

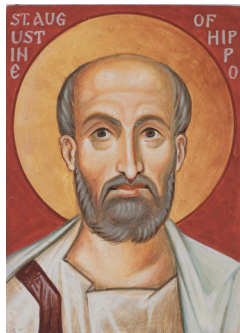
The Apostle

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Dear friends - Do we still mourn the fall of the Empire?



This, below, is my proposition. I would welcome feedback from you all if you have a different point of view or maybe you have new insights into this question. Proposition: Christianity has never fully recovered from the fall of Rome in both the West and the East. The "City of God" is the title of a very famous work



by Saint Augustine, written in the early fifth century. It is a dogmatic work, but with a crucial teaching concerning human political orders and the divine order represented by the city of God, the New Jerusalem. It is significant, I think, that St Augustine wrote this as the Roman Empire in the west began to fall to the Germanic barbarian hordes; eventually beyond his lifetime over an eighty-year period, beginning just before his book was written. The fall of the empire in the west was a truly catastrophic event. In Rome itself, prior to the first incursions of the Germanic tribes, Rome's population has been estimated to be between 800,000 and 1 million people. The fall was a long and protracted event, but by the middle of the 6th century there were perhaps no more than 50,000 people left in the ancient city. The fall of Rome was not a fatal blow for the Church, but it did

profoundly affect her mission in those countries that had formerly been part of the western empire. Of course, in the east, the Roman Empire continued unabated. St Constantine the Great had the foresight to understand that such a huge empire could not effectively be governed from one centre alone. An unintended, or perhaps providential, consequence of his foresight was that Roman Christian civilisation and culture continued hand in hand with the faith and life of the Church until the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. However, Turkish incursions into Asia Minor had resulted in the fall of Anatolia well before this time in the 14th century. Nonetheless, the idea and realisation of a Christian Roman civilization did not finally disappear globally until well after the fall of Rome in the West.

Let us return briefly to St Augustine and the City of God. This is a very important work, not so much for its dogmatic teaching from an Orthodox perspective, but for its strong contrast between the city of God and the city of man. The militancy of the Church against the devil and his dominion in the world was not a rejection of the world in St Augustine's thought, but rather both a practical and spiritual assessment of any over-confidence

in any human political order or imperium as the handmaid of the Church. St Augustine, in his great work, enabled the west to renew its confidence that, indeed, the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church - even if, for practical purposes, the empire no longer existed. Rome was able to recover by hanging onto the beautiful idea of what the gospel could do for any society or culture that was open to its teaching. The association of the city of Rome with St. Peter and St. Paul, hardly an exclusive bond since Antioch too had that privilege, also imbued Rome with a mystique



that served the papacy in asserting itself against any new political order in Europe that might threaten its claimed prerogatives. In this endeavour, it was assisted in the eighth and ninth centuries by the Carolingian Renaissance: but this also had the unfortunate longer-term consequence, after the Great Schism, of dividing Christianity into two unnecessarily antagonistic

world views, the Latin and the Greek.

In the East, the idea of a Christian synthesis of the political and religious order survived until 1453, but even after the fall of

historical provenance, but arguably can all be attributed to this failure by Christians in the west and the east to give the Roman Empire a decent burial. Instead, we have lamentably propped up a dead



Constantinople, several nations in the Christian East tried to claim the legacy of the Roman Christian Imperium with its emblem and flag, the double-headed eagle; one eagle for Rome, the other for Constantinople. Controversially it would be Moscow in 1492, merely 39 years later, that claimed to have inherited this legacy through the self-serving doctrine of the third Rome - old Rome and Constantinople both having fallen. The political and religious problems between West and East that we have inherited from the 20th century onwards have a long

imperial corpse in our minds and hearts, arguably distracting us from evangelisation according to the gospel.

I have rehearsed this history for one important reason, which is to address the question: Has Christianity ever fully recovered from the fall of Rome in both the West and the East?

I am not sure that it has. Here are some questions (assumptions? evidences?) I present for my conclusion: -

Why does eastern Christianity and indeed eastern Christian nations cling so fiercely to the double-

headed eagle symbolism, not only on the flags of these nations but also in the minds of those who seek to recover the Roman Imperium in new dress in different places and times? This happened in the west as well with the idea of the Holy Roman Empire, satirised by Voltaire in his day as “neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire”.

