



FROM THE AMBIVON

ST MICHAEL ORTHODOX CHURCH

512 WINTER ST., OLD FORGE, PA

Phone: 570-457-3703

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Priest Michael Shepherd (frmichael@stmichaelof.org)

Chair - Tammy Wytovich (chair@stmichaelof.org)

Vice Chair - Danny Pregmon (vicechair@stmichaelof.org)

Secretary - Vitaliy Rakovsky (office@stmichaelof.org)

Treasurer - Maura Elko (treasurer@stmichaelof.org)

December 1st, 2024 23rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — Tone 6. Venerable Botolph of Iken (7th c.). Prophet Nahum (7th c. B.C.). Righteous Philaret the Merciful of Amnia in Asia Minor (792). Martyr Ananias of Persia.

Birthdays & Anniversaries for December

Birthdays:

Nameday: Barbara Sevensky (12/4); Daniel Jones (12/17);

Baptism:

Anniversary:

Travelers:

Prospora Schedule: PLEASE HELP! We need families to start baking prospora at home. Please sign up. *The Church has a prospora kit if you would like to borrow it!* Thank you all for your offering “for the people by the people”.

Dec 8th

Dec 15th

Counting: HELP! Please sign up to help us count weekly donations! We need help counting today.

Dec 8th

Dec 15th

Visitors: PLEASE JOIN US DOWNSTAIRS for an Agape Meal. Thank you to everyone who donated! Please donate what you would spend for lunch at the agape meal to replenish our supplies.

PLEASE SING ALONG! Singing the hymns and responses to the litanies throughout the services is encouraged!

DEAR GUESTS AND FRIENDS: *A most sincere and heartfelt welcome to you from our community. According to the ancient traditions of the Orthodox Church, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is to be administered only to Orthodox Christians who have prepared to receive themselves by prayer, fasting, and a recent (monthly) confession. If you have questions please ask Fr Michael! Visitors, if you did not introduce yourself to Fr Michael at Vespers, please refrain from Holy Communion.*



Service Schedule

SAT, Nov 30th @ 5:00 PM Great Vespers
SUN, Dec 1st: Hours @ 9:10 AM Hours, 23rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — Tone 6.

INVITATION TO ST NICHOLAS IN OLYPHANT
THURS, Dec 5th: @ 6:00 PM 9th Hour - Great Vespers w/Litya
FRI, Dec 6th: Hours @ 9:30 Hierarchical Divine Liturgy
St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia
600 E. LACKAWANNA ST., OLYPHANT, PA 18447

SAT, Dec 7th @ 5:00 PM Great Vespers
SUN, Dec 8th: Hours @ 9:10 AM Hours, 24th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — Tone 7.

NATIVITY SCHEDULE

TUES, Dec 24th: @ 9:00 AM Nativity Royal Hours @ 5:00 PM Compline and Matins w/Litya
WED, Dec 25th: Divine Liturgy @ 9:00 AM - Nativity of Christ



Treasury

“... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. Jesus Christ

How Much is my tithe

Weekly	2%	4%	5%	10%
\$200	\$4	\$8	\$10	\$20
\$500	\$10	\$20	\$25	\$50
\$750	\$15	\$30	\$37	\$75
\$1000	\$20	\$40	\$50	\$100
\$1500	\$30	\$60	\$75	\$150

WEEKLY GIVING UPDATE: We thank you for your continued giving in gratitude for all that our loving God does for each of us, for His Holy Church, and all the blessings we receive through her.
Nov Income: \$15,114.02 (\$5519 deposited from pasta dinner)
Nov Expense: \$9,465.62
Average Weekly Cost to Keep the Church Open: \$3,740.85
Average Monthly Cost to Keep the Church Open: \$14,963.58



Announcements - Upcoming Parish & Diocesan Events

Silent Prayers and Confession: Every Wednesday 11:00AM - 1:30PM or before/after Vespers. Or you can make an appt for confession.

Monthly Panikhida: Dec 28th, 4PM prior to Vespers

Catechumen Classes: Every Sunday after Liturgy. All are welcome to sit in the classes.

Church Work Day: Every Day is Church Maintenance day! A lot of cleaning can be done! If you have a day you would like to work in the church or even just a couple of hours please get with Fr Michael for what can be done. Sweeping, vacuuming, polishing.....

Parish Council Meeting: Dec 7th, 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM - All are invited. January we will start preparing for the Annual Parish Meeting February 9th and the Diocesan Meeting 23rd & 24th of January (Diocesan Delegates - Primary: Maura Elko - Alternate Tammy Wytovich) any motions to change the Parish By-laws must be submitted to Parish Council for

discussion by mid January in order for His Eminence to bless off on the change prior to the Annual meeting. Reminder, in order to submit changes or to be a voting member, a parishioner will submit a signed "Statement of Intent" along with donation of Time, Talent, and Treasure.

Choir practice: Saturday's @ 4pm prior to vespers. Reminder, to sing in the choir; practice is mandatory. If you are unable to make it please talk to Fr Michael about your circumstances to sing without going to practice.

