

Why Go to Church Every Sunday

by Fr. Daniel Sysoyev

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord (Psalm 121:1).

People often ask priests: “Why should we go to church every Sunday?” and then they begin to justify themselves.

“We need our sleep, then, we need to spend time with the family, do things around the house, etc. And you want us to get up and go to church. What for?”

Of course, in order to justify one’s laziness one can come up with various objections. But first we have to understand the meaning behind the weekly trips to church and only then to measure it against our self-justification. It is so obvious that the requirement of frequent church attendance is not man-made, but it was one of the Ten Commandments: Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it (Exodus 20:8-11). In the Old Testament, violation of the fourth commandment was punishable by death, as was murder. In the New Testament, Sunday became the greater holy day because Christ, having risen from the dead, sanctified that day. According to the church rules, whoever violates this commandment is subject to excommunication. As stated in the 80th canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council: “In case any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or anyone else on the list of the clergy, or any layman, without any graver necessity or any particular difficulty compelling him to absent himself from his own church for a very long time, fails to attend church on Sundays for three consecutive weeks, while living in the city, if he be a cleric, let him be deposed from office; but if he be a layman, let him be removed from Communion”.

It is rather unlikely that the Creator would give us ridiculous commands, or that the church canons were written to make people’s lives unbearable. Then what is the meaning of this commandment?

Everything in Christianity has its origin in the self-manifestation of God the Trinity, Who is revealed to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Entering His inner life and participation in His Divine glory is the goal of our life. Since God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him, by the word of Apostle John (1 John 4:16), we can enter into communion with Him only through love.

As affirmed by the word of the Lord, the entire Divine God can be reduced to two commandments: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and

with all thy mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40). Can we truly fulfill these commandments without going to church? If we love someone, do not we try to see this person as often as possible? Is it possible to imagine two people in love who are avoiding seeing one another? Yes, they can talk on the phone; but it is far better to talk face to face. The same goes for the person who loves God—he wants to come closer to God. May King David be an example for us. He, being a ruler of his people, fighting numerous wars with enemies, executing judgment, used to say: How beloved are Thy dwellings, O Lord of hosts; my soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God. For the sparrow hath found herself a house, and the turtledove a nest for herself where she may lay her young, Even Thine altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house; unto ages of ages shall they praise Thee. Blessed is the man whose help is from Thee; he hath made ascents in his heart, in the vale of weeping, in the place which he hath appointed. Yea, for the lawgiver will give blessings; they shall go from strength to strength, the God of gods shall be seen in Sion. O Lord of hosts, hearken unto my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob. O God, our defender, behold, and look upon the face of Thine anointed one. For better is one day in Thy courts than thousands elsewhere. I have chosen rather to be an outcast in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of sinners (Psalm 83).

When he was in exile, he would tearfully cry every day over the fact that he cannot enter the house of God: These things have I remembered, and I poured out my soul within me, for I used to go to the place of the wondrous tabernacle, even to the house of God, with a voice of rejoicing and thanksgiving, yea, of the sound of them that keep festival (Psalm 41:5).

It is exactly this attitude that gives rise to the need of going to God's temple and makes it essential for the person.

And this is not surprising! The eyes of the Lord are always directed towards God's temple, the church. In the church, He Himself is present in His Body and Blood. In the church, He revives us in the Baptism, therefore the church is our lesser motherland. In the church, God forgives us our sins in the Mystery of Confession, He gives us His own self in the most holy Communion. Where else can we find such sources of incorruptible life? According to the word of an ancient ascetic, they who throughout the week fight against the devil, hasten on Saturdays and Sundays to church to partake from the sources of the living water of Communion, in order to quench the thirst of their hearts and to be cleansed of the filth of their defiled conscience. Ancient legends tell us that deer hunt snakes and eat them; but when the poison starts burning their interior parts they run to a spring of clear water. So also we have to hasten to the church, in order to cool the irritation of our hearts with the communal prayer. As Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-bearer said, "Try to gather together more frequently to celebrate God's Eucharist and to praise him. For when you meet with frequency, Satan's powers are overthrown and his destructiveness is undone by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which all strife in heavenly and earthly spirits is cast out" (Hieromartyr Ignatius the God-bearer. Epistle to the Ephesians, 13). People forget that only church prayer can save man

from the devil's attacks, for he is trembling before the power of God and is unable to harm the person who abides in Divine love.

