

SELECTIONS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF
St Ignatius Brianchaninov

*Translated from The Collected Letters of St. Ignatius
Brianchaninov (in Russian), Moscow, 1995.
Titles have been supplied by the translator.*

I. ON THE GIFT OF WORDS

*A letter to Abbot Anthony (Bochkov) of the
Cheremenets Monastery*

Your Reverence,
Most Reverend Father Anthony!

I sincerely thank you for your visit to me, a sinner; this visit afforded me heartfelt consolation. I am especially grateful to you for desiring to acquaint me with your poems, with your wonderful talent, to which I give its true value. Mother Maria, after your departure, read me several more of your compositions. All of God's gifts to man are worthy of respect. Without doubt, the gift of eloquence [words] belongs to the greatest of gifts. By it man is made like unto God, Who has His Word. The word of man, like the Word of God, ever abides with its father and in its father—the mind—being one with it, and at the same time being inseparably separate from it. The human word is dependent upon the mind alone, from which it is continually being born, and through it the mind expresses its existence. We cannot even imagine the existence of the mind without the word or the word without the mind. When the mind wishes to communicate with

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the mind of its neighbors it uses its word for this. The word, in order to acquire the means of communication, clothes itself in sounds or letters. Then the immaterial word is made as it were material, remaining immutable in its essence. The Word of God too, so as to enter into contact with men and save them, became man.

A well-reasoned look at man's word makes understandable the reason for the Lord's strict decree, by which it is ordained and proclaimed that men will give an account for every idle word. The Divine purpose of the word for writers, for all teachers, and above all for pastors, is the instruction and salvation of men. What a terrible answer will be given by those who turn the means of edification and salvation into a means of depravity and destruction! St. Gregory the Theologian wrote in verse with a lofty, profoundly pious goal: to furnish readings and images in poetry to Christian youth, and to make unnecessary for them the study of the pagan poets, who exhale sensuality and the other passions, who exhale sacrilege.

I sincerely wish for you too the goal of the Theologian, finding you capable to a certain degree of complying with this purpose, and your reward will be great on earth and in heaven. Take the yoke of this goal upon yourself, as one obliged to render an answer at some point to the Giver for the talent given you. Take upon yourself the labor needed to attain this goal. Putting aside all vexation, apply yourself continually and humbly to the prayer of repentance that you are now occupied with, drawing inspiration from it for your writing. Then subject your writings to your own strictest criticism, and in the light of your conscience, enlightened by the prayer of repentance, mercilessly throw out of your works everything that belongs to the spirit of the world, that is foreign to the spirit of Christ. Woe unto them that laugh now! These are the words of Christ! This is a decree that proceeds from God! It is impossible to set it aside by any excuse whatever. Judging yourself and scrutinizing yourself, you will see that every word spoken or written in the spirit of this world places its mark upon your soul, by which souls are sealed unto the prince of

this world. It is essential to repent of such words, which are let loose through enthusiasm and ignorance. It is essential to establish in one's heart a deposit of faithfulness to Christ, and to immediately heal any falling away of the heart from faithfulness, due to our infirmity, by repentance and by putting away from oneself actions instilled by unfaithfulness and committed under the influence of spirits which flatter us and at the same time thirst for our destruction.

In my imagination I can already see a book of your verses, of poetry worthy of being called both sacred and elegant. Oh, may I see my expectation become fact, that I might rejoice over it with spiritual joy! About myself I can say nothing: you have seen more than I can tell you. Again I thank you for the labor you undertook in visiting me, and invoke God's blessing upon you. I ask your holy prayers, and with feelings of the most sincere devotion and respect I have the honor to be

Your Reverence's most humble servant,
Bishop Ignatius
August 11, 1864

2. ON TEMPTATIONS AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

*From a letter to Archimandrite Ignatius (Vasiliev)**

... When I recall you and our monastery, a comforting thought comes to me: without God's will nothing can happen. Thus it is with you and with the monastery—nothing can happen that God does not permit. And upon those whom He loves He permits temptations, and after the temptations He grants deliverance from them. Consoled by our redemption we hasten in prayer to God; and, receiving deliverance from temptations, we acquire faith in God—a faith that is not dead and theoretical, but living and practical. Your present situation entails

* Written during a period of travel, to the archimandrite replacing him as Superior during his absence.—TRANS.