St. Michael's Greeters Ministry please sign up! Thank you Maura!

ChurchTrac Registration Please register and/or sign in to ChurchTrac and update your information. I am in the process of putting a church directory and this program will allow us to do so very easily. Please add your photo so when we use this directory for proskomide there will be a picture alongside your name.

<https://stmichaeloldforgepa.churchtrac.com/sign-in>

Attendance: While this is not mandatory, I will be taking attendance every Sunday as we head into 2025. And every month I will be making a monthly report on trends of services, attendance (Feast days/Sundays), donations, and monthly summary events e.g. visitations, ministry work, outreach, catechesis etc., to the diocese. This will help me for our end of year report for the diocesan council. You also can check in on ChurchTrac for your own attendance.

Angel Tree: Please take notice of the Angel Tree in the Narthex. This is a parish effort to provide gifts to a needful family for Nativity. Simply take a tag from the tree and purchase the items listed on the back of the tag. Return the gift(s) wrapped with the tag secured to the gift(s) by Dec 21st.

Heavenly Image: There will be a meeting during coffee hour for those who have the know-how and those who want to volunteer to help put down the tile in the altar. I would like to have this finished for Nativity.

Parish Prayer List

NEWLY DEPARTED: *Archpriest Michael Evans*
(11/14);

DEPARTED: *Michael Toczko* (12/1); *Peter Mizgala*
(12/2); *Helen Sorok* (12/9); *Dorothy Polanchik* (12/11);
Robert Sorok (12/23);

Please remember in your prayers LIVING:

Ill-afflicted Archpriest(s) John Nightingale, & Theodore Orzolek

All those caring for the sick and suffering at this time throughout the world, especially our families and friends: *Christine Sevensky, Margaret Pregmon, Daniel Jones, Michael Sokol; Michael Krenitsky; Bernie Elko; Nadia Macheska; The child of God Abigail.*

Servants of God: *Mark Bezhuly, David Barsigian, Patricia Jones, Anne Buday, Emily Krenitsky, Gregory Krenitsky, Barbara Sevensky, Beverly Elko, Sandra Condon, Marie Pasternak, Nicole Earl, Anna Tyrpak, Sandy & Danny Pregmon, Walter Pritchuk, Michael & Euphemia Keklak, Justin & Elisabeth Kane, Maria & Vitaliy Rakovsky, Ekaterina & Anna, Joe & Kelly Cigna, George, Natasha, Rosa, & Lucia Coyoy, Mat. Emilia, Reader Blaise, Maximus, Rodion, Savina Shepherd, Joseph, Emilia, Judah, Nadezda, & Silas Hart, Eli & Paula Stavisky, Helen Wytovich, Tammy Wytovich, Paulette Ezbiensky, Jason Vo & Maura Elko, Mary Krevko, Elisabeth & Jacob Hallford*

Seekers: *Eugene, Gabriel, & Mike,*

Catechumens: *Paul Dunay, George McCandless, Christopher & Neva Yeisley*



Words of Wisdom
From the Saints & Teachers

Today's Readings

Epistle: (220) Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel: (91) Luke 18:18-27

EPISTLE

Deacon: Let us attend!

Priest: Peace be unto all!

Reader: And to thy spirit.

Deacon: Wisdom!

Reader: The Prokeimenon in the 6th Tone, a Psalm of David: O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance.

Choir: O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance.

Reader: Offer to the Lord, O ye sons of God! Offer young rams to the Lord!

Choir: O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance.

Reader: O Lord, save Thy people

Choir: And bless Thine inheritance.

Deacon: Wisdom!

Reader: The reading from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Ephesians.

Deacon: Let us attend!

[(220) Ephesians 2:4-10] Brethren: God, Who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, * even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), * and raised us up with Him, and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, * that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. * For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- * not because of works, lest any man should boast. * For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Priest: Peace be unto thee, Reader.

Reader: And to thy spirit.

ALLELUIA

Deacon: Wisdom!

Reader: In the 6th Tone: AL-LE-LU-IA!

Choir: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Reader: He that dwells in the aid of the Most High shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven.

Choir: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Reader: He shall say to the Lord: Thou art my protector and my refuge, my God. In Him will I trust!

Choir: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

GOSPEL

[(91) Luke 18:18-27] At that time, a man came to Jesus and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" * And Jesus said to him, "Why dost thou call Me good? No one is good but God alone. * Thou knowest the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor thy father and mother.'" * And he said, "All these I have observed from my youth." * And when Jesus heard it, He said to him, "One thing thou still lackest. Sell all that thou hast and distribute to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." * But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich. * Jesus looking at him said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! * For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." * Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" * But He said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

2:5 SAVED BY GRACE

WHAT WE GIVE FOR WHAT HE BESTOWED. JEROME: The sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the future glory that will be revealed in us. If so, we are saved by grace rather than works, for we can give God nothing in return for what he has bestowed on us. EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS 1.2.1.