Why does it matter so much to many in the Christian East that the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Istanbul become again a focal point for a revived Eastern Christian Church presence? This is not simply the desire for it to become a church again ... which is a noble idea I support, but also the hope that one day Byzantium could be rebuilt out of the ashes of an eschatological crisis, which is a dangerous and toxic reverie. It is also, to my mind, a refusal to accept the fall of Constantinople as, arguably, the judgement of God upon this lingering notion of a rebuilt imperial Church. Bury the idea. Please!

Why do so many in the Orthodox Church continue to hold that only an emperor can convene an ecumenical council? Are the canons nor reformable? Are we not able to adapt to a post imperial world? Cannot Christianity thrive

in other forms of governance than that of an imperium?

Why are we still wedded to the idea of the mystique of certain formerly imperial cities being the focal point (historically in the pentarchy) of Christian civilisation? Antioch has a strong and noble tradition, but it is no longer a Christian city of that name. Rome has retreated into its own Vatican City state, itself an acknowledgement of the post-Enlightenment, post-Christian reality of contemporary Europe. Other members of the ancient pentarchy continue to languish in the doldrums of the sea of Islam. The pentarchy as a political idea is dead; bury it.

My conclusion is that yes, we are still hindered in our mission by clinging onto the now utterly defunct idea of a Christian Empire. Christianity does not depend for its vigour and success upon the idea of an imperial expression of Christian civilisation. As Saint Augustine and the Fathers remind us, from the New Testament onwards, “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come”. (Hebrews 13:14)

- Fr Gregory

Christ in his Saints

Brothers and sisters – never stop getting to know the orthodox saints and martyrs! There are thousands, from the very early Church, through to the present day. Listen to them, pray to them for help and ask them to pray to Christ for you. Talk to them, let them become additions to your family and circle of friends. They support me, hold my hand, and sometimes are a bit tough with me when needed. (think of my name's sake St George the Great Martyr or St John the Forerunner –

a couple of tough guys who tell me to get on with things...)

One very near to my heart is Mother Matrona of Anemnyasevo who I keep coming back to. Born to a poor Russian village family. Contracted smallpox at seven years old and went blind. Picked on by her mother and beaten so badly she became bed bound at ten years old and stopped growing. By the time she was seventeen villagers began to realize that she had the gift of healing and came to her



for help. After the death of her parents, her siblings controlled the widening stream of pilgrims who visited her – and stole the gifts of money they brought her for their own benefit.

She was entirely dependent on others – her bed was in a passage way in a position that was either wet from rain or stifling from heat if they forgot to move her.

Finally, the soviet authorities took her away for interrogation, prison and death in custody. Little is known of this last period except she is said to have healed the sick mother of her interrogator.

Why do I come back to her time and again? Because through the unbelievably harsh life her tiny helpless body endured, she explains to me that my freedoms of choice, movement and activity come second to the faith of patience and endurance.

Brothers and sisters, read the lives of the saints! Get to know them. You will be gradually drawn to a few special ones who will come to your aid. Oh, I have so many that encourage and help me! I could

tell you about a secret Orthodox Christian slave to an elderly muslim master. He loved his master and knew that he could not manage without him, so he served him loyally until the old man's death and then without hesitation confessed to the authorities his Christian faith – and was martyred.

But that story and dozens more are for another time!

Love to all – don't forget to pray!

- George



I'm reading a book called Orthodox Psychotherapy,
and I found it very touching.
I came across this prayer in it and wanted to share it with you all.

A Prayer For Knowledge of God and love for Him

Make me worthy, O Lord, to know and love Thee, not with knowledge from the exercise of a scattered nous; but make me worthy of that knowledge whereby, beholding Thee, the nous glorifies Thy nature in divine vision which robs the mind of awareness of the world. Account me worthy to be lifted above my will's wandering eye which begets imaginings, and to behold Thee in the constraint of the Cross's bond, in the second part of the crucifixion of the nous, which willingly ceases from its conceptual imagings to abide in Thy continuous vision that surpasses nature. Implant in my heart an increase of Thy love, that I may be drawn away from this world by fervent love for Thee. Awake in me understanding of Thy humility, wherewith Thou didst sojourn in the world in the covering of flesh which Thou didst bear from our members by the mediation of the Holy Virgin, that with this continual and unflinching recollection I may accept the humility of my nature with delight.