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difficulties, but these difficulties are extremely beneficial for you—they are absolutely necessary; they will form you. “A man who is untried is unskilled,” says the Scriptures (????); he who is tried will receive the crown of life and will acquire the gift of helping those who are themselves being tried. Believe that your hairs are numbered by God—even more so are all things that happen with us before His eyes. Sail and direct the helm of the monastery with faith in God, in patience, and in the fear of God. When someone stands in a high place he must look up, not down. If he looks down his head will easily begin to spin and he will fall. And so, look up with faith to heaven, to the Providence of God, and your head will not spin, and you will not fall into confusion and despair, which come when you look down—that is, when in place of prayer and faith we give ourselves up to our own reasoning, and desire to resolve every matter by our own understanding alone. May Christ be with you. I ask your prayers and those of the whole brotherhood.

Unworthy Archimandrite Ignatius
July 12, 1847

3. ON DEATH

From a letter to a nun who has lost a close relative (no date).

... We who have departed from the midst of the world into the bosom of the holy monasteries by this very act have initiated our death according to the flesh, and our life in Christ. There are deaths that are sudden and there are deaths that come with prolonged illnesses. From the time we leave the world we die daily, according to the testimony of the holy Apostle Paul. In this death we see the indispensable condition of true life. The moment of our crossing over from earth, our birth into eternity, is not as strange and foreign to us as it is for those who live in the midst of the world, deafened by its noise, attached to it in mind and heart; who have forgotten that death exists and who do not think about eternity, which must unfailingly be their destiny as well.

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Having learned of the death of your relative, do not give yourself over to inconsolable weeping, which the world usually falls into, demonstrating by this that its hope is only in the flesh. Your hope is in Christ! Shed prayerful tears for the reposed, turn in your heart and thoughts to Him Who alone can comfort you, before Whom you must stand at the time appointed you. Do not be carried away by anything earthly; the fruit of such passion—which is illusory, seductive fancifulness—is corruption. Have peace in God and give yourself over in complete submission to His holy will. In this will is the fulness of Goodness and Wisdom; let us bow before it and fall down before Its feet, entrusting our souls and bodies to the Lord. Amen.

4. ON REPENTANCE, PRAYER, AND READINESS FOR AFFLICTIONS

From a letter to a certain nun, his spiritual daughter.

If you impute to my sinful heart that its sole joy is to hear that my spiritual children are walking in the truth, then why do you impute sorrow to me over your silence, for not having received from you words of gratitude, which belong to God alone? Let them fly to Him on the wings of prayer, on the wings of heartfelt sighs. Truth—our Lord Jesus Christ—standing in a humble form before Pilate, who questioned Him about Truth, who looked upon Him and did not recognize Him, as even now all the slaves of the world, seeing Him, see not, and hearing Him, hear not—this is that Heavenly Truth, Who descended to the earth to fallen and infirm humanity, “whose heart from his youth lieth in evil” (cf. Gen. 8:21), and Who began His teaching with the words, “Repent ye!” How long must an infirm one, who continually falls—if not in body, then in thought and heart—repent? As long as he is necessarily subject to mutability, that result of the Fall of our first father, even to his last breath. For evidently, it has not been seen that the Truth, Who ordained repentance, set any other limit or end to it on

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earth, other than its natural end, with the end of a man's earthly life. And so, do not be surprised when you see constant mutability in yourself. Do not hope to be delivered from it before death; or, better, do not be seduced by this hope; otherwise great agitation will always take you unawares, and will therefore act incomparably more powerfully upon you, and even overthrow you. Marvel at and worship the Truth, Who heals the unceasing mutability of man with His commandment of unceasing repentance. Lying on your bed, repent, and rising up, repent; as in a chain one link holds to another, so in your life let sigh follow after sigh. Thus spend the days, months and years. Let your infirmities be the object of your scrutiny. In the feelings of your heart be like unto one who has been cast into prison for life; be like unto a leper who has been banished outside the camp. Then your sufferings will end when your life ends; your last groan will be emitted with your last breath. For a monk, his consolation on earth is weeping and contrition. What is weeping? It is the action of grace, given at Baptism; it is the mediation for the sinner of the Spirit, Who makes His abode in us at holy Baptism. That is why holy weeping is unknown to those who do not know Christ, and to heretics.