Edwards, M. J., ed. (1999). *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* (p. 132). InterVarsity Press.

18:24–30 All Things are Possible with God

THE CAMEL IS A THICK CABLE USED IN SAILING. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA: The ruler was too weak in his intentions and could not be prevailed upon even to listen to the advice of selling his possessions, although it would have been good for him and full of reward. Our Lord lays bare the sickness that has its home in the rich, saying, “How hard it is for those that have riches to enter into the kingdom of God! I say to you, that it is easier for a camel to enter in through the eye of a needle than for a rich man into the kingdom of God.” Now by a camel he means not the animal of that name but rather a thick cable. It is the custom of those well-versed in navigation to call the thicker cables “camels.” COMMENTARY ON LUKE, HOMILY 123.

Just, A. A., ed. (2005). *Luke* (p. 284). InterVarsity Press.

Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven by Saint Innocent Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kurilian and Aleutian islands Enlightener of America

3. The Way that Leads into the Kingdom of Heaven The way into the heavenly Kingdom is Jesus Christ Himself.

Only those who go by this way follow Jesus Christ. But as to how we must go by this way, listen to what Jesus Christ Himself says: Whoever wishes to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. And what it means to deny oneself, take up one’s cross and follow Jesus Christ will be told in the following pages. Jesus Christ said: Whoever wishes to follow Me. These words mean that Jesus Christ does not compel or force anyone to follow Him. He does not want to have as His disciples those who are unwilling or those who have no special desire to follow Him, but wants us willingly and without any compulsion to surrender ourselves wholly to Him. Consequentially, only those who desire to do so enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christian, your salvation or perdition depends on your own will! In His unspeakable wisdom and love, the Lord has given you freedom to do what you like, and He does not wish to take this most precious gift away from you. And so, if you wish to follow Jesus Christ, He will show you the way into the Kingdom of Heaven and will even help you along the way. But if you do not wish to follow Him, do as you like; no one is going to compel you or force you. But beware of despising the call of Jesus Christ and His loving kindness.

In His great goodness, Jesus Christ knocks for a long, long time on the door of everyone’s heart in order to awaken his soul and arouse in it a desire for salvation. But woe to the man whom He finally abandons and whom He casts out as a son of perdition! And so, in order to follow Jesus Christ, first of all you need to have a special desire and resolve to do so; and in order to have a desire to follow him, you must know where to go, and what the way is, and what is needed for this way. But how can you know what you don’t want to know, or what you have only heard about slightly and superficially! And so, before following Jesus Christ you must do the following:

1. You must study attentively the foundations of Christianity, i. e., the actual books of Holy Scripture on which our Orthodox faith is founded. You should know where they come from, who wrote them and when, how they were preserved and have been handed down to us, why they are called Divine and Sacred, and so on. But you must study the Holy Books in simplicity of heart, without any prejudice, without curiosity, impartially and not beyond the limits of your mind; you should not try to penetrate and know what has been hidden from us by the wisdom of God. Such study of the faith is

by no means opposed to faith, but on the contrary it is the binding duty of every Christian, when he reaches maturity, to know his faith thoroughly; because anyone who has not got a solid knowledge of his faith is cold and indifferent to it and frequently falls either into superstition or unbelief. How many Christians or, rather, how many people baptized in the name of Jesus Christ have perished and are perishing only because they have and had no desire to turn their attention to the foundations of our Orthodox faith! Whoever despises this duty will be speechless at the awful judgment. But not all people can to the same degree make a study of the faith, but each should do so according to his ability, knowledge and enlightenment. Thus, for example, an educated person can and should direct his attention to the historical events which prove the origin and effects of the faith, to the spirit of Holy Scripture, and so on. But an uneducated and simple person should ask and learn from the Pastors and Teachers of the Church, because they have promised to teach the faith and have been learning from their childhood and they consecrate all their life to the study of the faith.

2. When you know and are certain that our Orthodox faith is based on Sacred Scripture and not on fictions or speculations, and that Holy Scripture really is the Word of God revealed to us by the Holy Spirit through the Prophets and Apostles, then do not pry into what is hidden from us. Believe implicitly, without doubt or reservation, all that Holy Scripture teaches. Do not listen to any natural explanations and interpretations of what is beyond the human mind. And if you act in this way, your faith will be true and right, and it will be imputed to you as justification and merit.

3. Finally, try to have and to stir up within you a desire to do what Holy Scripture teaches. And if you have not this desire, fall at the feet of our Saviour Jesus Christ and with fervent prayer implore Him to give it to you. But on no account resist when grace calls you to the way of salvation. All that has been said here about faith let us explain by a parable.