- *Abba Isaac the Syrian (Hom. 36, Ascetical Homilies, p. 161)*"

God bless,

- **Beth Spary**

75\$ Bike Ride - Part 2

The trek begins...



4/9/16 last day in Cyprus.

Arrived McKinley Beach and went swimming, no sooner was I out of the water and dried and pedalling off than Ian phoned --back to McKinley beach another dip with Ian (who couldn't believe how warm the water was, it really is almost hot enough to bath babies in). We had a good meal Meze with a few drinks, while Ian tried to convince me that the cheapest way to travel was by air (he's right of course) and there was no point in trying to cycle back from Belgrade unless it was part of my holiday. It was! Of course the sweetener would be proving a cheap bike was just as capable of the journey as a space age carbon fibre masterpiece from the acknowledged king of bespoke

bike builders in Amsterdam. Not to mention it would be more weight to the ongoing 75\$ bike blog. (Several bloggers have claimed it is possible to do a long distance bike trek on a 75\$ machine: a few have even attempted it)

I accompanied Ian to a discount store for some tarpaulin for him to lay out his worldly goods on while decanting from his shipping container, before loading them for transport to the flat he had leased. I saw a Chinese tent for 20 € Ian said "Are you mad it's single skin it'll sweat, you'll be soaked borrow mine" "No need" says I "yours is too big too heavy this weighs less than a kilo". I also saw a puncture kit to 3€ including box spanner and tyre levers. But being in penny pinching mode, I decided I would be able to buy cheaper in Serbia, also with tent and I was afraid poles would get damaged on the plane. Ian dropped me at airport and I arrived in Belgrade 23.30 on time found a bench and slept with travellers waiting for early morning flights.

5/9/14

Woke 5.30. Tourist info (TI) was airside of security barrier! Why? Ah well no plan survives first contact

with the enemy or in this case reality. I soon found the express bus stop 1½ hours to wait- what? Taxi info stand told me where the city bus stop was and fare was 1.50€ (express 3€)- guide books quote 0.5 € actually it was 3€ for town bus but maybe cheaper with prepay multi-journey card. TI in town centre not open until 9.00 but doorman of a 5* hotel gave me a map and told me best bet for cheap bikes was the flea market, X marks the spot. I set off and found I had to cross Danube over what appeared to be a motorway bridge I asked a policeman for directions and he seemed to confirm yes cross the bridge. It was a motorway, but I walked down the maintenance aisle behind the Z barrier intending to plead ignorance, stupidity and Britishness, if challenged. In the event there was only one stall on the market selling bikes just 2 worth considering brand new 11000RSD (100€) and second-hand 7000 RSD (dodgy wheel bearing) carrier rack thrown in.

I couldn't face the hike back to town so went to the tram stop, picking up a cheese pasty and carton of milk for breakfast. Waited 50 mins for tram, plenty went by but none for town centre. Locals were somewhat disgruntled too. Seemed to be prepaid tickets only

system, woman tram driver was intent on making up time, I didn't dare disturb her, so kept quiet, hoped no inspectors got on.

TI had never heard of eurovelo6, but said the bike hire shop by the river was selling ex hire bikes. They had a number, all looked the same so I bought cheapest, everything seemed in good condition tyres brakes gears 5300RSD or 6200 including carrier rack and cheap lock. Pumps, puncture kits were inordinately expensive. They recommended Sportsvision for tent not far from flea market, got a good puncture kit from street market on the way, 24 big patches. It was uphill down dale to Sportsvision who only had pop up tents (should have bought tent in Cyprus)but bought bike pump anyway a bit cheaper, than bike shop but not much. Bike lock disintegrated as I unlocked it I the spotted river towpath behind Sportvision and made my way back to Brankov most (most= bridge) a lot quicker than getting there as all flat. The bike shop was only 500m on so I called in, they changed lock no quibbles. Fortunately I had spotted EV6 info board by the bridge on the way to close to bike shop

