else do you feel?"

"An extraordinary joy in all my heart."

And Father Seraphim continued: "When the Spirit of God comes down to man and overshadows him with the fullness of His inspiration, then the human soul overflows with unspeakable joy, for the Spirit of God fills with joy whatever He touches...."

What else do you feel, your Godliness?"

I answered: "An extraordinary warmth."

"How can you feel warmth, my son? Look, we are sitting in the forest. It is winter

out-of-doors, and snow is underfoot. There is more than an inch of snow on us, and the snowflakes are still falling. What warmth can there be?"

I answered: "Such as there is in a bath-house when the water is poured on the stone and the steam rises in clouds."

"And the smell?" he asked me. "Is it the same as in the bath-house?"

"No," I replied. "There is nothing on earth like this fragrance."

And Father Seraphim, smiling pleasantly, said: "I know it myself just as well as you do, my son, but I am asking you on purpose to see whether you feel it in the same way. It is absolutely true, your Godliness! The sweetest earthly fragrance cannot be compared with the fragrance which we now feel, for we are now enveloped in the fragrance of the Holy Spirit of God..."

And during the whole of this time, from the moment when Father Seraphim's face became radiant, this illumination continued; and all that he told me from the beginning of the narrative till now, he said while remaining in one and the same position. The ineffable glow of the light which emanated from him I myself saw with my own eyes. And I am ready to vouch for it with an oath."

### **Conclusion: A Russian Experience with Universal Meaning**

St Seraphim in dialogue with Nicholas Motovilov has set out here a practical example of deification (*theosis*) alongside illuminating comments, surely drawn from personal experience, and theological insights. He repeatedly stresses the power of prayer, sets forth grace as a gift for all people and insists that the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit" remains a real opportunity for both monastics and laity. He proclaims the "nearness" of the Divine, encourages us to "open up" to the reality of the Holy Scriptures and to make a commitment to the spiritual life. Reflecting on the above quotations we need to remember that St Seraphim was a true hesychast and theologian in that he was taught by God directly.

This dialogue between St Seraphim and Nicholas Motovilov is utterly Russian in both its setting and its focus on St Seraphim as a *starets*—defined as “an elder in a Russian Orthodox monastery who functions as a venerated adviser and teacher.” However, the experience of life and of the Lord that St Seraphim relates to his friend Nicholas remains open to each of us more than 180 years after the repose of the saint. However, as Donald Nicholl has pointed out:

... Seraphim himself anticipated how difficult it would be for people to accept the stories [about him] as true, and he explained the cause of that scepticism: ‘There is nothing incomprehensible here [he wrote]. The failure to understand comes about because we have wandered far from the spacious vision of the early Christians. Under the pretext of enlightenment, we have reached such darkness and ignorance that now we find inconceivable what the ancients saw so clearly that even in ordinary conversation the notion of God’s appearance did not seem strange to them. Men [and women] saw God and the grace of His Holy Spirit, not in sleep or in a dream, or in the excitement of a disordered imagination, but truly, in the light of day.’<sup>17</sup>

Donald Nichol’s own self-awareness challenges many of us:

... How can Seraphim possibly maintain that the Enlightenment has brought [the] ‘darkness of ignorance’ when you look at the history of the last 200 years and you see the improvements in education and in health and in human rights and you see the spread of democracy, all those achievements which we place under the heading of the Enlightenment? I think the answer is that though all those advances in education, health, human rights and so forth are desirable, they are not crucial because they do not respond to the crucial need of the wounded human condition, which cannot be healed by any achievements of progress but only by redemption. Perhaps those of us, like myself, who have spent much of our lives working for the aims of the Enlightenment, for justice

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia*, p. 11. The translation of the Russian phrase *od predlogom prosveschenia* as “under the pretext of enlightenment” is given by Nichol in *Talking with St Seraphim*, p. 3.

and for peace, have a special need to realize that.<sup>18</sup>

Such an attitude is not a negation of the search for social justice and peace, but rather an affirmation of the priority of redemption in Christ. For us to experience what St Seraphim called “the spacious vision of the early Christians” we must first face our own need for “a double healing”—both psychological and in faith. On the psychological side, the English poet W. H. Auden set a goal in his 1939 poem, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats:” “In the deserts of the heart/ Let the healing fountains start,/ In the prison of his days/ Teach the free man how to praise.”<sup>19</sup> Yet this necessary psychological beginning of “healing fountains” in the heart, needs to be joined to a search for oneness in faith with the Lord. As is written in Isaiah 35:6, 8, “Water shall burst forth in the desert... The road of cleansing goes through that desert. It shall be named the way of holiness.”<sup>20</sup>

Just as St Seraphim consistently addresses Nicholas Motovilov in the dialogue as “Your Godliness,” so we can each learn to seek and encourage the image of God in each person we encounter. As St Seraphim advised us: “Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved.”<sup>21</sup> The Kontakion of his feast day on the Second of January offers an appropriate plea from us to him:

O Father Seraphim, mighty worker of wonders and most glorious saint who pleased God, accept this small prayer of ours that we offer up to thee in praise, and standing now, as thou dost, before the throne of the King of Kings, our Lord Jesus Christ, pray for all of us that we may find His mercy on the day of judgement, singing to Him in joy.<sup>22</sup> Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> Nicholl, *Talking with St. Seraphim*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> This poem is available in full on the web at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-memory-of-w-b-yeats-2/> .

<sup>20</sup> Both the poem by W. H. Auden and the passage from Isaiah are cited by Deacon Dr John Chryssavgis as the opening frontispiece of his book, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. The translation of Isaiah 35:8 is by Deacon Chryssavgis.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by the website Orthodox Wiki at: [https://orthodoxwiki.org/Seraphim\\_of\\_Sarov](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Seraphim_of_Sarov)

<sup>22</sup> Donald Nicholl concludes his meditation, *Talking with St. Seraphim*, with this Kontakion, p. 7.