



279. Oct. 23/Nov. 5, 1979 Apostle James the Brother of the Lord

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Father Neketas,

Christ is in our midst!

We have recently received vol. 6, nos. 8 and 9, 1979, of the Tlinget Herald. According to the return address on the envelope and the heading on the title page, this publication was mailed and published by you. You yourself in the past have indicated that Fr. Lev Puhalo at times acts in an unbalanced and irrational way, and from our own experience I know that it would be pointless to write him directly to protest against the content of this issue; it would only produce another of his irrational letters or even a whole new series of attacks against us in the Tlinget Herald. Therefore we are writing to you as the person responsible for distributing this issue.

Father, what can we say to you? You, of course, realize, that this issue is (among other things) a personal attack against our Brotherhood for our series of articles on "The Soul After Death." The attempt of the author of these articles is, clearly, not merely to "correct" the "errors" he thinks we have been teaching, but to discredit us entirely as publishers of Orthodox material. Orthodox Christians, when they disagree, are normally able to express their disagreements in a civil way without trying to discredit those who hold errors, if such they be, and certainly without casting aspersions on their Orthodoxy in general, on their scholarship, or even on their sanity.

But what must the unsuspecting reader think when he is told that the "toll-houses" which we recently presented as an Orthodox teaching in *The Orthodox Word* are "a new and novel doctrine in the Church" (p. 15), that they come from an "old pagan astral cult" and "are merely an illogical mutation of these pagan myths" (p. 24), are "imaginary" (p. 18), that "Manicheism (more directly, Methracism) is fundamental to the 'toll-house' theology" (p. 23). What must he think to read that some of the sources which we cited in presenting this teaching are a "perverted 'ikon'" (p. 16) which constitutes a "grotesque and radical innovation" (p. 23), and a "fantastic literature and spiritual delusion," most notably "Gregory of Thrace's wild tale about the Journey of Theodora" which is "heresy-filled" (p. 24) and was revealed to a man who was in "no longer merely delusion, but already insanity" (p. 24). The author declares that this literature is a "fantastic, apocryphal literature which seeks to insinuate the pagan psychostasia myths into Orthodox teachings" (p. 17).

Father, if all this is true, then we who have presented this teaching and used these sources must clearly be heretics, willful innovationists, and in general irresponsible, deceived, and nearly insane



people.

Must we answer such charges? Do you believe this?

Father, we are deeply, deeply offended and hurt by this surely irresponsible attack against us which you have supported.

But this is a small part of the decisive protest which we must make to you.

We did not make up this teaching. We received it from our fathers and teachers in the faith. Quite recently it has been taught quite openly by a number of respected voices in the Church, and it is evident that Fr. Lev's attack is more generally against them also: against Holy Trinity Monastery, which has published several of the sources which Fr. Lev attacks in issues of *Orthodox Life* in recent years; against Fr. Alexey Young and Nikodemos, whose latest issue was devoted to this subject; against Father Michael Pomazansky, the most respected theologian in our Church, whose recent article on the toll-houses was prompted in part by Fr. Lev's earlier attacks against them; against Archbishop John Maximovitch, whose sermon in the last *Nikodemos* was already singled out for attack by Fr. Lev a year or more ago (it appeared in *The Orthodox Word* seven or eight years ago).

You have sponsored such an irresponsible attack against such respected teachers in our Church, some of them indeed very pillars of our Church. Father, I am deeply ashamed for you. What can you possibly be thinking of accomplishing by this?

But there is something even worse that you have done.

This is an attack not just against these recent teachers of the Church, but also against the very teaching of the Church. Father, you have been to seminary. You must know by now that Fr. Lev is no theologian. This article has no theological foundation, but is a passionate diatribe which is composed of varying amounts of misunderstood teachings set up as ridiculous "straw men," quotations which do not prove his points or are taken out of context, unfounded private opinions set up as dogmas, arbitrary interpretations of art history, and the like, with enough obvious truths and half-truths thrown in to make the whole thing convincing to some who have not thought much about the subject or have not been much exposed to the Orthodox teaching.