Journey proper started 17.30 at lift from river bank to Brankov bridge level across the Danube and

onto the dedicated cycle path. I cycled to the brow of the bridge keeping pace with river barge Kapitan Zhidov, which was Making a 3 point turn cum reverse parking manoeuvre across the current to a berth on the right bank. I absolutely flew down the other side, until a plumb middle aged woman fell or jumped off her bike right in front of me, squealing brakes and a few monosyllabic old Anglo Saxon words elicited a response of "sorry" in a thick American accent. I was nearly thrown over the bars,, despite the 15 kg on the rear carrier and the cross bar was not in comfortable place had it not been a ladies bike she would have learned a few more words that can only be translated into American as expletive deleted. What was an American doing on a hire bike in Belgrade, aren't they all supposed to be hanging out in McDonalds on Champs Elysee or Wenceslas Square trying to find themselves. Poor old dear trying to soak up the atmosphere in an environmentally friendly way and I scare her witless .Pretty riverside gardens, then cobbled streets and stucco houses for 15kms. Then ordinary roads EV6 signs good, until EU sponsored road replacement, I lost diversion signs but I got directed back onto right road, but it was getting dark

and EV6 signs had disappeared. Someone told me 1km down road was cycle rest station with other cyclists I followed his directions but all I found was a truck stop- ensuite bed and evening meal 1300RSD 11€. You could say that it had an air of faded elegance but at it's best it was only ever ultra austere soviet simplicity. Meal was lukewarm soup, cold grilled river fish, with potatoes, beans, peppers, picked cabbage (all cold) palatable but uninspiring. I asked the attendant for tea, surprised but undaunted, she made me a cup from her own personal stock of peppermint tea bags I thanked her profusely and she gave me a big smile, maybe she fancies me?

6/9/14

Woke at 6.00am rode in to village surprised to find I am back on EV6. Supposed to be quiet back roads –roads yes, quiet defiantly not they are narrow and cars speed pass too close for comfort. Bought breakfast at local shop, discovered mleko is Serbian of milk and klieva small bread or roll as opposed to kleb a large loaf couple of bananas and bunch of grapes completed my meal eaten on the doorstep.

7/9/14

Big day yesterday lot of ground covered. Soon on quiet back roads, some only wide enough for one car with gravel strip along one side for passing. The village houses were gable end (often quite ornate almost Dutch/Flemish style) to the road with a wide grass verge and then footpath in front of small garden. The rear gardens extend back several hundred metres, sometimes right down to

the Danube. Each generation has extended the living space down the garden in a variety of styles, but always the ubiquitous wooden slatted wood store cum hayloft on a raised brick foundation somewhere in the layout. All are at some stage of rebuilding restoration or remodelling, many worthy of a slot on TV's "Grand Designs". A lot have nicely figured stucco work, often with years between 1955 and 1970 moulded into the stucco

and picked out in black or white against a pastel background, a few between 1910 and 1930, even one with Mathais Klien in gothic script a reminder of the extent of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The churches mostly Orthodox have an Austrian look with copper spires incorporating bulbous bases.

- Paul Griffiths

More to follow next month!



Hiking Mount Snowdon



On the 6th June, Myself (isha), Isaac, Harvey, Joseph and Bonnie set out together to Hike Mt Snowdon to raise money for St Aidan's church. For me personally, the climb carried a deeper meaning than just simply completing a physical challenge, as a catechumen, I am still learning what it truly means to live the Orthodox faith not only within the walls of the church, but also in everyday actions. I have come to understand that faith is not only something we receive, but something we are also called to offer back to God through service, love, and sacrifice. Taking on this challenge felt like a small but sincere way of responding to that calling.

Me and Isaac chose to raise money for St Aidan's Church

because it is more than just a building. It is a spiritual home where we gather for worship, where we are taught the faith, where we receive guidance, and where we grow together as one body in Christ. Wanting to give back to the church came from a deep sense of gratitude for all that it has given us. In many ways, this climb was an expression of thanksgiving in action.

The journey up to Wales was amazing in itself and became an important part of the experience. Harvey kindly took the time to pick myself, Isaac, and Joseph up from church and drive us all the way to Wales. During the journey, we spent our time talking, laughing, and getting to know one another better. We shared our stories, spoke about how each of us had

come to the Orthodox faith. Those conversations were a real blessing and helped strengthen the sense of fellowship between us before we had even begun the climb.