For example, you may have heard that in a certain place near you there is a colossal, wonderful building. Its height reaches to heaven itself. The entrance to it is somewhat hidden and without guidance not everyone can find it. There are many attendants standing by to direct you and guide you further. These attendants are at the same time physicians for the sick and crippled, and dispensers of the food needed for the journey. There are so many ladders for the ascent that nearly everyone has his own. But all the ladders are steep, narrow and poorly lighted so that without a guide and outside help it is impossible even to take a step, especially at the beginning. This building was the work of the wisest Architect, and it was made for the very purpose of enabling people to ascend to heaven and paradise itself. After hearing all this, no doubt you would like to be where this building leads to. But in that case how are you going to act? Of course, first of all you must go to the building, examine it carefully, -I ask the attendants about everything, about the building itself, its purpose, how to enter it, and so on. And the attendants will gladly tell you all that is necessary. If you are an educated person, go up to the building itself, look at it from all sides and see whether it is built on a strong foundation and whether it can bear the actual weight of the building as well as the people who enter it.

If you are very learned, then examine the materials of which it is made, find out about and investigate all that your eyes can see, and for this purpose you may even use the necessary instruments. And when you have seen and are certain that the building is sound, strong and can fully serve its purpose, then give up all further search and leave at the doors all the instruments with which you have made your investigations, because there they will only hinder and not help. And without doubt or hesitation enter the building itself, and go without stopping and without fearing the difficulty of the ascent, which is really difficult, especially at the beginning. The ascent to heaven is difficult, but on the other hand it leads straight to that to which all should aspire and which all should seek all their life. Inside this building you will meet fellow travellers with whom you will go hand in hand, and doctors if you happen to fall and be bruised; and you will find dispensers of the food you will need for the journey; you will also find guides and directors and teachers who will tell you all that is necessary, and whom you will find and meet until you meet the Lord and Creator of the building Himself. But in order to reach the end of the journey more quickly and more surely, the best and most hopeful thing to do is to surrender oneself completely to the will of the Builder and Lord.

But would it not be unreasonable if someone, instead of examining the building at its very foundation and looking at what our eyes can see, out of pride and self-confidence or out of obstinacy took it into his head to examine the very top of the building which must generally be hidden in the clouds and in the vast expanse between earth and heaven? And would it not be stupid for a person who had seen certain parts of the building and had been unable to examine them properly to presume to judge them and to draw conclusions about the whole building, and to find defects or excess where, on account of the extreme height, the building itself was scarcely visible? Or would it not be unreasonable on his part and even criminal if, without examining it at all and scarcely entering the enclosure of the building, he were suddenly to begin to criticize something or other in it and to assure others that the building was unsound and unnecessary; or instead of the laws and teachings of the Architect and Master of the house, he were to put forward his own ideas and teachings?

But perhaps the most stupid of all would be the man who, when he had hardly entered the enclosure, abandoned all desire not only to enter the building but even to look at it. For anyone who has a sincere desire to be where this building leads, it is sufficient if he is convinced that it is sound and established on a firm foundation, and built not by the hands of ordinary artists and workmen, but by the hands of the great Architect Who opened the way into it and cleansed it by His blood and went by it Himself first.

It is sufficient to be convinced of this; and all the rest, that is, why it is built as it is and not otherwise, or why it there and not in another place, and so on – all this is not your business. Your business is to surrender yourself to the will of the Master of the house, and with hope (trust) in His help and with love for Him in your heart to go to Him and follow Him, and to go as He orders. Let us apply this parable to Christianity. The building built on earth and reaching to Heaven is our Orthodox Christian faith; the Architect and Master of the house is Jesus Christ; the attendants are the Pastors and Teachers of the Church, and so on. Now let us look at the way by which we must follow Jesus Christ. He said: Whoever wishes to follow Me...

1. Let him deny himself,
2. Take up his cross, and...
3. Follow Me.

And so as the first duty of a Christian, of a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ, is to deny oneself. To deny oneself means: to give up one's bad habits, to root out of the heart all that ties us to the world; not to cherish bad desires and thoughts; to quench and suppress bad thoughts; to avoid occasions of sin; not to do or desire anything from self-love, but to do everything out of love for God. To deny oneself means, according to the Apostle Paul, to be dead to sin and the world, but alive to God. A Christian's second duty is to take up his cross. The word cross means sufferings, sorrows and adversities. There are exterior and interior crosses. To take up one's cross means to accept and bear uncomplainingly everything unpleasant, painful, sad, difficult and oppressive that may happen to us in our life. And therefore, whether anyone offends you, or laughs at you, or causes you weariness, sorrow or annoyance; or you have done good to someone and, instead of thanking you, he rises up against you and even makes trouble; or you want to do good, but you are not given a chance; or some misfortune has happened, for example, either you are ill yourself, or your wife, or children, or with all your activity and untiring labors you are suffering from want and poverty, and are so hard up that you do not know how to make both ends meet; or besides that, you are in some difficulty bear all this without malice, without murmuring, without criticism, without complaint, that is, without regarding yourself as offended and without expecting any earthly reward in return; but bear it all with love, with joy and firmness.