If you wish to know what the Church really teaches about the toll-houses (as opposed to Fr. Lev's most uncharitable and totally unfair caricature of them), I would advise you (for a beginning) to re-read our own article on them in *The Orthodox Word*, no. 83, where the exposition of Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov is set forth and there are numerous citations from Holy Fathers, Lives of Saints, and Divine services. There you will find also a discussion of "How to Understand the Toll-houses," in view of the sometimes figurative elements which appear in descriptions of them (I know of literally no one who has ever read these descriptions in so "literal" and one-sided a



manner as Fr. Lev); you will also find there a discussion of the toll-houses as a universal phenomenon in spiritual life, the experience of which begins in this life; as well as other aspects of this rather subtle teaching which Fr. Lev has deliberately cast aside in order to set up and ridicule a caricature of it and expose all who believe in the toll-houses as some kind of simpletons or idiots.

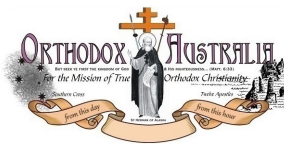
In another article in the same issue, “The Body, the Soul and Death,” Fr. Lev continues his attack against our series of articles, and makes even more definite than before his most un-Scriptural, un-Patristic, and un-Orthodox teaching that the soul at death “enters into a condition of inactivity, a sort of sleep in which it does not function, hear or see...” (p. 19). He conveniently dismisses everyone who holds a different teaching as “Origenistic”—despite the obvious fact that those who hold the Orthodox teaching on this subject have nothing in common with Origen’s views and do not accept his ideas that the soul is “imprisoned” in the body, that it “pre-exists” its “fall” into the body, etc. “Origenism” here is merely a smear word he uses to paint his enemies black. This is dirty fighting.

Since you have printed and distributed this article and the earlier articles where Fr. Lev has set forth this teaching of the souls “sleep” after death, I assume you must believe it, especially since Fr. Lev presents it in such categorical terms, dismissing any other teaching as heresy. We gently reminded you that this teaching is not Orthodox in a note some months ago.

Is it really necessary to set forth the Scriptural, Patristic, and general Church texts which give the Orthodox teaching on this subject? Up until now no one has been challenging this teaching in our Church, and one would have thought a defense of it to be unnecessary. That the modernist theologians of other jurisdictions have often challenged it is not surprising; it is part of their “modernism” in general. But certainly anyone who reads and loves the Orthodox Lives of Saints and accepts the authority of the Orthodox theologians of our own Church would never think of questioning this teaching.

I hope that Fr. Lev’s “fit” will pass, and his spite against us and the recent teachers of our Church will be exhausted with what he has already written, and a lengthy defense of the Orthodox teaching will not be required. In any case, I offer to you below just one quotation from a text which has already appeared in our series on “The Soul After Death.” This is a brief statement from St. Mark of Ephesus’ “Second Homily on Purgatorial Fire” which gives some rather specific indications of how active the soul is after death. Unfortunately, we now hear that the teaching of St. Mark on life after death has also been called into question by Fr. Lev, and perhaps you will soon be printing Fr. Lev’s attack on it—may God not allow it! Certainly St. Mark’s words are authoritative for us (although the words of many other authoritative Fathers could also be cited), since he was the chief defender precisely of the Orthodox teaching on life after death at Florence, opposing the Latin errors. Here is the text (emphasis added by me; see *The Orthodox Word*, no. 79, p. 90):

“We affirm that neither the righteous have as yet received the fullness of their lot and that blessed condition for which they have prepared themselves here through works, nor have sinners, after



death, been led away into the eternal punishment in which they shall be tormented eternally. Rather, both the one and the other must necessarily take place after the Judgment of that last day and the resurrection of all. Now, however, both the one and the other are in places proper to them: the first, in absolute repose and free, are in heaven with the angels and before God Himself, and already as if in the paradise from which Adam fell (into which the good thief entered before others) and often visit us in those temples where they are venerated, and hear those who call on them and pray for them to God, having received from Him this surpassing gift, and through their relics perform miracles, and take delight in the vision of God and the illumination sent from Him more perfectly and purely than before, when they were alive-, while the second, in their turn, being confined in hell, remain in the lowest pit.... And this teaching we have as handed down from our Fathers in antiquity, and we can easily present it from the Divine Scriptures themselves.”