Snowdon was both beautiful and demanding. The mountain was breathtaking, but it does not give itself easily. Every step required effort, patience, and encouragement from one another. For me, the challenge was made even more difficult by a meniscus tear in my knee. There were moments when the pain became noticeable and I had to slow down, but I was constantly supported by the group and at times I felt myself tearing up from all the encouragement the group gave me. I was reminded that we were not climbing for ourselves alone, but for a shared purpose greater than any individual struggle. “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2).

As we ascended, we were surrounded by the beauty of God’s creation. Once we got to the halfway cafe point, we took a break sitting together and sharing food amongst ourselves. The higher we climbed, the more the landscape opened beneath us, reminding us of the vastness and majesty of God. This brought to mind the words of Scripture: “The heavens declare the

glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (Psalm 19:1). In those moments, the physical struggle and discomfort seemed to sit alongside a quiet sense of gratitude and prayer. It became more than just a hike; it became a journey filled with reflection, endurance, and encouragement surrounded by amazing people.

Along the way, we shared conversations, laughter, and moments of silence where words were not needed. There was a real sense of unity among us. Each person carried not only their own weight but also supported the others in different ways—whether through encouragement, patience, or simply walking together at the same pace.

Reaching the summit was a moment of joy, relief, and thanksgiving. Standing at the top together with our Icons was truly a blessing, Harvey also read out a prayer which was beautiful and made the moment so memorable. We were able to look back on how far we had come, both physically and spiritually. It reminded me that perseverance often leads us to moments of clarity and gratitude. As Scripture says, “Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Galatians



6:9). Yet even more meaningful than reaching the top was knowing why we

had done it—to contribute, in some small way, to the life and future of St Aidan’s Church.

After completing the climb and beginning the long journey home after a lovely meal at Wetherspoons, Harvey once again generously drove us despite being understandably tired from the day. Even after the physical demands of the hike, the atmosphere in the car remained joyful. We listened to music, shared plenty of laughs, reflected on the day, and enjoyed one another’s company. Looking back, those moments of fellowship on the road were just as memorable as the climb itself. They reminded me of the importance of Christian friendship and the blessing of sharing both challenges and joys together.

Looking back, I realise the experience taught me a great deal about what it means to give back as a catechumen. It is not always about grand gestures, but about offering what we can with sincerity, humility, and love. It is about

recognising that everything we have ultimately belongs to God, and that we are called to use our gifts, strength, and even our struggles in service to others. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” (Colossians 3:23).

I am deeply thankful to have taken part in this journey, especially despite the difficulty of my knee injury. It was a reminder that challenges do not necessarily stop us from serving a purpose; rather, they can become part of the offering itself. With the support of my fellow parishioners, I was able to complete something that felt meaningful both physically and spiritually. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13).

We are sincerely grateful to everyone who supported us through donations, prayers, and encouragement. Your kindness made this effort possible and strengthened us throughout the journey. We hope that this small act of service will contribute to the continued life and mission of St Aidan’s Church, and that it may inspire others as we continue to grow together in faith.

- Isha

Discovering Orthodoxy

Discovering Orthodoxy is a revelation! (pun intended)

It is revelatory in so many ways, it's hard to wrap your head around at first, but in the best possible way. It can be quite difficult to keep yourself from wanting to run before you can walk! The desire to soak it

all up in one go is so strong, especially if your journey to it has taken some time (as in my case) you rather suddenly realise how thirsty you are, how in need of nourishment you have been.

If you happen to be a bibliophile (guilty as charged) Orthodoxy can, and does, open up a world to you that is hard to fathom.

Both in depth and scale. To say that there are a wealth of books and writings to explore would be an understatement of epic proportion. This pool is truly bottomless. All of the voices, all of the testimonies, the tales of struggle and faith.

The wisdom, the love, the guidance and compassion. The richest of resources is at our disposal and it is something I find continually breathtaking.

The WORD has spread in such a profoundly beautiful way. A vast timeline, spanning thousands of years. Just think about that for a

second~ Its mind-blowing ...

All of these years later and we can delve into any part of that history, we can have these people speak to us and have them show us the way. How blessed we truly are.

In a digital age, it is easy to forget the power of holding a book in your hands.