King David chanted: Though a host should array itself against me, my heart shall not be afraid; though war should rise up against me, in this have I hoped. One thing have I asked of the Lord, this will I seek after: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, that I may behold the delight of the Lord, and that I may visit His holy temple. For He hid me in His tabernacle in the day of my troubles, He sheltered me in the secret place of His tabernacle, upon a rock hath He exalted me. And now, behold, He exalted my head above mine enemies. I went round about and I sacrificed in His tabernacle a sacrifice of praise and jubilation; I will sing and I will chant unto the Lord (Psalm 26:3-6).

Besides the fact that in His temple the Lord protects us and gives us strength, He also teaches us, for the Divine Service in its entirety is a true school of Divine love. In God's holy temple, we hear His word, we bring to mind his marvelous acts, we learn about our future; indeed, In God's temple everything uttereth His glory (Psalm 28:9); as if before our very eyes there takes place feats of the martyrs, the victories of the ascetics, courage of kings and priests; we learn about the mystical nature of God, about the salvation which Christ has granted us; here we rejoice at Christ's Radiant Resurrection. It is not accidental that we refer to Sunday Divine Service as a "lesser Pascha". Often it seems to us that everything around us is terrible, awful and hopeless, but the Sunday Divine Service reveals to us our extreme hope. It was not without reason that Prophet David said that We have thought, O God, of Thy mercy in the midst of Thy temple (Psalm 47:10). Sunday Divine Service is the best weapon against those numerous depressions and sorrows which inhabit our gray everyday life. This service is a brightly shining rainbow of God's covenant amidst the fog of the everyday bustle.

In the heart of our festal Divine Service is prayer and contemplation of the Holy Scripture, the reading of which in the church possesses a unique power. One ascetic saw tongues of fire rising up from the mouth of the deacon reading the word of God at the Sunday Divine Service. They were purifying the souls of the praying people and were ascending to Heaven. Those who say that reading the Bible at home is sufficient and, therefore, they do not need to go to church to hear the Word of God are mistaken. Even if they do open the Book at home, their distancing themselves from the assembly of the faithful in the church will prevent them from fully understanding the sacred text. It has been confirmed that those who do not partake of the Holy Communion are practically unable to understand God's will. No wonder! The Scripture is nothing other than instruction on how to receive Heavenly Grace. But if we simply read a set of instructions and do not try to, let us say, put a bookcase together or use a computer program, the set of instructions will remain unmastered and will be soon forgotten. It is well-known that our mind quickly filters out any unused information. Therefore, the Scripture is inseparable from the church community, for it was given solely to the Church.

And vice versa, those who attend the Sunday Divine Liturgy and then read the Scripture at home will comprehend meaning in it that they would never have comprehended otherwise. Often, it is precisely on the Church Feast Days that people learn the will of God about

themselves. According to the words of St. John of the Ladder, “Although God always endows His servants with gifts, He does even more so on the yearly feasts of the Lord and the Mother of God” (To the Pastor, 3:2). It is not surprising that those who regularly attend church are somewhat different, both in outward appearance and in the disposition of their souls. On one hand, to them virtues become natural, while on the other hand, frequent confessions prevent them from falling into serious sins. In the life of a Christian, passions can intensify, for Satan does not want us—who were made from dust—to ascend to Heaven from which we had been cast down. For this reason Satan attacks us as his enemies. We, however, should not fear him; we should fight him and overcome him, for only he that overcometh shall inherit all things, says the Lord (Rev. 21:7).