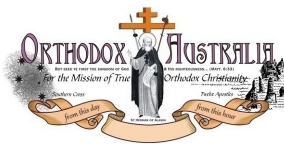
Even from this quite explicit quote about the consequences of the soul after death, of course, Fr. Lev could take a sentence out of context (as he has already done with innumerable other Fathers) and “prove” his own point (“the righteous have not yet received the fullness of their lot,” hence are unconscious). But I am addressing you as someone who, I sincerely hope and believe, wants to know the truth and not merely to possess a collection of meaningless “proof” texts.

It would be pointless to offer many specific criticisms of these articles you have printed, when their whole intent is so mistaken and the teaching so un-Orthodox. I would only point out two or three incidental things that, it seems to us, you do very ill in presenting in such a way to Orthodox readers.

Fr. Lev accuses “the heretical teaching that the Ancient of Days (Dn. ch. 7) was God the Father” (p. 23). Father, in the past you have already printed enough of such categorical statements that find “heresy” in every corner; it is really time for them to stop. Prophetic images such as the “Ancient of Days” are of such a character that often a hard-and-fast identification is not even possible or necessary, let alone being made into a “dogma” so that misidentification of it is a “heresy.” It happens that some Fathers have indeed identified the Ancient of Days as God the Father, while others identify this image as God the Son. Specifically, St. John Chrysostom in his commentary on Daniel (ch. 7), noting that it is One “like the Son of Man” Who comes to the Ancient of Days, states that Daniel was thus “the first and only one to see the Father and the Son.” Is he then a heretic? The use of such language in this case is just name-calling and vain boasting over ones supposed “correct interpretation” of Scripture.

Again, Fr. Lev speaks of Blessed Augustine’s “blasphemous commentary on Genesis” (p. 23). Can you find one single Father or teacher of our Orthodox Church who has ever referred to this book in this way? This is simply hatred posing as “righteousness” in “exposing” someone whom the Orthodox Church continues to regard with reverence, despite such malicious attacks on him.

Again, Fr. Lev has found a new Orthodox teacher to attack and discredit: Because Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov emphatically teaches the Orthodoxy of the toll-houses (and sees the attack on them



as a sign of theological modernism), Fr. Lev accuses him of “novelty” also: “Bishop Ignaty Brianchaninov, who, was, of course, educated in the then prevalent Latin-milieu of Russian seminaries, accepted this novel interpretation” (p. 17). Father, despite the superior “of course,” this man doesn’t know what he’s talking about! Bishop Ignatius graduated from engineering school and never went to a seminary at all; his knowledge of the Fathers and of Orthodox doctrine came from his own Patristic reading and his experiences in Russian monasteries under some of the leading spiritual elders of his time. Soon Fr. Lev will be attacking all the Russian monasteries and elders also. Can’t you see that he merely attacks and discredits, without facts or evidence, anyone who disagrees with his opinions and whims? This is dishonest.

Father, there has been enough and too much of all this. Why do you sponsor such immature, irresponsible articles? Not long ago you told someone: “We all know that Fr. Lev is unbalanced, but he is on our side? And true enough, Fr. Lev’s extreme statements are usually only exaggerations of opinions you yourself have printed before. But don’t you see that:

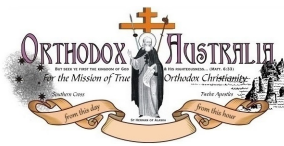
(1) You are sponsoring a most unhealthy party spirit in the Church, putting “your side,” evidently those whom you regard as “theological experts” and “super-Orthodox” among the converts and Greek-Americans, against the “other” side—i.e., presumably us poor “Russians” who stick to the tradition our fathers have handed down to us and are not easily “reformed.”

And (2) You are attacking with increasing openness the tradition of theology and piety whose representatives took you in when you were in need of an Orthodox Church home. This is ingratitude to say the least.

In both these respects you are helping to create a very bad feeling in our Church, and there is disaster ahead if you do not change.