Just as the act of holding a pen and putting your thoughts down on paper is infinitely more rewarding than typing your feelings on a keyboard. Reading from an actual book is a gift you should endeavour to give to yourself as much as you can. It is a gift that has continued to give in my life. It has been a constant sanctuary. That sanctuary has gained even more meaning and has become richer and more rewarding than ever due to the nature of the books I now choose to read.

Now speaking of being blessed ... I am in the fortunate position to be able to buy books as and when I want to. Within reason of course and providing that I behave myself! (As a full blown book nerd I could easily spend beyond my means if I'm not careful)

My bookshelf is ever growing with all manner of edifying content, most



of which I plan to dive back into over time. Again and again, creating my own library to help keep me on the right path.

I do however, try to keep in mind that this is very much a luxury in my life. Buying and owning is nice, but not necessary ...

This brings me on to the subject of Libraries ... Have you ever had a proper look at the Library in our Church? I've only really been properly digging around in there recently and it is an absolute treasure trove ...

The lives and teachings of Saints, theology and history, guide books, prayer books, you name it. The list could go on!

Books long out of print (and actually pretty rare) defunct zines and periodicals, leaflets, pamphlets, art books, etc ... It is fantastic, and to be safe in the knowledge

that the writings available to us here have been chosen by our Church leaders is a fact not to be overlooked.

I definitely do not need any more books to read, nor do I need encouragement but alas, it cannot be helped. Borrow I must and borrow I shall, and borrow you should too :-)

I know a lot of you do use the library, but for those who don't, or are yet to take a peak, I would implore you to do so.

Ditch the screens for a little while, get the kettle on and read, read, read!

Oh, and join the St Aidan's book club too if you haven't signed up already.

Happy reading and God bless.

- Paul x

The Pill Syndrome

The Quiet Creed of Modern Life



Pill syndrome is the quiet creed of modern life, the reflexive conviction that every discomfort, every sadness or delay or inward restlessness, must have an immediate remedy, preferably one small enough to swallow with water and forget. It is not the use of medicine, which can be wise and humane, but a deeper habit of soul: a cultural impatience that no longer tolerates the slow, obscure labour of enduring, discerning, and healing. The pill becomes the symbol of an entire worldview.

In this creed, pain is no longer a messenger to be interpreted, weakness no longer a limit through which humility might enter, waiting no longer a school of depth. Every disturbance becomes an interruption of performance, an

obstacle to be cleared away as quickly as possible so that the machinery of life may continue without pause. Formed by speed and technological mastery, the modern person comes to expect from existence exactly what

the pill promises: instant effect, measurable relief, minimum effort, no inward transformation required.

Yet the spiritual life, in nearly every tradition, begins precisely where immediate control ends. It asks for attention rather than suppression, for listening rather than reaction, for the courage to remain present before what hurts, confuses, or exceeds us. It teaches that not every wound is an error, not every emptiness should be filled at once, not every darkness is meaningless. Suffering can expose illusion, soften pride, awaken compassion, and open the hidden door to prayer.

A consciousness trained by the pill loses trust in such processes. It grows less capable of silence,

less patient to wait on God, less willing to inhabit an unanswered question, seeking anaesthesia before wisdom and relief before understanding. Little by little the inner life is flattened. Mystery becomes intolerable because it cannot be dosed; repentance grows unlikely because self-discomfort is neutralised before it can do its work; even hope is altered — no longer the deep confidence that meaning can emerge through time, but the demand that discomfort disappear now.

So the modern person risks becoming spiritually fragile: highly equipped, medically assisted, psychologically managed, yet estranged from endurance, reverence, and transcendence. The pill syndrome changes not only how we treat pain but what pain is allowed to mean. And when pain is stripped of all possible meaning, the soul itself begins to feel like a technical problem — no longer a sacred depth to be encountered, but a malfunction to be corrected. Against this, Scripture sets a stranger and more demanding vision.

Scripture treats pain as a real evil, yet never as a meaningless one. It neither denies suffering nor

commands us to hide it. From the beginning, sorrow and toil enter human life as marks of a world disordered by sin (Genesis 3:16–19); pain belongs to the tragedy of a fallen creation, not to its original design. But the proper response is not suppression. The Psalms are full of cries from the afflicted — “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1), “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (Psalm 42:5) — and the assurance that “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18). Here pain becomes speech, prayer, dependence.