To take up one's cross means not only to bear crosses laid on us by others or sent by providence, but to take and carry one's own crosses and even to lay crosses upon oneself and bear them. This means that a Christian can and should make and keep various vows and promises that are troublesome and burdensome for our heart; but they should be vows in conformity with the Word of God and His will, and not according to our own ideas and fancies. Thus, for example, one can and should make and keep vows useful to our neighbors, as: to tend the sick' to help practically those in need of help;

to seek out cases and with patience and meekness to work for the salvation and welfare of others, either by action or by word, or by advice, or by prayer. And if when you are bearing your cross according to the word and intention of the Lord a proud thought rises up within you, that you are not like other people but firm, pious and better than your neighbors and companions, root out such thoughts as far as you can for they can ruin all your virtues. It was said above that there are exterior and interior crosses, but so far we have spoken almost entirely about exterior crosses. And blessed is he who can bear them wisely and well, for the Lord will not let such a man perish, but He will send him the Holy Spirit Who will strengthen and guide him and lead him further. But in order to become holy and be like Jesus Christ, merely external crosses are not enough; for exterior crosses without interior ones are of no more use than exterior prayer without interior. Outward crosses and outward sufferings are borne not only by disciples of Jesus Christ, but by all and everyone.

There is not a man on earth who has not suffered in one way or another. But whoever wants to be a true disciple and follower of Jesus Christ must bear without fail interior crosses as well. Interior crosses can be found at all times, and more easily than exterior ones. You have only to direct your attention to yourself and to examine your soul with a sense of penitence, and a thousand interior crosses will at once present themselves. For instance, consider: How did you come to be in this world? Why are you in this world at all? Do you live as you ought to live? And so on. Pay attention to this, and you will see at first glance that, being the creation and work of the hands of Almighty God, you exist in this world solely in order, with all your actions, with all your life and with your whole being, to glorify His holy and great Name. But you not only fail to glorify Him, but on the contrary you offend and dishonor Him by your sinful life. Then recollect and consider: What awaits you on the other side of your grave? On which side will you be at the time of Christ's awful judgement, on the left or the right? And if you reflect in this way, you will inevitably be alarmed and will begin to be disquieted. And this will be the beginning of interior crosses. But if you not only do not banish such thoughts from you, or seek diversion from them in worldly pleasures or empty amusements, but still further and more attentively examine yourself, you will find still more crosses.

For example, hell which up till now you have perhaps scarcely thought of, or have thought of with indifference, will then appear to you in all its horror. Paradise which the Lord has prepared for you and to which you have hitherto hardly given a thought, will then become to you the living reality that it actually is, a place of pure and eternal joys of which you are depriving yourself by your carelessness and stupidity. And if you do not pay any attention to the troubles and inner sufferings which you feel from such thoughts, and firmly resolve to bear them without seeking consolation in anything earthly, but pray more fervently to the Lord for your salvation and surrender the whole of yourself to His will, then the Lord will begin to show and reveal to you the state of your soul as it really is in order to introduce and nourish within you fear, affliction and sorrow, and thereby purify you more and more. We can never see the state of our soul in all its nakedness or vividly realize its danger without the special grace and help of God, because the interior of our soul is always hidden from us by our self-love, prejudices, passions, worldly cares, delusions. And if it sometimes seems to us that we see the state of our soul ourselves, yet we see it only superficially and no more than our own reason and conscience can show us.

Knowing how good for us it is to examine and see the state of our soul, the enemy of our soul (the devil) uses all his wiles and cunning in order to prevent us from seeing the state in which we really are, lest we should be converted and begin to seek salvation. But when the devil sees that his wiles do not help, and that the man with the help and grace of God is beginning to see himself, then the devil employs another still more crafty means – he endeavors to show a man the state of his soul suddenly and, as far as possible, more from the dangerous side, so as thereby to strike the man with terror and lead him to despair. And if the Lord were actually to allow the devil always to use this last means, to show us the state of our soul from the most dangerous side, few of us would stand firm; because the state of the soul of a sinner, and especially of a sinner who has not repented, really is extremely dangerous and terrible; and not only the soul of a sinner, but even the most holy and righteous persons, with all their righteousness, could not find tears enough to weep for their soul.

When the Lord is pleased to reveal to you the state of your soul, then you begin to see clearly and to feel acutely that with all your virtues your heart is corrupt and perverted, your soul is defiled and you yourself are only a slave of sin and the passions which have completely mastered you and do not allow you to draw near to God. You also begin to see that there is nothing truly good in you, and even if you have some good works they are all mixed with sin and are not the fruit of true love, but are the product of various passions and circumstances; and then you will certainly suffer. You will be overwhelmed with fear, sorrow, misery etc. – fear because you are in danger of perishing; sorrow and misery because you have so long and so stubbornly closed your ears to the gentle voice of the Lord calling you into the Heavenly Kingdom, and that you have so long and so brazenly angered Him with your sins. And in proportion as the Lord reveals to you the state of your soul your interior sufferings will also increase. Now you see what interior crosses are! Just as not all people have the same virtues and the same sins, so interior crosses are not the same for all. For some they are more oppressive, and for others less; for certain people they are more prolonged, and for others less; for some they come in one way, and for others quite differently.