If the person says that he is a Christian but does not pray with his brothers, what kind of Christian is he? In the words of the greatest expert on Church canons, Patriarch Theodore Balsamon of Antioch, “Such a person either does nothing regarding fulfillment of the Divine commandment about prayer and singing hymns to God, or he is not a believer. Otherwise, why would he for twenty days not want to be in church with Christians and have communion with God’s faithful people?” (A reference to Church canons which stipulate that Christians who were absent from church on three consecutive Sundays are to be excommunicated. —Trans.).

It is no accident that people we consider model Christians: Christians of the apostolic Church in Jerusalem, Were together, and had all things common... And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people (Acts 2:44-47). Their inner strength was a result of their being in one accord. They abided in the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit which was poured forth upon them in response to their love.

It is no coincidence that the New Testament directly forbids one to neglect assembling in church: We shall not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but we shall exhort one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day [of the assembly] approaching Hebrews 10:25).

All the best things which made Russia holy, and which sustain other Christian nations, are provided by the Divine Services. In church we are delivered from the yoke of our vanity and we can break through from the shackles of crises and wars into God’s peace. And this is the only correct decision: not curses and revolutions, not malice and hatred, but church prayer and virtues can change the world. For what Thou hast formed they have destroyed; and the righteous man, what hath he done? The Lord is in His holy temple (Psalm 10:3-4), and the righteous one flees to the Lord to find refuge. This is not cowardice but wisdom and courage. Only a fool is going to try to stand up by himself against the onslaught of the evil of the entire world, be that terrorism or a natural disaster, revolutions or wars. Only the Almighty God can defend His creation. This is why a church has always been considered a place of safety.

Indeed, a church is Heaven’s embassy on the Earth where we pilgrims looking for the Heavenly

city, receive support. How Thou hast multiplied Thy mercy, O God! Let the sons of men hope in the shelter of Thy wings. They shall be drunken with the fatness of Thy house, and of the torrent of Thy delight shalt Thou make them to drink. For in thee is the fountain of life, in Thy light shall we see light (Psalm 35:8-10).

I think it is clear that love for God is the reason for one's striving to frequently visit the house of the Lord. But the second commandment demands the same—to love our neighbor. Where else can we give our attention to what is most beautiful in a person? In a store, in a movie theater, or in a hospital? Obviously not. Only in the house of our common Father can we meet our brothers. Our communal prayer is going to be heard by God sooner, too, than a prayer of a proud loner. For Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself said: If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Matthew 18:19-20).

In church we distance ourselves from the hustle and bustle and are able to pray both about our own troubles and about the entire universe. In church, we pray to God asking Him to heal the diseases of our relatives, to free the captives, to preserve the travelers, to rescue the perishing. In church we are also in communion with those who have left this world but have not left Christ's Church. Whenever the departed visit the living they beg them to pray for them in churches. They say that every such a commemoration is like a birthday to them, but we often neglect that. Where then is our love? Let us imagine their condition. They have no bodies, they cannot receive communion, and they cannot do any good deeds (alms), either. They are waiting for support from their friends and relatives, but what they are getting are just excuses. It is the same as saying to your hungry mother: "Please forgive me, I am not going to give you anything to eat, because I badly need a nap". Do we not know that the church prayer is true food to the departed?

Besides, holy righteous men and women, worthily glorified, await us in the temple. Holy icons allow us to see them, their words are proclaimed during the service, and they themselves often visit the house of God, especially on their feast days. They pray together with us to God, and their powerful hymnology like eagles' wings bring up the church prayer directly to the Divine altar. And not only people but bodiless angels also participate in our prayer. People sing angels' songs (for instance, "Trisagion"), while angels sing along with us ("It is truly meet to bless Thee, O Theotokos"). According to the Church Tradition, an angel always stands over the Altar in the consecrated church, sending the prayer of the Church up to God, while a blessed spirit stands at the church entrance, watching over the thoughts of people entering and exiting the church. This presence is rather palpable. For it is not without reason that many unrepentant sinners do not feel good in the temple—it is the power of God rejecting their sinful will and the angels punishing them for their lawlessness. Such people, instead of ignoring the church, must repent and receive forgiveness in the Mystery of Confession and then remember to thank the Creator.