The book of Job dismantles every easy formula. Job is “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1), yet he suffers terribly, and when his friends insist on a tidy moral explanation, God rebukes them (Job 42:7). The righteous may suffer without visible cause; pain may remain mysterious. Scripture will not let us reduce it to a transaction.

And yet suffering is not therefore empty. It can be discipline, for “the Lord reproves him whom he loves” (Proverbs 3:11–12; Hebrews 12:5–11) — hardship painful rather than pleasant, but yielding “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” to those trained by it. It can be a refining fire: the testing of faith that “produces

steadfastness” (James 1:2–4), trials that prove faith genuine as gold is proved (1 Peter 1:6–7), affliction that works endurance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3–5). None of this glorifies pain; it insists that God may work through it.

The centre of all this is Christ, who does not merely explain suffering but enters it. He is “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3); he weeps at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35); and he embraces the cross in obedience to the Father (Philippians 2:8; Hebrews 12:2). In him pain becomes a place not only of agony but of love, surrender, and redemption. The cross is the final proof that God is not distant from suffering — that he has made it his own dwelling.

Paul makes this intensely personal. His “thorn in the flesh” is not removed despite his prayers; instead he hears, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7–9). He can even speak of rejoicing in suffering (Romans 5:3) and longing to share “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). Pain has become a place of communion with Christ.

But Scripture never lets pain have

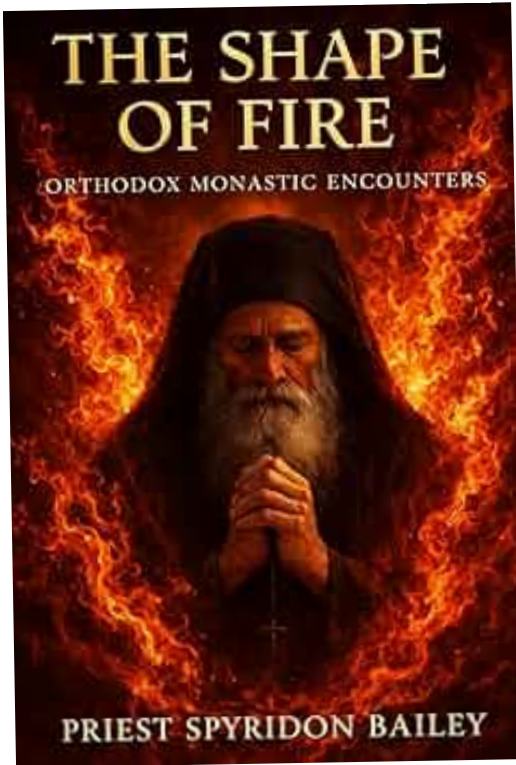
the last word. The story moves toward healing and restoration: a promise that God “will wipe away every tear,” that “death shall be no more,” and that mourning, crying, and pain will be no longer (Revelation 21:4). Pain is real but penultimate — it may serve a purpose in this present age, yet it belongs to what God will finally overcome.

So pain, biblically, is neither an ultimate good nor a mere nuisance to be silenced on contact. It is the wound of a fallen world, a cause for lament, sometimes a discipline, often a refining test, and above all the condition into which Christ himself descended. To this, Scripture does not answer, “Escape it at once,” but something the pill can never offer: bring it to God, endure it in faith when you must, learn from it where you can, and hope for the day when he abolishes it forever. The pill promises relief without transformation. The Gospel promises transformation — and, in the end, a relief the pill could never imagine.

- Silouan

Book Review - *"The Shape of Fire."*

by **Father Spyridon Bailey**, (published by FeedA Read.com Publishing, 2026)



This informative book by an Orthodox priest begins with a powerful opening paragraph: "In His love for man, God continuously offers Himself; He reaches out to each of us through the circumstances and conditions of our lives to call us back to Himself. Everything that He does in relation to us and to the whole creation is founded in His love. In our fallen state we are too often

not only blind to His love, but we attribute false meaning to the things in our lives that contradict our will. But despite our response, His love does not change" [p. 7].

