

## On Love of Our Enemies

The Teaching of St. Silouan

*Jean-Claude Larchet*

Although it is natural and usual to love those who love us and to do good to those who do good to us (Mt 5:46-47; Lk 6:32-33), to love our enemies is distasteful to our nature. One can say that it isn't in our power but is an attitude that can only be the fruit of grace, given by the Holy Spirit. This is why St. Silouan the Athonite writes, "The soul that has not known the Holy Spirit does not understand how one can love one's enemies, and does not accept it."

The Staretz repeatedly says that love of enemies is impossible without grace: "Lord, You have given the commandment to love enemies, but this is difficult for us sinners if Your grace is not with us"; "Without God's grace we cannot love enemies"; "He who does not love his enemies, does not have God's grace"; "He who has not learned to love from the Holy Spirit, will certainly not pray for his enemies." On the contrary, St. Silouan always teaches that this attitude is a gift of the Holy Spirit: "The Lord has commanded us to love our enemies, and the Holy Spirit reveals this love to us"; "One can only love one's enemies through the grace of the Holy Spirit"; "When you will love your enemies, know that a great divine grace will be living in you."

This grace does not suddenly erupt in the soul, but rather shows itself in a divine pedagogy, where taking into account the weakness and the difficulties of man, the Holy Spirit progressively teaches him to love and teaches him all the attitudes and ways which will allow him to do so. "The Holy Spirit teaches us to love even our enemies"; "The Holy Spirit teaches the soul a profound love for man and compassion for the lost. The Lord had pity for those who were lost... The Holy Spirit teaches this same compassion for those who go to hell"; "I could not speak about it if the Holy Spirit had not taught me this love"; "The Lord taught me love of enemies... The Holy Spirit taught [me] to love."

The grace of the Holy Spirit shows to him who possesses it the

way to love his enemies. But it also reveals to him the foundation of this love: the love of God for all people and His will to save them: "No man can know by himself what divine love is if the Holy Spirit does not instruct him; but in our Church divine love is known through the Holy Spirit, and that is why we speak about it." Grace also "gives man the capacity and the strength to love his enemies, and the Spirit of God gives us the strength to love them."

Staretz Silouan insists that because love of enemies is a fruit of grace, it is essentially through prayer that it can be obtained. Several times he urges us to "ask the Lord with our whole being to give us the strength to love all men." He also advises to pray to the Mother of God and the Saints: "If we are incapable [of loving our enemies] and if we are without love, let us turn with ardent prayers to the Lord, to His Most Pure Mother, and to all the Saints, and the Lord will help us with everything, He whose love for us knows no bounds." The Staretz confesses that he himself constantly prays God for this: "I continuously beg the Lord to give me the love of enemies... Day and night I ask the Lord for this love. The Lord gives me tears and I weep for the whole world." Wishing in his universal love for all men to receive such a gift, he links them to himself in his prayer: "Lord, teach us through Your Holy Spirit to love our enemies and to pray for them with tears... Lord, as you prayed for your enemies, so teach us also, through the Holy Spirit, to love our enemies."

Yet obtaining the grace to love one's enemies presupposes other conditions.

The love of enemies is completely bound to the love of God: we have seen that the principal foundation for the love of enemies is the love that God shows to all His creatures equally and His will that all people should be saved, and Christ gave us a perfect example of such love throughout his earthly life. The love of God leads man to accomplish His will and to imitate Him as much as possible, and so also to love his enemies. The Staretz also notes that he who does not love his enemies shows that he has not

learned from the Holy Spirit to love God.

To love one's enemies is also tightly bound to humility. The Staretz often associates these two virtues. Almost all the difficulties we encounter in loving our enemies are linked with pride: it is from pride that flows the affliction that follows upon insults, hatred, bad temper, spite, the desire for revenge, contempt for one's neighbor, refusing to forgive him and to be reconciled with him.

Pride excludes the love of enemies and love of enemies excludes pride: "If we love our enemies, pride will have no place in our soul." The fact that humility goes hand in hand with love of enemies proves the presence of grace and the authenticity of love: "If you have compassion for all creatures and love your enemies, and if, at the same time, you judge yourself the worst of all people, this shows that the great grace of the Lord is in you."

Indeed humility is the indispensable condition to receive and keep the grace that teaches us to love our enemies and gives us the strength to do so. The Staretz advises: "Humiliate yourself, then grace will teach you." On the other hand, "pride makes us lose grace... The soul is then tormented by bad thoughts and does not understand that one must humiliate oneself and love one's enemies, for without that one cannot please God."

The Staretz sometimes also stresses the role played by penitence in connection with humility. "Regard yourself the worst of men," he advises. This is an attitude of great humility that of its nature implies penitence. He who counts himself the worst of men necessarily thinks others better than himself; he will judge and blame himself, and not judge and criticize his enemies, for he tends to estimate them better than himself.

The Staretz also gives us the example of another penitential attitude — asking God's forgiveness each time one has not loved one's enemy: "If I judge someone or look at him angrily, my tears dry up and I fall into despondency; and again I start asking the Lord to forgive me, and the merciful Lord forgives me, a sinner. "Through such an attitude, by which the soul humbly recognizes

before God its faults and shortcomings and obtains from Him forgiveness, an opening can be made that becomes bigger and bigger for grace and unceasing progress in love. As to a total absence of compassion for enemies, it shows the presence and the action of an evil spirit; sincere repentance is the only way to be freed from it."

The insistence on prayer, humility and penitence shows that, although St. Silouan recognizes a determining role to the action of grace in acquiring love of enemies, he does not neglect the role played by the efforts that man makes. The Staretz is very conscious of the importance of the initial action; this is why he says, "I beg you, try," and states, "In the beginning, force your heart to love your enemies." The efforts one makes must manifest themselves in a general way in a straight intention and constant good will, stretched toward the realization of God's command. God will not fail to respond.

For the person who feels discouraged by such a demanding task, St. Silouan reassures him: "Seeing your good intention, the Lord will help you in everything." The Staretz who felt in himself so acutely human powerlessness and weakness seems to think constantly of these words of the Apostle: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13) and witnesses in his own experience the mighty help that everyone can receive from God.

### **For Christ there are no enemies**

The Staretz would say that for Christ there are no enemies — there are those who accept "the words of eternal life," there are those who reject and even crucify; but for the Creator of every living thing, there can be no enemy. So it should be for the Christian, too, who "in pity for all must strive for the salvation of all."

Wherein, then, lies the force of the commandment, "Love your enemies"? Why did the Lord say that those who keep His commandments would know from very experience whence the doctrine?

...God is love, in superabundance embracing all creatures. By allowing man to actually know this love the Holy Spirit reveals to him the path of fullness of being. To say “enemy” implies rejection. By such rejection a man falls from the plenitude of God... “The whole paradise of Saints lives by the Holy Spirit, and from the Holy Spirit nothing in creation is hid,” writes the Staretz. “God is love and in the Saints the Holy Spirit is love. Dwelling in the Holy Spirit, the saints behold hell and embrace it, too, in their love.”

...[It] is possible to judge whether a given state of contemplation was a reality or an illusion only after the soul had returned to consciousness of the world; for then, as the Staretz pointed out, if there were no love for enemies and so for all creatures, it would be a true indication that the supposed contemplation had not been a real communion with God.

– *The Monk of Mount Athos* (London: Mowbrays, 1973) by Archimandrite Sophrony; pp 70-71

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