I will not speak for the rest of the Church, but will only tell you how grieved we ourselves are with what you are doing. From the moment you entered our Church we were among your most ardent supporters, as you well know. Even when we recognized some of the differences of opinion between you and us we did not cease to give you our support. And then you began cutting us off—over what, I really don’t know. Was it “evolution,” or the “Shroud of Turin,” or our “Russianness,” or just the fact that we didn’t follow your “party line”? You began to spread doubts about the Orthodoxy of our views, spreading suspicion about us and other “Russians” in our Church, even dropping us from your list of “important places in the Synod,” in your Calendar.

We know that you yourself have suffered in the past from Synod politics (we have defended you on many occasions when we could); but we have all suffered from this, it isn’t something unique with you Greek-Americans, and you will not escape such things no matter what jurisdiction you might belong to. You have at times complained about feeling yourself to be a “second-class member of the Synod” and at being told to “go back to the Greeks where you belong.” We have been sorry to hear such things, but you know that we and many others in our Church have never treated you like



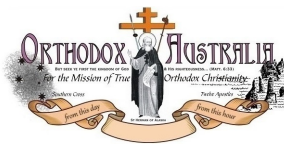
that.

But you yourself, for whatever cause, are playing that same game of politics. We very strongly feel ourselves that you are trying to make us (our Brotherhood and other defenders of the traditions of our Russian Church) into “second-class members” of the Church organization, and that you are trying to undermine the theologians and the theological authority of our Russian Church. You are taking advantage of an unusual situation in which your own bishops do not speak your language and cannot keep track of all that you say or understand the nuances of it, in order to promote the cause of a virtually independent kind of “Orthodoxy” within our Church, one that has no living continuity with the fathers and teachers of our Church but comes from the fashionable “patristic revival” of the modernist seminaries. Can’t you see how dangerous this is, how you yourself can lose the tradition of Orthodoxy and confuse others in the process by trusting your own opinions and the opinions of the clique to which you belong?

Apparently, for you Fr. Panteleimon is the authority. As your spiritual father no one will protest his right to spiritual authority over you. If you wish to accept also his personal opinions about all manner of church affairs, that is also your right. But you cannot make him into the authority for our Church or our converts or insist that his opinions prevail over all others in the Church. His actions and statements are public enough over the last 15 years to show that he is no infallible guide to Orthodoxy, that he has often been mistaken, has needlessly alienated many people in our Church and among the Old Calendarist Greeks, has lessened his own authority by playing politics—in other words, that he is fallible like the rest of us, that whatever his intentions, he has done both good and ill in his church activities. His authority, whatever it may be for you personally, cannot justify your sponsorship of Fr. Lev’s articles for “party” reasons, or your undermining of our Russian theologians and the Church’s teaching.

You talk much of “Western influence.” It seems to be one of your “party slogans.” Father, don’t you see how very Western you and Fr. Panteleimon yourselves often are? You can’t just go “back to the Fathers”; you must be linked to them through your own fathers—and the fathers of our Russian Church, to which you still belong, are precisely the ones you are undermining.

Father, be humble enough to see that this is one of the reasons why some in our Church have been suggesting to you that you should “go back to the Greeks” and work out your problems with them. As long as you are undermining the teachers and authorities of our Church (Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, 19th-century catechisms, Unseen Warfare, Bishop Theophan the Recluse, now even Bishop Ignatius, etc., etc.) and trying to force your own attitudes and opinions at least on the English-speaking part of our Church—then you really do look like a foreigner out to demolish our Russian Orthodoxy. And when you publish attacks on the toll-houses and sponsor really novel doctrines like the “sleep” of the soul, you certainly reveal yourself as “Greek-Archdiocese mentality” through and through. If these are the things you want to teach and publish, then by all means you should go back and fight it out with your Greeks, instead of taking refuge behind Russian bishops whose authority you are undermining. Your Greeks will not protest when you



attack the toll-houses—because the Greek Archdiocese lost contact with the Orthodox teaching on such subjects long ago, and you’re still operating on their “wave-length.” It is just not fair for you to remain in our Church, and in a very protected place where our bishops really have little contact with you, and try to attack and convert the rest of us to your Greek-Archdiocese attitudes.