The subtitle of Father Spyridon's book is "Orthodox Monastic Encounters." However, the subtitle is misleading, because his concern is to teach us how to see that "our concern for the things of this world too often prevents us from seeing the seed of life that has been cast into our life by Christ from growing and bearing fruit. Sometimes we can look back and recognise certain moments when the seed can be seen, when God's activity is simply too clear not to name. However, too often we remain unaware of most of the opportunities God has offered us for spiritual growth" [pp. 7-8].

In chapter 1 the then lay person Spyridon Bailey describes his dissatisfaction with Anglican worship in Bath in 1987 and how

his world was centered on himself until he encountered The Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” He was told that “The Jesus Prayer is like an SOS signal sent from a ship on rough seas, a cry for help. Of course, help doesn’t always come from ships, but when we say the prayer we [can learn to] have confidence that God not only hears but always responds. And so, when we say the prayer, we are learning to trust in God more. Saying the prayer teaches us to have confidence in God’s mercy, and we’re changed. The Jesus Prayer is a statement of the truth of our Christian faith, and so we are continuously declaring the truth, but as we learn to trust in God, God’s grace transforms every part of our lives. The Jesus Prayer draws our whole life to God” [pp. 11, 17].

It was then explained to him that there “is another purpose of the Jesus Prayer. In many Orthodox writings you will find the Fathers describing the movement of prayer from the head to the heart. Part of this means bypassing the clutter of our intellects which can be so filled with the concerns of the day or worldly preoccupation. The Jesus Prayer can help us move our impulse to God away from

ideas to the depth of ourselves, even to the soul” [p. 23]. It was further explained that: “All prayer requires effort, great effort. We are taught that all the virtues can become a habit, but prayer cannot. The demons work relentlessly to prevent us from praying. Their goal is to separate us from God. And so prayer is their main target, to keep us at all costs from praying. All prayer requires a struggle, and even saints must pray as an act of will, even to the day of their death” [p. 24].

Spyridon Bailey then asked: whether it was better to pray the Jesus Prayer silently or out loud; and he was advised: “It is good to move back and forth between speaking the prayer and saying it silently within ourselves. But... if we say The Jesus Prayer without focus, without awareness of our sins and desire for God’s mercy, then there is little benefit. Jesus warned the [Jewish] Pharisees about empty repetition, and we can fall into this trap as Christians too. But the warning is not simply about the pagan practice of multiplying words in empty repetition; it is to help avoid prayers without humility, without trust. Jesus told Saint Photini at the well that we must worship in spirit and in truth. To

worship in spirit means to offer our whole lives to God, our whole self; it means to cultivate the virtues in our lives, and not to pray like the pagans do with empty incantations and mantras, but with awareness of God and ourselves... If we say the Jesus Prayer without taking up our cross, without seeking to crucify ... sin, then the devil will easily fill our hearts with pride and delusion. To worship in spirit and in truth means to struggle to be obedient to Christ, to repent of our sins, to make our prayer an expression of our way of life, but also a means by which we may seek to sanctify our lives. Every prayer must be a commitment to God...To pray is to commit ourselves unceasingly and dying to the old life of sin in order that Christ may live in us" [pp. 25-27].

Saint Seraphim of Russia ... was asked why some Christians become holy, while others remain great sinners despite both groups professing the Christian faith. His answer was very simple; he said 'determination. Our spiritual lives are dependent on our willingness to struggle. The ... sin within us will oppose God's will, and obedience to God means battling with sin and overcoming [sin]...When we strive to harmonise our conscious will with God's will it requires that we

put to death the impulse to give in to our feelings; and we can only hope to do this when we begin to see them as unimportant and refuse them "... A Christianity that is acceptable to the world is not Christianity at all. We must strive to recognise the taste of our faith. We can only do this by reading the lives of the saints, by becoming familiar with the writings of the Church Fathers and by attempting to live as they did. The Christian faith can never be known simply as an abstract set of ideas; its message must be rooted into our lives, in everything we do.... As we begin to change, the sins that once brought us pleasure will taste bitter; and God's grace permits us to see the true nature of evil, which is corrupting and death. All of this is encapsulated in those few words of the Jesus Prayer for those attempting to live the gospel within Christ's Church" [pp. 31-32, p.35. pp. 39-40].

I have covered only the first chapter of this insightful book of some 280 pages. However, I hope I have written enough for you to make a decision about whether it is worthy of purchase by you to learn more about The Jesus Prayer.

- Father Emmanuel