

St. Michael's Serbian Orthodox Church: Bible Study/Spiritual Chat 3/22/2016 Traditional Practice of *Govenie* as a Model for Spiritual Life

As we continue our Lenten journey, it is beneficial to learn about the pious Russian Orthodox tradition of *govenie*. Evidently, there is not an exact word in English that corresponds to the word *govenie*, but as we can see from various excerpts of spiritual and historical writings, the purpose of *govenie* is spiritual repentance, renewal, and transformation through practicing fasting, prayer, confession and receiving Holy Communion.

St. Theophan the Recluse wrote in a letter to a young woman asking spiritual advice, "*Lord give the blessing for you to perform govenie in a fitting manner. Each faster must do everything that you intend to do. Fast, go to church, seclude yhourself, read, think and study yourself; all of this is necessary. But all of these actions must be directed toward one goal: worthy Communion of the holy Mysteries of Christ. In order to Commune worthily, the soul must cleansed with repentance. All the various actions of govenie—going to church, prayer at home, fasting, and everything else, are undertaken in order to accomplish the repentance as it should be, with sincere contrition and a firm resolution to not offend the Lord anymore.*"

It is always a temptation when we read the spiritual writings of Holy Fathers, to view them quite literally, since our minds commonly run in that direction. However, the important thing is to try and 'catch the spirit' of what our Holy Fathers are trying to convey to us. One typical example is when we read the writings of some Holy Father who was himself a monastic, perhaps living an austere life of extreme asceticism in some desert or cave; we tend to look on the surface of his writings and think to ourselves, 'I cannot possibly live this way or practice such an intense spiritual life as this. Therefore, these writings are of no use to me.' This however is unfortunate. It goes without saying that a lay person living in the world can hardly practice the same intense ascetic life of prayer and fasting as a monastic. It is unfortunate because if we think this way, we will deprive ourselves of much beneficial spiritual inspiration and guidance. This is why Christians often have a very superficial understanding of their faith—living primarily an outward, external moralistic type of life, it is quite easy to fall into the same trap the Pharisee fell into in the Gospel of the Publican and the Pharisee: pridefully thinking that any efforts one makes toward prayer, fasting and good works is the result of one's personal greatness, rather than with God's help.

We must approach our spiritual study with great fear of God and humility. When reading about pious Christians in ancient times and writings from Holy Fathers, then, if we will make an effort to see in what small way we might be able to imitate those who went before us in the Christian life, we can gain tremendous benefit. Whether it's just acquiring a new perspective or learning some helpful strategies in overcoming temptations, the Orthodox Sacred Tradition has an unending wealth of spiritual writings to help support us in these challenging times. Perhaps we can think of such writings as a kind of road map that can help us navigate the way toward our destination: salvation in the kingdom of heaven!

"Most Orthodox Christians in the Russian empire went to confession once a year as part of a days-long process called *govenie*. *Govenie* took several steps. First, the penitent had to attend church services for

several days before going to confession (usually during the first, fourth or last weeks of Great Lent), and read or listen to special prayers before confession. On the day of confession at the end of a church service, one stood in loine with other penitents, bringing a candle as an offering. When one's turn came, one told one's sins to the priest...Either before or after confession, one told one's name to the sacristan, who would mark it off in the church register: annual confession was a legal requirement in the Russian empire for Orthodox Christians, and priests had to send in confessional records every year to the Holy Synod. One then fasted until Divine Liturgy the next day, when one partook of the Eucharist..." *from Orthodox Christianity in Imperial Russia: A Source Book on Lived Religion by Heather J. Coleman*

"For the elevating and strengthening of grace-filled life through the Sacraments it is necessary to institute *govenie* with all its components, to go to Confession, and having thus prepared yourself, to worthily partake of the Holy Mysteries. It is necessary, that is, to institute *govenie*, or rather take it upon yourself, for it is already instituted for us by the Holy Church. The four fasts are established to this aim, so that during them zealots of piety would prepare themselves, confess and receive Communion. Those seeking perfection should make it a rule for themselves to prepare for Communion four times per year, during all the great fasts. This is written in *Orthodox Confessions*.

Incidentally, this should not stifle any zeal for receiving more often or even constantly, neither should it burden like a yoke anyone who is unable to fulfill it due to his circumstances. Just try to do anything within your powers to prepare for Communion four times per year. For lay people four times per year is a modest amount, moderate, and in the experience of many very salvific. He who does this will not set himself apart from others, and therefore will not get puffed up for being more exalted than they. You can also prepare twice during the Nativity and Great Lenten fasts—at the beginning and the end. This will make in all six times.