When you first came to us eleven years ago you seemed anxious to learn from our Church; now you’ve gotten used to us, spotted many of our weaknesses, and you seem only to want to teach us. All you will do by this is to cause fights, bitterness, and deep sorrow.

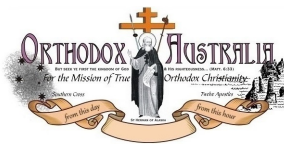
I’ve already said enough. If you don’t understand what I’m saying by now, you never will. We are not your “enemies”; we would be sad to see you change jurisdictions, not only because it would mean that you have lost the golden opportunity you had with us to go deeper into Orthodoxy, but also because you yourself could contribute something valuable to our Church if you could be closer to us in spirit. But if you want to stay with us and be anything other than a “troublemaker” in our midst, you must begin to learn more and teach less—at least in the way you “teach” through Fr. Lev’s articles.

I have written this with pain of heart, and I pray that you will receive it with your heart. How I wish that there could be the oneness between us that we thought existed in the beginning! There is no need for you to mistrust the “Russians”; I suspect that in your heart you are very much like them, but the ideas and opinions you have acquired are separating you from them. There are “good” Russians as well as “bad,” loving and aware Orthodox people as well as politicians. Unfortunately your mind seems to have led you into contact with some of our “politicians,” and you never got close enough to the real heart-beat of our Church. You could never have been attracted by Fr. Lev’s articles if you had.

Please forgive me if anything I have said has offended you. We have never had any intention of being your “enemies,” only to speak the truth as we see it; if you want us to be enemies you will have to make us so yourself.

I hesitate now to send this. I have not worked it over for public inspection. It is addressed to you personally, and doubtless you will have to show it to “party headquarters”—I say this not in sarcasm, but just knowing the way you do things. I don’t think such an arrangement is very healthy or good for the Church, and I suspect it also gives you a measure of false security which shields you from some of the Orthodox reality of our day. If you want to answer, please answer yourself and don’t let someone you think is “smarter” do it for you. That’s not our “Russian” way and we regard it as rather an insult.

Please forgive my over-bold words, and do not judge me too severely for them; please pray for us sinners, who grieve that such a letter is necessary (but of course it is—the situation is bad and won’t get better by silence; in particular, I hope I’ve communicated well enough that Fr. Lev’s articles are inexcusable).



With sincere love in Christ our Saviour,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim

P.s. A recent issue of your Witness gives an example of how sometimes you help to undermine Orthodox traditions without even being aware of it, simply by virtue of not being in sufficient living contact with the tradition.

You reprinted Fr. Michael Henning's article on "Christmas," "Easter," and the "New Year." While the intent of the article is commendable—to show that there is an Orthodox way and a non-Orthodox way of looking at these things—the article does err, I think, in its over-zealous insistence on abolishing terms which, after all, aren't that reprehensible, and will cause in some converts an undesirable "correctness" complex with regard to them. But worse: the author obviously views the "new year" question in a purely abstract manner and evidently has no contact with the traditional Orthodox way of handling the question: Archbishop John without fail had a new year's moleben on January 1/14 every year, precisely to mark the civil new year by the old calendar (not the new—he refused to serve a moleben then); this is sound, living "conservatism." The Church new year is another occasion entirely—which you yourself admit since you don't change the year's number on Sept. 1. But some of your "correct convert" readers, when they hear that Archbishop John did this, will very likely begin to suspect further his Orthodoxy—and you will have helped put a new poison in the air without realizing it. (Don't think it isn't so—how many already show disdain for Archbishop John because he venerated Blessed Augustine and did other things the "Patristic revival" forbids!) There must be a whole different tone to the preaching of Orthodox truth!

P.p.s. On reading this I find a phrase that will probably be offensive to you: "party headquarters." Forgive me; I shouldn't have used it. But I'm leaving it as it is trusting that you will accept this letter in good faith for the points that are made in it, and will not try to "pick it apart"; and also because it does show how this situation is widely viewed in our Church (something which perhaps you are not aware of)—so much so that even your best friends admit that "of course they have their own 'synod of bishops'". This letter is written with utmost frankness in the hope that real contact can still be restored between us and this whole idea of an "independent Orthodoxy" in our Church (which does amount to a clique or party) will come to an end.