And all this depends on the state of each person's soul, just as the length and mode of cure of an illness depends on the patient's condition. It is not the doctor's fault if he must sometimes use violent and prolonged means for the cure of a chronic and dangerous illness which perhaps the sick man himself irritated and increased. Whoever wants to be well will consent to bear everything. Interior crosses are sometimes so burdensome that the sufferer can find no consolation whatever in anything. All this can happen to you too! But in whatever position you may be, and whatever sufferings of soul you may feel, do not despair and do not think that the Lord has abandoned you. No! He will always be with you and will invisibly strengthen you even when it seems to you that you are on the very brink of perdition. He will never allow you to be tempted more than He sees fit. Do not despair and do not be afraid; but with full submission and surrender to Him, have patience and pray. For He is always our Father, and a very loving Father. Even if He permits a person who is surrendered to Him to fall into temptation, yet it is only in order to make him realize more clearly his own impotence, weakness and nothingness, and to teach him never to trust in himself and to show that no one can do anything good without God.

And if the Lord leads a person into suffering or lays crosses upon him, it is only to heal his soul, to make him like Jesus Christ and perfectly to purify his heart, in which He Himself wishes to dwell with the Son and the Holy Spirit. In these troubles of yours, however trying they may be, do not seek consolation among men unless the Lord specially indicates it and sends you His chosen servants. Ordinary people, that is, those who are not experienced in spiritual matters, are always bad comforters, even in ordinary sorrows, and still more in spiritual sorrows and troubles which they do not even understand; in this case they are more likely to do you harm than to comfort and relieve your sufferings. The Lord Himself is your Helper and Comforter and Guide; run to Him alone, and in Him alone seek consolation and help. Blessed, a hundred times blessed, is the person to whom the Lord grants to bear interior crosses, because they are the true healing of the soul, the sure and safe way of becoming like Jesus Christ, and consequently they are a special and manifest favor of God, and they show clearly His care for our salvation. Blessed is that man also because he is in a state of grace to which we not only cannot attain without the assistance of the grace of God but do not even consider necessary for our salvation.

If you bear your sufferings with submission and surrender to the will of God and do not seek consolation anywhere or in anyone except the Lord, then in His mercy He will not abandon you and will not leave you without consolation; He will touch your heart with His grace and will communicate to you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Amid your sufferings, and perhaps even at the very beginning of them, you will feel in your heart ineffable sweetness, a wonderful peace and joy which you never felt before; and at the same time you will feel within you the power and ability to pray to God with true prayer and to believe in Him with true faith. Then your heart will burn with pure love for God and your neighbor. All this is a gift of the Holy Spirit. And if the Lord grants you such a gift, whatever you do, do not regard it as a reward for your labors and troubles, and do not think that you have attained perfection or sanctity. Such thoughts are inspired by pride which has so deeply penetrated our soul and has taken root so strongly in us that it can make its appearance even

when a person has miracle-working power. These consolations and touches of the Holy Spirit are not a reward, but only the mercy and favor of God Who grants you to taste the good things which He has prepared for those who love Him, so that having tasted them you may seek them with greater zeal and fervor, and at the same time may prepare and strengthen yourself to endure fresh troubles and sufferings. And the love which you feel at that time is not the perfect state to which the Saints attain on earth, but only an indication of it. The third duty of the disciple of Jesus Christ is to follow Him. To follow Jesus Christ means to imitate in all our works and acts the works and acts of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus Christ lived and acted on earth, so we should also live and act. For example: Jesus Christ always gave thanks and praise to God His Father, and always prayed to Him.

So too in every state and in all the circumstances of our life we should thank God, love Him and both publicly and privately give praise to Him, pray to Him, and always have Him in our mind and heart. Jesus Christ honored His immaculate Mother and His foster-father and superiors, and obeyed them. In exactly the same way we too should honor and obey our parents and teachers, and not irritate or grieve them by our behavior; and we should respect our superiors and all authorities, and we should submit to them and obey them without a murmur. Jesus Christ, the universal King, paid tribute (tax) to the earthly king; and the Judge of the living and dead was unwilling to take upon Himself the civil authority of a judge or arbitrator (Luke 12: 14). Just so, we ought to pay the taxes to our king without any murmuring, and we ought not to take upon ourselves any authority which does not belong to us, for example, the authority of a judge, and condemn (or criticize) those in authority.-17 Jesus Christ fulfilled the duty He undertook and the work for which He was sent into the world willingly, and with zeal and love. IN exactly the same way, we too should carry out such duties as are assigned to us by God and the king (or government) conscientiously, willingly and uncomplainingly, even though our duties may be difficult or menial. Jesus Christ loved everyone, and did every kind of good to all. So we too should love our neighbors and, as far as possible, do good to them either by deed, or word, or thought. Jesus Christ gave Himself up for the salvation of men.