Govenie should be distinguished from fasting, or worthy conduct of the fasts according to the rubrics of the Church. It is part of the fast, but is stricter with respect to food, sleep and everything else connected with other pious occupations, such as: ceasing worldly cares and affairs, reading holy books as much as possible, full attendance at church services, and so on. This time is generally dedicated exclusively to pious occupations that are all directed towards bringing forth needed repentance and confession and then the receiving of Communion.

Thus it is clear that the whole process of *govenie* is the cleaning up of our whole life, renewing its tone, purifying our goals, uniting with the Lord, renewing the spirit and all our existence. It is like washing out our dusty clothing or taking a bath after being on the road. A Christian will never be able to keep from getting dirty on the road no matter how careful he is. He gets covered with the dust of passionate thoughts and stained with falls into sin. Even though it be but a little dirt, it is the same as dust in the eyes or grit in a watch—the eyes do not see and the watch does not run. So we have to clean ourselves off from time to time. How wisely it is all set up in our Church, and how salvific it is to humbly submit to this institution!

This is the meaning of *govenie*! It is a means for nourishing, enkindling and preserving life in us. But mainly it is the assiduous assessment of our lives and our falls with their causes, and the establishment

of methods for avoiding them. When sins become known, they are cast out of the heart by contrition and aversion, and cleansed away by Confession with the promise to change. Then the vessel is ready. In Communion the Lord comes and communes with the worthy spirit, which should feel that: *I am not alone, but with Thee.*

Govenie is done at a certain time, but the spirit of preparation should eventually become a constant state. Certain exercises must be used that will help to root this state.

Because *govenie* includes three illuminating works: fasting, Confession and Communion, these three things should lead to as much constancy and frequency as possible. For this is needed:

1. Concerning Govenie.

1) Observing all the great fasts, or spending all of them in fasting; that is, more than just continence, so that the flesh feels a lack, insufficiency, or a little pain. A certain number of days are set aside during the fast for preparation, when you must abandon all business and concentrate exclusively on cleansing the conscience. Otherwise during the fast business goes on as usual, fasting relaxes and other activities are determined by opportunity. Only wearing out the flesh and denying it all consolations, as in a decent mourning period, gives ease to the spirit and attracts the grace of God. What a potent means of inspiration there is in this!

2) Observing the fasts on Wednesday and Friday. This strongly reminds man from time to time that he is not free but in slavery and bears a burden. It stanches the flood of sensuality, sobers and imparts vigor. It is as a short break for the stallion from the cruel bit and bridle.

3) Besides this, voluntary fasting on other particular days, especially Mondays, as is customary. Some people deny themselves certain foods and always eat lenten foods; others alternate days, and so on. There are various forms of fasting and all of them are beneficial and advisable according to one's strength and zeal.

2. Concerning Confession.

1) Every sin that burdens the conscience should be quickly cleansed by repentance without waiting for any particular time of preparation. It is good not to keep it in your soul for even one day, and even better for less than an hour, for sin drives away grace and deprives one of boldness in prayer; and the longer one holds on to it, the more it hardens and cools the heart. Once it is driven away by repentance, it leaves a compunctionate dew of tears.

2) Every day before you go to sleep, make a private confession to the Lord of everything in which you have sinned. Thoughts, desires, senses and passionate movements, as well as any impurity even in righteous deeds, must be revealed to God. Even though we may have sinned as it were against our own will, the sin is still within us, making us impure and indecent before God and our own sense of purity and perfection. Lying down to sleep is like departing for the other world. Confession prepares us for this. During sleep, whatever we have acquired during the day becomes part of our nature; we must cleanse it and cast out all indecency with contrition. Then we will be clean.

3) Make a confession minute by minute, that is, every impure and blameworthy thought, desire, feeling and movement confess as soon as you realize it to the all-seeing God with contrition of spirit; and ask forgiveness for it and the strength to avoid it in the future. Ask that you be cleansed from all impurity in that moment. This activity is very salvific. It is like wiping your eyes as you walk against the dust, and it requires strict attention to the heart. The concentrated man is always fervent and zealous. But whoever does not exile thoughts and desires by contrition and repentance, leaves the wound in his heart. How many unnoticed wounds we often have, how many arrows! It is not surprising that we grow cold and fall. One thought leads to another, and they easily give birth to desire. One desire and another give birth to consent, and then an inner adultery has been committed, and we have fallen. He who constantly repents cleanses himself of all this and clears his own path.