"Alright. One has to go to church, but why every Sunday? Do we need to be so fanatical?"

To put it briefly, one has to say that if the Creator commands, His creation has to answer with absolute obedience. The Ruler of all times has given us the days of our life. Is He not allowed to demand from us that we give Him four out of one hundred and sixty-eight hours of the week? Besides, the time we spend in church is for our own benefit. If a doctor prescribes some procedures for us, do not we try to follow all the doctor's recommendations if we want to get well? Why do we then ignore the words of the Great Physician of souls and bodies?

Is following the Supreme Will fanatical? According to the dictionary, "fanaticism (from Latin fanaticus—extreme zeal) is a belief or a worldview taken to the extreme, intolerance to other points of view (for example, religious fanaticism)." Here we have to answer the question: What is the extreme degree? If it is something frenzied and ecstatic, then it is very unlikely that the people who go to church every Sunday tend to attack people in ecstatic joy or wrath. Sometimes, adhering to common sense is already considered extreme by some people. If not stealing and not killing is fanaticism then we are definitely fanatics. If the teaching that there is only one true path to one true God is considered fanatical, then we are fanatics. But with such an understanding of fanaticism the Heavenly Kingdom will be inherited only by the fanatics, because all the "normal" and "logical" are destined to the outer darkness, for God says: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. But as thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spite thee out of My mouth" (Rev. 3:15-16).

Let us think about the words with which we began our discussion:

"We need our sleep, then we need to spend time with the family, do things around the house, etc. And you want us to get up and go to church."

Well, no one is forcing you to go to the early Liturgy, for in cities often both early and late Liturgies are served. As for the villages—nobody sleeps in in the countryside anyway (where the farm work is to be done.—Trans.). But in the city—nobody prevents you on Saturday evening after returning home from the evening service from spend time with your family, reading an interesting book, and, after the evening prayers, going to bed around 11 or 12 o'clock in order to get up on Sunday morning at 8:30 and go to church. Nine hours of sleep is enough to restore strength for most people. If it is not enough, you can make it up by taking a nap on Sunday afternoon. All our problems come not from going to church, but from the fact that the rhythm of our life does not correspond to the will of God, and it brings us to a state of exhaustion. Only communion with God—the Source of all the powers of universe—can rejuvenate us both physically and spiritually. It is proven by experience that if you are exhausted by Saturday, Sunday Divine Services will fill you with inner strength. This strength is physical, too. For this reason the ascetics, who spent their lives in inhuman desert environments, lived to be 120 or 130 years old, whereas we can barely make it to 70 or 80. God gives strength to those who hope in Him and serve Him. A study was conducted before the revolution in Russia, which showed that greater longevity was enjoyed not by the nobility or merchants, but by priests, although they lived in far worse conditions than the first two classes. This is a palpable confirmation of the benefit of weekly attendance in the House of the Lord.

As for spending time with your family—what prevents you from going to church with the whole family? If the children are too little, then your wife and children can come to church a little bit later, and then all of you can go for a walk, have lunch, etc. Does this plan have anything in common with “spending time together”, when the entire family is sucked into the TV? Often those who do not come to church “because of the family” do not exchange a dozen words with that same family for the entire day.

As for the household chores: the Word of God does not allow us to do on Sundays anything beyond what is absolutely necessary. We must not clean the entire house on a Sunday, or dedicate the day to doing laundry, or canning fruits and vegetables for the whole year. The time of peace and calm lasts from Saturday evening till Sunday evening. All chores should be postponed till Sunday evening. The only kind of labor which is not only allowed, but prescribed for Sundays and feast days is acts of mercy. To clean the entire house of an old or sick person, to help in church, to provide food and clothing for an orphan or a large needy family—that is the only true and God-pleasing way of keeping the Lord’s Day holy.

“We cannot live through winter without canning produce from our garden; therefore we have to spend Sundays in the garden.”