So too, in order to do good to people, we should not spare our labors or help. For the salvation and defence of our king and country (the king being the father of the nation), we should not spare even our life itself; while for Jesus Christ, as our Redeemer and Benefactor, we should not spare the very comforts of our soul, nor our body, nor our life, like the holy Martyrs who suffered various tortures and death for Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ willingly surrendered Himself to suffering and death. So too we should not avoid the sufferings and sorrows sent us by God but we ought to accept and bear them with humility and surrender to God. Jesus Christ forgave His enemies all that they did to Him, and over and above that He did them every kind of good and prayed for their salvation. So too we should forgive our enemies, repay with good the evil done us and bless those who curse and abuse us, with full faith and hope in God, the most just and all-seeing Judge, without Whose will not even a hair of our head will be lost. By bearing wrongs without complaint, without revenge and with love, you will act as a true Christian *Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:28). Jesus Christ, the King of heaven and earth, lived in poverty and earned His living by His own labors, so too we should be industrious and have a love of work, and should seek without laziness what is necessary for our life, and be content with our state and not desire wealth; because, according to the Saviour's word, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus Christ, being meek and humble in heart, never sought or desired praise from others. So too we should never boast or pride ourselves on anything at all, or seek praise from others.

For instance, if you do good to others, if you give alms, if you live more piously than others, or if you are more intelligent than many, or in general if you are better and more distinguished than your fellows, do not be proud of it either before men or to yourself, because all that you have that is good and praiseworthy is not yours but the gift of God – only sins and weaknesses are your own, and all the rest is God's. To follow Jesus Christ means also to obey the word of Jesus Christ. Therefore we must listen to, believe and practice all that Jesus Christ has said in the Gospel and through His Apostles, and we must do all this without artifice or temporization but in simplicity of heart. He who listens and attends to the word of Jesus Christ may be called His disciple; but he who listens to and carries out His word and will with simplicity of heart and with perfect devotion is His true, beloved disciple. And so, that is what it means to deny oneself,

to take up one's cross and follow Jesus Christ. That is the true nature and property of a disciple of Jesus Christ. That is the true and straight way into the Kingdom of Heaven. And that is the way by which Jesus Christ Himself went while He lived on earth, and by which we Christians must go. There never was and never will be any other way. Certainly this way is rough, narrow and thorny, and it seems so especially at the beginning. But on the other hand it leads straight to Paradise, to the heavenly Kingdom, to eternal beatitude, to God Who is the source of all beatitude. Sorrowful is this way, yet for every step we take along it thousands of rewards lie ahead. The sufferings on this way are not eternal, and one can say that they are even no more than momentary, whereas the rewards for them are unending and eternal, like God Himself. The sufferings will become less and lighter from day to day, while the reward will increase from hour to hour, throughout an infinite eternity. And so, do not be afraid of this way, for the smooth and easy way leads to hell, and the rough and thorny way leads to Heaven.

Many ask in perplexity: Why is the way to the heavenly Kingdom so difficult? And why must a Christian bear such heavy crosses? To these and similar questions the Christian should always reply that so it is pleasing to God. Our God is all-wise and the Lover of men; He knows what He is doing and what to do with us. If we really wish to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, disciples who are submissive, obedient and devoted to Him, let us surrender ourselves and each other and all our life to Christ our God. But it is possible to show a few plain and comprehensible reasons why the way into the Kingdom of Heaven is so difficult and that we cannot possibly avoid it if we wish to attain salvation.

1. The Kingdom of Heaven is the very highest beatitude, and the greatest glory and honor, and the most inexhaustible riches; and therefore if great cares and labors are necessary in order to obtain a trifling quantity of earthly wealth, how can such an unspeakable treasure be obtained without labors?

2. The Kingdom of Heaven is a reward, and the very greatest reward; and where is a reward given free and for nothing? So, if it is necessary to labor and struggle to get an earthly and temporal reward, how much more must it be necessary in order to get a heavenly and eternal reward? 3. We must bear crosses because we call ourselves and wish to be Christians, that is, disciples, followers and members of Jesus Christ. Whatever the Master, Leader and Head is like, such ought also His disciples, followers and members to be. Jesus Christ entered into His glory through sufferings; consequently we too can enter there only by the way of sufferings.

4. All carry their crosses, all have to suffer. To carry the cross is not the portion or lot only of Christians. No! Both the Christian and the non-Christian, the believer and the unbeliever carry the cross. The only difference is that for the one the cross serves as a cure and as a means of inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven, while for the other it becomes a chastisement, penalty and punishment. For the one, crosses gradually become lighter, sweeter and are finally turned into crowns of eternal glory; while for the other they become heavier and more grievous, and in the end all the crosses of the world will converge into one great hellish burden which will weigh down upon their heads and beneath which they will suffer eternally and without respite. But what is the cause of such a difference? The reason is that the one carries them with faith and surrender to God, and the other with murmuring and blasphemies. And so, Christian, you should not only not avoid crosses and not murmur at them, but on the contrary you should thank Jesus Christ for sending them to you and thank Him day and night for granting you to be numbered among his crusaders or cross-bearers. For unless Jesus Christ had suffered for the world, not one of us would ever have entered the Kingdom of Heaven, however much we may have suffered and been tortured; because then we should have had to suffer as condemned and rejected violators of the will of God, and we should have had to suffer without hope or consolation. But now, although we suffer, we suffer or can suffer for salvation, for deliverance, with hope, with consolation, and so as to receive a reward. O merciful Lord, how great is Thy love for us! O Jesus Christ, how great are Thy benefits to us! Thou turnest the very evil of the world into a blessing for us, to our profit and for our salvation. Christian! Gratitude and love for Jesus Christ your Benefactor alone obliges you to follow Him. Jesus Christ came down to earth for you; will you grudge Him anything earthly? Jesus Christ drank for you and for your sake the full chalice of sufferings; will you not swallow one drop of sorrow for Him?

