



Christian Life Begins with Ardor of Zeal

St. Theophan the Recluse

There is a moment, and a very noticeable moment, which is sharply marked out in the course of our life, when a person begins to live in a Christian way. This is the moment when there begins to be present in him the distinctive characteristics of Christian life. Christian life is zeal and strength to remain in communion with God by means of an active fulfillment of His holy will, according to our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of the grace of God, to the glory of His most holy name.

The essence of Christian life consists in communion with God, in Christ Jesus our Lord - in a communion with God which in the beginning is usually hidden not only from others, but also from oneself. The testimony of this life that is visible or can be felt within us is the ardor of active zeal to please God alone in a Christian manner, with total self-sacrifice and hatred of everything which is opposed to this. And so, when this ardor of zeal begins, Christian life has its beginning. The person in whom this ardor is constantly active, is one who is living in a Christian way. Here we will have to stop and pay attention to this distinctive characteristic.

I am come to send fire to the earth, the Saviour said, and what will I, if it be already kindled! (Lk. 12:49). He is speaking here of Christian life, and He says this because the visible witness of this is the zeal for the pleasing of God which is in the heart by the Spirit of God. This is like fire because, just as fire devours the material which it takes hold of, so also does zeal for the life in Christ devour the soul which receives it. And just as during a time of fire the flame takes hold of the whole building, so also the fire of zeal, once it is received, embraces and fills the whole being of a man.

In another place the Lord says, For every one shall be salted with fire (Mk.9:14). This is also an indication of the fire of the spirit which in its zeal penetrates our whole being. just as salt, penetrating decomposable matter, preserves it from decomposition, so also the spirit of zeal penetrates our whole being, banishes the sin which corrupts our whole nature both in soul and in body; it banishes it even from the least of the places where it has settled in us, and thus it saves us from moral vice and corruption.

The Apostle Paul commands, Quench not the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19), to be not slothful in business; fervent in the spirit (Rom. 12:11). He commands this to all Christians so that we might remember that the fervor of the spirit, or unsloughful striving, is an inseparable attribute of the Christian life. In another place he speaks of himself thus: Forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those things that are before, I press toward the mark for the high prize of the calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13-14). And to others he says, So run, that ye may obtain (I Cor. 9:24). This means that in the Christian life the result of fervor of zeal is a certain quickness and liveliness of spirit, with which people undertake God-pleasing works, trampling upon oneself and willingly offering as a sacrifice to God every kind of labor, without sparing oneself.

Having a firm basis in such an understanding, one may easily conclude that a cold fulfilling of the rules of the Church, just like routine in business, which is established by our calculating mind, or like correct and dignified behavior and honesty in conduct, is not a decisive indicator that the true Christian life is present in us. All this is good, but as long as it does not bear in itself the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, it has no value at all before God. Such things would be like soulless statues. Good clocks also work correctly; but who will say that there is life in them? It is the same thing here. Often thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead in reality (Apoc. 3:1).



This good order in one's conduct more than anything else can lead one into deception. Its true significance depends on one's inward disposition, where it is possible that there are significant deviations from real righteousness in one's righteous deeds. Thus, while refraining outwardly from sinful deeds, one may have an attraction for them or a delight from them in one's heart; so also, doing righteous deeds outwardly, one's heart may not be in them. Only true zeal wishes to do good in all fullness and purity, and persecutes sin in all its smallest forms. It seeks the good as its daily bread, and with sin it fights as with a mortal enemy.

An enemy hates an enemy not only personally, but he hates also relatives and friends of this enemy, and even his belongings, his favorite color, and in general anything that might remind one of him. So also, true zeal to please God persecutes sin in its smallest reminders or marks, for it is zealous for perfect purity. If this is not present, how much impurity can hide in the heart!

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