4) Reveal every perplexity, confusion or new understanding to another of like mind with you, or to your spiritual father, so that he would decide and discern its worth, and pronounce a judgment. This is how to avoid an impasse or digression. Curtail the habit of deciding everything for yourself, and, as a result, save the time that is sometimes wasted in empty daydreaming. But mainly it is a constant safeguard, a firm, unwavering conviction which engenders firmness of will and reliability of action.

Through all of these activities confession truly becomes ceaseless. The spirit is retained in contrition, compunction, self-abasement, and prayerful supplication — which means that it is alive. It is the most suitable of all activities for preserving the spirit of zeal and the heat of fervor, so that some have even limited all spiritual work for themselves as well as for others to one thing: repenting every minute and weeping over their sins.

3. Concerning Communion.

1) Go as often as possible to Liturgy, and as it is celebrated stand in firm and bright faith in the sacrifice that is being made to God. The Sacrament of the Body and Blood is Divine Food for the Christian and a sacrifice. Not everyone receives Communion at every Liturgy, but the sacrifice is brought from all and for all. Therefore all should participate in it. We participate with our faith, our pained contrition over our sins, our self-abasing falling down before the Lord Who has sacrificed Himself like a lamb for the life of the world. Concentration alone on this Mystery powerfully enlivens and awakens the spirit. Faith and contrition always bring cleansing from sins, and often also a treasured touch from the Lord upon the heart of the Christian, delighting and enlivening him as a sort of Communion in spirit.

Such a touch is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb and more fortifying than all spiritual fortifications. But it must be remembered that it is entirely a gift of God. When, to whom and how He will grant it depends on the Lord Himself. The Christian should receive it with reverence, joy, and triumph if it is granted. But he should not try to force it, or invent some method to obtain it. It is even better not to trust that it even happens, or that what does happen is truly it. This is in order to avoid getting puffed up or falling into pretest.

2) If it is impossible to go to church, then do not let the hour of the holy and Divine Sacrifice pass without sighing and turning to God. If possible, stand in prayer and make a few prostrations. Terrifying natural phenomena make all creatures tremble: for example, thunder, earthquakes, or storms. At the moment the Divine Sacrifice is celebrated in church, something occurs that is more

awesome and greater than anything on earth or heaven; but it occurs invisibly, spiritually, before the face of the infinite Triune God, the holy angels, the entire assembly of the heavenly Church, before the eyes of faith of all who struggle and live on earth. It is invisible, but real nevertheless. Therefore the believer should not let these moments slip past his attention. When he remembers it, this remembrance alone warms the spirit and enraptures him to God, by which grace is drawn down.

This is how the work of *govenie* can approach ceaselessness, so that along with inner work, the heat of zeal and the spirit of quest can be preserved in constant tension and power. With their aid all *podvigs* of body and soul can be turned into salvific means of growing and strengthening our inner man.

Such is the general order of guiding rules. Being based on the existence of life, they are essential to everyone who seeks the Lord. But we have only shown the beginning, spirit and power of the rules, for example, with respect to the body — not pleasing the flesh in all its bodily functions; or with respect to the external life — removal from everything that is permeated with the spirit of passions, binding the soul at each of its powers, and living under the influence of grace-filled means. These are the essential points of ascetic labor. Because of the multiplicity of personal dispositions, the application of these means should be multitudinous, and it is impossible to set one rule for all. For example, in order to heal the mind we must impress upon it the divine truths according to the understanding of the holy Church. This can be done by reading, listening and mutual discourse on the Word of God, patristic teachings, Lives of saints and sermons. The spiritual father should discern which method is best for whom, and how it can be applied. Just do it however you can. Thus, although it is all one and the same thing, asceticism appears from the outside in infinitely varied forms. Only bear in mind that any spiritual father who extinguishes the spirit of zeal by various dispensations and indulgences or comforts, and lulls those in a state of coldness is a destroyer of souls and a murderer, for there is only one way — the narrow and sorrowful.

From The Path to Salvation by St. Theophan the Recluse (p. 272-278)

(see also...The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It by St. Theophan the Recluse (p.136-147)