5. Jesus Christ redeemed us by His passion and death; and therefore by right of redemption we belong to Him. Consequently we are not our own, but His; therefore we must carry out and do all that He orders, if we do not wish to be cast away from His presence. But Jesus Christ demands of us only one thing, and even that for our own welfare, that we follow Him into the heavenly Kingdom.

6. Jesus Christ did not suffer and die in order to give us the will to do all that we want. No, God preserve us from thinking so!

7. Finally let us say why we cannot possibly avoid the narrow way into the Kingdom of Heaven.

First, because in every man there is sin, and sin is a wound that does not heal by itself, without medicines; and in the case of some people this wound is so deep and dangerous that it can only be healed by cauterization and amputation. That is why no one can be cleansed of his sins without spiritual sufferings.

Second, sin is the most horrible impurity and abomination in the eyes of God; but nothing abominable, vile and unclean can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Wherever you put a person suffering from an internal disease or oppressed with cruel sorrow, he will suffer, even if he is put in the most magnificent palace; that is because his disease and sorrow are always and everywhere with him and in him. It is the same in the case of a sinner who is impenitent and not cleansed of his sins – wherever you put him, he will suffer, even in paradise itself, because the cause of his sufferings (i.e., sin) is in his heart. To a sinner everywhere will be hell. On the other hand, whoever feels real, heartfelt joy will rejoice both in a palace and in a hut, and even in prison, because his joy is in his heart. So too for a righteous man whose heart is filled with the consolations of the Holy Spirit, wherever he may be, everywhere will be Paradise because the Kingdom of Heaven is within us (Luke 17:21).

However much you cut off the branches of a living tree, it will not die, but will again produce new branches; and in order to destroy it completely, you must tear it out of the ground by its roots. In exactly the same way, you cannot destroy sin from the human heart by lopping off or giving up a few vices or habits; and therefore whoever wishes to destroy sin from the heart must tear out the actual root of sin. But the root of sin is deeply embedded in the human heart and firmly attached to it, and therefore it is quite impossible to eradicate it without pain. And unless God had sent us the Great Physician, Jesus Christ, no one could have destroyed the root of sin, and all efforts and attempts to do so would have proved absolutely futile. And so, you see that we must follow Jesus Christ without fail and that we cannot possibly avoid the way by which Jesus Christ went. Also you see that without suffering no one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven, because all the Saints and servants of God went by this same way. Some say: “How can we who are so weak and sinful be like the Saints, and how are we to be saved?”

We live in the world and have various duties.” This is not only untrue, but it is blasphemy and an insult to our Creator. To excuse yourself with pretexts of this kind means to accuse our Creator of being unable to make us. No, this is an empty and blasphemous excuse, and not a reason. Look at the Saints! They were not all hermits; and they were like us at first and were not sinless, and they were also engaged in worldly affairs, cares and duties, and many of them had a family as well. But while doing their worldly occupations and duties, they did not forget at the same time their duties as Christians; and while living in the world, they made their way at the same time into the Kingdom of Heaven and often led others with them as well. In exactly the same way, if we wish, we can be at once good citizens, faithful husbands and good fathers, and also good and faithful Christians.

True Christianity is never and nowhere a hindrance, but on the contrary is everywhere and for everything beneficial. A true Christian is only a person who believes in Jesus Christ, and imitates Him in everything. The spirit of Christianity is pure, disinterested, spiritual love, love which is a gift of the Holy Spirit (many things are called love by people, but not all are Christian love). So, if you wish to be in the Kingdom of Heaven, you just go the way Jesus Christ went; otherwise you will be lost, and lost for ever. But here it is necessary to say that anyone going the Christian way who trusts in his

own powers will not be able to take even a single step forward. And unless Jesus Christ, our great Benefactor, had given us help, no one could have gone this way. Even the Apostles themselves, when they were without this help, could not do anything – were scared and terrified to follow Jesus Christ. But when they received help from Jesus Christ, they followed Him joyfully and gladly, and no difficulties or sufferings, not even death itself could daunt them. But what is the help that Jesus Christ gives to those who follow Him? This help is the assistance of the Holy Spirit, Whom Jesus Christ gives us, and Who is always with us and always surrounds us and draws us to Himself. And anyone who wishes can receive Him and be filled with Him. As to how the Holy Spirit helps us, and how we can receive Him, we shall see in what follows.