Do you want to feel relief from the passions that war against you? Do you want to find contrition in your cell, without which, like a boat without an anchor, your mind will be borne away by fierce winds across the waves of reverie and dashed down into the depths of despair? Do you want to see the light from the Light? Do you want to taste the love which proceeds from Love and leads to Love? Take your mind and cast it down at the feet of your brothers and sisters, without distinguishing between the bad ones and the good ones. Tell your mind, and repeat as often as possible, so that from the thought will be born the feeling: "These are angels of God, while I alone, by my sin and darkness, am like unto the devil." It is destined for you to find relief for your soul at the feet of the brethren; the prayer of the Publican has been fixed for you, not the Jesus Prayer. For you the Kingdom of Heaven will be opened by the confession of the Thief, and not by the

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sanctity of John. Let us draw out from our heart and say: *Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thine ear* (Ps. 44:9); and when you are adorned with repentance, the King of kings and Lord of lords *shall greatly desire thy beauty* (Ps. 44:10), which comes from repentance.

You write about thoughts and desire to sort them out and learn what the Apostle means by the words: *We wrestle not against flesh and blood* (Eph. 6:12), and the rest. This is not of benefit to you and is unnecessary. It is enough for you to know that at any moment there might rise up against you either your passions or the spirits of treachery, who thirst for the destruction of all, and that you, as a most infirm one, must unceasingly cry out to the Lord: *Have mercy upon me ... for I am weak* (Ps. 6:2)! When, according as you hope in Him, the Lord is your strength, and according to your occupation He is your song, then the Lord will also be your salvation: *The Lord is my strength and my song, and He is become my salvation* (Ps. 117:14). Then you shall not die but live in repentance, and shall tell of the works of the Lord—how He delivers souls from hell and leads them to Paradise. Oh! When will the Lord vouchsafe us this? Prepare yourself for afflictions, and the afflictions will become easier; relinquish consolations, and they will come to him who considers himself unworthy. I ask your holy prayers for me, who speaks but does not do.

October 9, 1842

5. ON SORROWS AS THE LOT OF EVERY FOLLOWER
OF CHRIST

A letter to the same nun.

I received your letter and saw from it that the path of your life lies through narrow places and sorrows, as is promised to all who wish to follow Christ. He who follows Christ, like the foremost Apostle Peter and Andrew the First-called, is destined for the cross. The lot of one who converts to Christ, like the thief, is again the cross. In the first case

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the cross is made into a crown; in the second case it acts as a ladder. But no matter what our circumstances, and no matter which type we resemble, it is impossible to be Christ's without the cross. As it is said at the tonsure into monasticism: "that we might be ever prepared for the rising up of every affliction which Providence might permit to befall us." May the Lord strengthen you.

May 20, 1846

6. ON DISTRACTIONS

From a letter to the same nun.

The sea, troubled by winds, continues to be agitated for a considerable amount of time even after the winds quiet down. So also the mind, when it has been subject to the influence of distractions, continues to feel this influence, even after its withdrawal from the distractions, for a considerable length of time. One must endure such a situation with equanimity and try to divert the mind from the distractions by the remembrance of death and the judgment of God.

May the merciful Lord overshadow your struggle with his mercy!

April 29, 1863

7. ON THE NECESSITY OF TEMPTATIONS FOR SALVATION

To someone new to monasticism, who is undergoing temptations (no date).