I think the answer is obvious. Nothing prevents us from going to our local church, and still doing our work in the garden either on Saturdays or later on Sundays. This way our health will be preserved and the will of God will be honored. Even if there is no church nearby, we must dedicate Saturday evening and Sunday morning to prayer and Holy Scripture. Those who do not want to live by the will of God will harvest punishment. The hoped-for crops will be devoured by locusts, caterpillars, and diseases. When we need rain a draught comes, and when we need dry weather we get a flood. This way God shows everyone Who is Master in the world. Often God punishes those who transgress His will.

On the contrary, to those who follow the Divine commandment God sends unprecedented crops. For example, the crops in Optina Monastery exceeded those of its neighbors fourfold, although the same agricultural technology was used.

“I cannot go to church because it is too cold or hot; it is raining or snowing. I’d better pray at home.”

But, oh the wonder! The same person is ready in the rain to go to the stadium and route for his favorite team, to work in his garden, dance the night away at a party. He finds it beyond his strength to go to the house of God. Bad weather is always no more than justification for our lack of desire. Do we really think that God will hearken unto the prayer of the person who is not willing to sacrifice even in something little for Him?

Another objection is equally absurd:

“I am not going to church because you do not have pews and it is too hot. The Catholics have figured it all out much better!”

Of course, this objection cannot be taken seriously, but for many, comfort is more important than eternal salvation. Nevertheless, God does not desire peril even for an outcast, and Christ will not break a bruised reed and will not quench the smoking flax. As far as the pews go, they are not essential. If a person is sick nothing prevents him from sitting down on one of the benches at the back of the church. Moreover, according to the rule of Divine Services, at the festal evening service the faithful may sit seven times. And even if all the benches are occupied what stops you from bringing along a folding chair? Nobody will say a word. You will just have to get up for the reading of the Gospel, at the Cherubic Hymn, during the Eucharistic Canon and at about other ten most important moments of the service. I think this should not pose a problem for anyone. To those who cannot get up due to their health condition these rules do not apply at all.

Let me repeat it again: all these objections are ridiculous and they cannot be taken as a reason for disobeying the Divine commandment.

Neither can the following be an excuse:

“In your church everyone is so mean and grumpy. The old women hiss and deride people. And you call yourselves Christians? I do not want to become like you and for that reason I am not going to set my foot in church.”

Nobody demands from anyone to be mean and grumpy. Have you heard anyone in church making such demands? Do they ask you at the entrance of the church to put on boxing gloves? Do not hiss and do not deride people, and then you will be able to correct them. The Apostle Paul says: “Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? Before his own Lord he standeth or falleth” (Rom. 14:4).

Your objection would make sense if priests were teaching us to fight and to squabble. But this is not so. Neither the Bible, nor the Church, nor its ministers have ever taught that. To the contrary: in every homily and in every church hymn we are called to be meek and merciful. Therefore, others’ unfriendliness cannot be a reason for our not going to church.

We must understand that the people who come to church are not from Mars but from the same world we are from. They come from the same world where it is customary to swear. But in the temple you will not hear swearing. You could say that church is the only place out of bounds for swearing.

In the world it is customary to be grumpy and to pour out our discontent upon others, calling it a fight for justice. Don’t they do just that in doctors’ offices’ waiting rooms, where old women pick to pieces everyone from the president to the nurses? Do you think that on entering the church those people, as if from a touch of a magic wand, will immediately change and become as meek as sheep? No. God gave us free will, and without our effort nothing will change within us.

We are always in the Church only to a certain degree. Whenever this degree is great, the

person is called a saint. At other times, this degree is small. At times a person holds on to the Lord only with his little figure. But we must remember that the only Judge and Appraiser is the Lord, not we. While there is still time there is hope. No one judges an entire movie before it is over—only certain episodes. Such episodes are saints. The Church is to be judged by Her saints, not by the people who are yet to complete the journey of their lives. Not in vain it is said that the end crowns every endeavor.

If the Church calls itself a hospital (in the prayer before the Confession, it says: “Thou hast come to the place of healing, may thou not depart unhealed”), can we expect the Church to be filled with healthy people? There are healthy ones, but they are in Heaven. The Church will be revealed in all its beauty only when everyone desiring healing starts using the treatment that the Church offers. Saints are the best evidence of God’s healing power acting in the Church.

Therefore, when in the church, we should not look at the people around us but at God, for we come not to the people in the church but to God.

“I do not understand what goes on during the church services.”

Let us paraphrase this statement. A first-grader comes to school and overhears a lecture in the algebra class, then refuses to go to school, saying: “I did not understand anything there.” Those who refuse to study the Divine science because they find it “incomprehensible” show the same lack of common sense.

If everything were easy then education would be meaningless, because you would already know everything the specialists are talking about. Believe me: the science of living with God is no less difficult and refined than mathematics; therefore, please allow it to have its own terminology and its own language.

I think we should not abandon the church vestments but rather realize what exactly it is that we do not understand. With that we must keep in mind that the Divine Liturgy is not given to us for missionary work among the unbelievers, but for the faithful. Thank God, if we pray attentively we will begin to understand everything in the Divine services after about a month or a month and a half of regular church attendance. But we can discover the true depths of the Divine services only after many years. This indeed is a wonderful mystery of the Lord. What we have is not a Protestant preaching where everything is on the horizontal plane, but, if you wish, a life-long university where the church service books are textbooks and the Lord is the Teacher.

“I believe in God but do not trust priests. That’s why I don’t go to church.”

Nobody asks the faithful to trust their priest. We trust God, whereas priests are merely His servants and instruments for fulfilling His will. Someone said: “Electric current travels even through a rusty wire.” So also the grace of God is transferred through His unworthy servants. As Holy Hierarch John Chrysostom says truly, “We ourselves, who sit on the cathedra (the bishop’s seat in the church) and teach, are entangled in sins. Nevertheless, we do not despair

of God's loving-kindness and do not attribute hard-heartedness to Him. And this is why God allowed even His priests to slave under the passions—so that they would learn by their own experience to be lenient to others, as well." Imagine that it is not a sinful priest but the Archangel Michael serving in the church. After his very first conversation with us he would flame up with righteous wrath and we would be reduced to a small pile of ashes.

In general, this objection to going to church is very much like one's denial of medical aid out of the notion that modern doctors are only after our money. Although the doctors' financial interest is obvious, people do not refuse medical assistance. But whenever we talk about a far more important thing—health of one's soul, people come up with any kind of nonsense in order not to go to church.

Here is what once happened. A monk lived in a desert and a priest would come to commune him. One day he heard that the priest who was coming to commune him was lecherous. Therefore, the monk refused to receive communion from that priest. The same night he saw a revelation: there was a golden well with crystal clear water and a leper dipping water from the well with a golden bucket. The voice of God said: "You see how the water remains pure although it is distributed by a leper. So also the grace does not depend on the person through whom it is given". After that the desert-dweller started receiving communion from the priest again, not reasoning within himself whether the priest was righteous or a sinner.

In all seriousness all those objections are totally worthless. How can anyone ignore the direct will of the Lord God, using a priest's sins to justify himself? "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own Lord he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up, for God is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:4).

"The Church is not a steeple, the church is the people", some say, so I can just as well pray at home."

This saying, although it might make sense, has its origin with sectarians who have separated themselves from the Church despite the word of God. It is true that God abides in the bodies of the Christians, too. But He enters those bodies through the Holy Communion that the faithful receive in churches. Besides, prayer in church is greater than prayer at home. Saint John Chrysostom says: "You are mistaken; of course you can pray at home, but to pray there as one would pray in church, where there are so many fathers, where all the faithful with one heart send up a song to God, is impossible. You are not going to be heard as speedily when praying to God at your own house as when praying with your brethren. There is something greater here, that is: unanimity and concord, a union of love and the prayer of the priests. This is why priests stand before the altar: so that people's prayers, being weaker, would join with the priests' stronger prayers together ascend to Heaven... If the prayer of the Church helped even Peter, this pillar of the Church, and let him out of prison (Acts 12:5), then tell me how dare you ignore its power and how can you justify yourself? Listen to God Himself Who says that He is pleased with the reverent prayers of many people (cf. Jonah 3). In church, it is not only people who raise their cry unto God, but even angels fall before the Master and archangels pray. Even