The path of our life is like unto a voyage across a broad sea. It is sometimes calm on that sea, and sometimes a favorable wind blows; but most often there are storms on it. Seeing the approach of a storm, seeing the storm itself, we must not become disturbed, or fall into despondency or despair; we must fight against the waves and the opposing winds. Otherwise the ship of our soul might undergo shipwreck, and

might even sink. If during a storm something breaks or is damaged in the ship of our soul—again, we must not despond, we must not be troubled. We must spy out a dependable harbor, enter into it, fix and repair that which was damaged, and then continue our voyage with hope in Almighty God. And Almighty God will not abandon one who hopes in Him! The storms themselves serve for the benefit of the true servant of Christ: they make him an experienced sailor. The harbor in which the ship of the soul is repaired is prayer in a contrite spirit, the reading of the Holy Scriptures and Patristic books, and the counsel of one's neighbor, if that neighbor is capable of giving counsel in the Lord. Calm down—blessed is the man, says the Scriptures, who endures temptations. Contrary to this, he who is untried is unskilled. May the storm that has passed serve for you as a preparation in advance, as a learning experience for the endurance of future storms. Consider in advance what your conduct should be during them—prepare in advance, study it. Storms will follow without fail. The Most-wise Lord established that it is through many sorrows that we are to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, which we have lost and which we lose through an untimely and unlawful striving for delight. All of us, like our ancestor, are inclined to stretch out an audacious hand towards the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil; we are inclined to material comfort and are quickly seduced by the deceptive phantom of spiritual discernment and virtue, under the guise of which is concealed the evil which kills us.

Affliction acts contrary to delight, and therefore it acts contrary to our fall, and assists us to rise up. By these attributes, affliction is essential to us for our salvation. By reason of its necessity, the Savior has led His holy flock by way of the path of sorrows to the land of everlasting blessedness. To him who renounces sorrows, He resolutely proclaims: *He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me* (Matt. 10:38).

May Christ be with you. I hope to see you and impart to you whatever God gives me for the strengthening of your soul, which has left the world in search of the Lord. I think that I will meet you during

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The St. Nicholas-Babaev Monastery, in which St. Ignatius reposed.

the winter in the Babaev Monastery. I would like to see you there in the spring as well. However, be it as God arranges it. Pray for me.

8. ON ILLNESSES AND EMBITTERMENT

To a certain hieromonk, his spiritual son (no date).

I thank you for your letter and for your greeting on my nameday. I am already greatly consoled by the fact that I see your handwriting. It is not because of my love for you (I have not yet attained to love), but because of my customary feelings towards you that I say that the sight alone of your handwriting has greatly consoled me. I have not been grieved at you because of your silence: I excused it on account of your sickliness, on account of the work entailed in your care-laden duties, and on account of the thoughts which cause the sick and the busy to say, "Wait until the next post!" The next post has arrived—I have your

letter. Now you excuse me the same way I excused you. This whole time I have written to almost no one, or I have not written well, and not as much as I should have. But, believe me—I have written to the point of exhaustion, to the point of pain. One who understands how illness turns a man around and binds him will excuse my silence.

And you're still sick! What can you do?! A sick man cannot entirely be numbered among the living, because he lives a semi-life, a kind of shadow of a life. The very faculties of his soul numb him—they don't function the way they are supposed to function. These days Christians don't suffer from fetters and the sword; we endure torments from illnesses and other afflictions. Each time period is given its own form of suffering; to our time is given trivial sufferings. Let us endure them. The scales and the rewards are with God.

Where could you have gotten bitterness from? *Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other* (Ps. 84:10), says the Holy Scripture. That means, where there is no "mercy," where there is "bitterness," there is no "truth." Where there is no "peace" there is no "righteousness." And a condition of soul which is estranged from Divine Truth and Righteousness cannot be considered "a condition sent by God." You must deliver your soul from such a state and lead it into a state given by Divine Truth and Righteousness, a state of "Peace and Mercy." You will succeed in this if you say to yourself: "It is not without the Providence of God that what has happened to me has happened. Blessed be the name of God from henceforth and forevermore!" Don't peer too much into the circumstances of life—they're not worth it. They proceed, they race along quickly, and replace one another. And we too are racing along to the bounds of eternity! But to one who peers into circumstances, they seem as though they are not moving, and he easily falls into despair. He who sees that all things are flying along will fly along himself; his heart will be light and happy.

Christ be with you. Pray for me.