time is on their side and the sacrifice facilitates them. Just as when people take olive branches in their hands and shake them before kings, reminding them through the branches about mercy and love for mankind, so also angels present instead of the olive branches, the very Body of the Lord, beseeching the Master on behalf of the human race, as if saying, “We are praying for those whom Thou Thyself hast found worthy of Thy love, and for whom Thou didst give up Thy soul; we are pouring out our prayers for those for whom Thou didst pour Thy Blood; we beseech for those for whom Thou didst offer Thy Body as a sacrifice” (St John Chrysostom. Against the Amonians. Third Homily).

Therefore, this objection is totally groundless, for as the house of God is holier than your own house, so the prayer offered in temple is loftier than your prayer at home.

“I would go to church every week, but my wife or husband, parents or children do not let me.”

Here we have to recall our Lord’s uncompromising words, which people often forget: “He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). We have to make this frightful choice—between God and man—all the time. Yes, it is hard. Yes, it can be painful. But if you prefer a person, even in something little, God will reject you on the Day of Judgment. Is your relative going to be able to help you then? Does your love for your relative justify you when the Gospel tells you otherwise? When we are at the Judgment, are you not going to bring back to mind—with sadness and bitter disappointment—the day when you rejected God for the sake of imaginary love?

Besides, life has proved that he who chooses a person instead of the Creator will be betrayed.

“I am not going to go to this church because it has negative energy. I do not feel good there, especially because of the incense.”

In fact, every Orthodox church is filled with one energy—the grace of God. All Orthodox temples are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Christ is present with His Body and Blood in every church. Angels of God stand by the entrance into every Orthodox church. It is not the church but the person who has the problem here. There may be a perfectly natural explanation for what you are feeling. On feast days, when the “visitors” stop by, the temples are filled beyond capacity, and it is no wonder that some might start feeling sick when there is very little air to breathe. But sometimes people feel sick in an almost empty temple. Christians know very well the spiritual reasons of this phenomenon.

The evil deeds a person does not want to repent of keep away the grace of God. What some people call “negative energy” is nothing other than the resistance of their evil will to the power of God. However, it is not only man who turns away from God, but neither will God accept an egoist, for it is said: God resisteth the proud (James 4:6). We find examples of this in antiquity. St. Mary of Egypt, who was a harlot, tried to enter the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem to venerate the Life-giving Cross, but some invisible power pushed her away from the church’s

gates. It was only after she repented and promised to never commit the sin of fornication again did God let her into His house.

Even now we know of cases when professional killers and prostitutes could not stand the smell of incense and fainted. This happens especially often with those who practice magic, astrology, ESP and other kinds of devilry. Some power ties them in knots at the most important moments of the Divine services so that they have to be taken away in an ambulance. However, there is yet another reason.

Not only does the person himself have no desire to meet the Creator, those who are behind his sinful habits do not either. Those beings are rebel spirits, demons. These impure beings are what hinder the person's entry into the temple. It is also they who steal strength from those standing in church. Some people can lift weights in the gym for hours but cannot spend ten minutes in the presence of the Creator. Only God can help those who are possessed by demons. But He helps only those who have repented and have a desire to live according to the will of the Almighty Lord. The very terminology of your question is borrowed from practitioners of psychic powers (the Church knows that they all serve the devil), who talk about people charged with certain energies, as if they were talking about batteries and not about the children of God.

Here we see symptoms of a spiritual disease. Instead of loving the Creator, those people try to manipulate Him. This is nothing other than an indication of demonic possession.

The last objection, akin to the previous one, is encountered most frequently:

"I have God in my heart and I do not need your church services. If I do good deeds, do you think God will send me to hell only because I do not go to church?"

What do you mean when you say "God"? If you are talking simply about your conscience, then of course this voice of God is heard in the heart of every man without exception. Neither Hitler nor Charles Manson were deprived of conscience, and all villains know what is good and what is bad. The voice of God tried to keep them from committing lawless acts. But does the fact that they heard the voice of God make them saints? Besides, conscience is not God—it is only His voice. If you hear the voice of the President on tape or on the radio, does it mean he is in your house? Neither does the presence of a conscience mean that God is in your heart.

But if we think about it, Who is God? He is Almighty, Omnipresent, Omniscient, Righteous, Blessed Spirit, Creator of the Universe, Who is not contained by either heaven or by heaven of heavens. Then how can your soul contain Him—Him at Whose face angels dare not gaze?

Jesus Christ Pantocrator (Detail from deesis mosaic) from Hagia Sophia

Does the one who says that God is in his heart sincerely think that this Boundless Power abides within him? Allow us to be skeptical, or else show us manifestations of that Power's might. Phrases like "God in my heart" are more potent than an attempt to retain a nuclear explosion

within oneself. Can you conceal in secret the explosion of a nuclear bomb in Hiroshima or a volcanic eruption? Therefore, we demand from the “container of God” some proof: let him work a miracle (for example, raising the dead) or manifest Divine love, offering his left cheek to him who hit him on the right one. Is he able to have one hundredth of the love for his enemies that Our Lord had for His when He prayed for them before His crucifixion? Indeed, only saints can say that God is in their hearts. Therefore, we demand holiness from those who make such a statement; otherwise, it will be a lie, whose father is devil.

They say: “I do good deeds. How can God send me to hell?” Please allow me to question your righteousness. What are we to consider a criterion of good and evil according to which we might determine whether we are doing good or evil? If the person himself is the criterion (as people often say: “I decide for myself what is good and what is evil”), then the notions of good and evil lose any validity and meaning. If Beria, and Goebbels, and Pol Pot thought they were doing right things why do you think their actions are blameworthy? If we ourselves have a right to determine the standard of good and evil, then this right cannot be denied to all killers, perverts, and rapists. Yes, following your logic, please allow God to disagree with your criteria and to judge you not by yours but by His standards. Otherwise, it is not fair—we claim the right of choosing the standard, but we do not allow the Almighty and Free God to do the same and to judge by His own laws; and by His laws the person who doesn’t repent and who doesn’t receive Holy Communion heads straight to hell.

Let us be honest: what are all our standards of good and evil worth? Our body, soul, mind, will, senses are not created by us. Everything we have is a gift (or even not a gift but something that belongs to Someone else, and has been entrusted to us for safekeeping), but we, however, have decided that we can with impunity deal with it as we please. Doing that we deny the One Who created us any right to demand an answer from us about how we have dealt with His gift. Don’t you find this demand somewhat insolent? Why would you think that the Lord of the Universe would do your will, which is corrupted by sin? We have transgressed the Fourth Commandment and firmly believe that He owes something to us?

Look, instead of dedicating Sundays to God we give them to devil. On this day, people often get drunk, they swear, commit lewd acts; if they don’t do that, they entertain themselves in various godless ways: watching questionable TV shows and movies where sins and passions are abundant. It is only the Creator Who appears to be out of place on His own day. Does not God, Who has given us everything, including time, have a right to demand from us only few short hours?

Therefore, hell awaits those who with scorn ignore the will of God. And the reason for that is not God’s cruelty, but the fact that such people, having abandoned the water of Life, are trying to dig their own empty wells of justifications. They refused to receive the Holy Cup of Communion, they deprived themselves of the Word of God and now they are wandering in the darkness of this evil age. Having walked away from Light, they find darkness; having walked away from Love, they obtain hatred; having discarded Life, they rush into the embrace of eternal death. How can we not bemoan their stubbornness and wish that they come back into

the house of our Heavenly Father?

As for us, we shall say together with King David: But as for me, in the multitude of Thy mercy shall I go into Thy house; I shall worship toward Thy holy temple in fear of Thee (Psalm 5:8). For We went through fire and water, and Thou didst bring us out into refreshment. I will go into Thy house with a whole-burnt offering; to Thee will I pay my vows which my lips pronounced and which my mouth had spoken in mine affliction (Psalm 65:12-14).