

Praise for *Hunger for Righteousness*

"In the world we live in which is full of immorality and indecency, Phoebe's book is a breath of fresh air on a subject not spoken of enough, and that is righteousness. People today are indeed hungry and thirsty to learn from people that lived righteous lives and Phoebe has chosen as examples for us that are perhaps hidden from the Western reader.... I highly recommend this book which is full of wisdom and takes a practical and engaging approach to write about what may otherwise be a weighty subject."

His Grace Bishop Suriel, Professor at Pope Shenouda III

Coptic Orthodox Theological Seminary and author of

Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness

"Farang Mikhail reminds us that fasting is about so much more than just food ... it is above all, perhaps surprisingly, about intimate union with God. All intimacy begins with a deep yearning or desire, hunger. Being hungry or thirsty is a movement of ascent, a point of departure from which we learn to hunger and thirst for righteousness, or more properly speaking, the Righteous One. This beautiful book acts as a guide through this hunger in Lent, gently intensifying week by week our yearning for God."

Rev. Assoc. Professor Daniel Fanous, St Cyril's Coptic Orthodox
Theological College, Sydney, Australia, author of *A Silent Patriarch*

"Phoebe Farang Mikhail's book will join the ranks of Alexander Schmemmann's *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* and Thomas Hopko's *Lenten Spring* as fitting devotional reading from an Orthodox writer. Farang Mikhail has gifted us by weaving together important ideas from scripture, excerpts from the Church Fathers, contemporary Orthodox and other Christian writers into a rich tapestry that reveals Christ. The rich description of the history and practices of the Coptic Orthodox Church alone is worth the price of entry. But Farang Mikhail's gift as a writer of Christian living shines through mostly in the practical advice on practicing righteousness."

Fr. Sujit Thomas, St. Thomas Indian Orthodox Church of Philadelphia

"Farang Mikhail transports the reader to a journey beyond Pascha, a journey to live as Christians throughout the year. She invites the reader to accompany her, through her personal reflections, to reflect on the world we live in through Christian eyes. She invites the reader to make pilgrimage to holy sites and ideas. *Hunger for Righteousness* is an engaging book and accessible writing. It is a good read."

Mother Lois, Professor Emerita of History of Early Christianity,
and author of *Balance of the Heart: Desert Spirituality
for Twenty-First-Century Christians*

“Frag Mikhail draws on a broad knowledge of history and literature, enriched by an intimate understanding of the Coptic tradition to offer wisdom and practical help. She lights the route to the proper posture of our Lenten journey using the thread of stories to proclaim the message of grace and the reminder that God works in our imperfections, our humility, our discomfort, our thirst, our hunger.”

Sherry Shenoda, author of *Mummy Eaters* and *The Lightkeeper: A Novel*

“Phoebe’s work is a poignant way to experience the days leading up to Easter. Where we hunger and thirst for righteousness, here is one way to be filled and guided.”

Lisa Colón DeLay, host of *Spark My Muse* podcast
and author of *The Wild Land Within*

“What is remarkable about Phoebe’s newest book is its ability to serve as an inspirational theological treatise, a self-help guide (in the best possible sense) and an actionable roadmap for every Christian wishing to thrive from their Lenten journey... The chapters are rich with content but concise, the prose is lyrical and profound.... God bless Phoebe and reward her for writing this gem destined to become a classic of the Orthodox tradition.”

Mireille Mishriky, author of the *Philo and the SuperHolics* series

“This new book ... is a must-read for Christians looking to connect the lives of the saints with their own modern-day struggles.”

Laura Michael, author and creator at *Coptic Dad and Mom*

“Phoebe Farag Mikhail has written a tremendously insightful travel guide to help Christians of any tradition ascend the ancient slopes of Lent with purpose, endurance, and resurrectional hope.”

Nicole M. Roccas, PhD, Certified trauma-informed coach
and author of *Time and Despondency*

“At last, a book designed for Lent for people living in the world with their families. Farag Mikhail, as in all her writing, is eminently pastoral, widely read, balanced, and practical. I highly recommend it for individual and group study.”

Dr. Patricia Fann Bouteneff, President and Founder of Axia Women



Hunger

for RIGHTEOUSNESS

Hunger *for* RIGHTEOUSNESS

A Lenten Journey Towards Intimacy with God
and Loving Our Neighbor

Phoebe Farag Mikhail



PARACLETE PRESS
Brewster, Massachusetts

2025 First Printing

Hunger for Righteousness: A Lenten Journey Towards Intimacy with God and Loving Our Neighbor

ISBN 978-1-64060-934-1

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945661

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

DEDICATION	9
FOREWORD by Allison Backous Troy	11
INTRODUCTION	13
CHAPTER 1 – Where Does My Help Come From?	17

PART I: HUNGER AND THIRST

CHAPTER 2 – Training for the Climb: Jonah and the Ninevites	25
CHAPTER 3 – Negotiating with God: Abraham	35
CHAPTER 4 – Friend of the Poor: St. Abraam of Fayoum	45

PART II: RIGHTEOUSNESS

CHAPTER 5 – Literally: The Patriarch and the Tanner	59
CHAPTER 6 – Take and Read: Abba Serapion	75
CHAPTER 7 – Paying Debts: St. Paësia and St. John the Little	91

PART III: FILLED

CHAPTER 8 – New Eyes: Tamar and Tobit	105
CHAPTER 9 – Savoring: Abraham	119
CHAPTER 10 – Christ is Risen! The Pilgrim Egeria	129

Thanksgiving	143
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APPENDIX A – The Pre-Lent and Lent Timeline Across Traditions	147
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APPENDIX B – References for the Great Lent Lectionary of the Coptic Orthodox Church	149
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NOTES	167
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*To my mother-in-law,
Wedad Gendy Abdelsayed,
“Teta Habooba,”
who reposed in the Lord
on August 6, 2020.*

*Please remember us in your prayers
and help us hunger for righteousness
as you did.*



FOREWORD

When I became Orthodox over a decade ago, I found myself in a spiritually difficult place. I was raised without any religious upbringing, and then after my many years in Protestant denominations, Orthodoxy Christianity's smoke and bells compelled me to see what was promised at the Eucharistic cup: Christ's healing presence, his body and blood mending the wounds I could only feel in my heart, my own life stretched over many losses and traumas. It was both the end and beginning of my pilgrimage, my entry into Orthodoxy. After receiving chrismation and Holy Communion, I realized that I had been the sparrow in Psalm 84, building a nest in Christ's doorway, only to see that I had been at his altar all along.

I had spent my Protestant years in faithful, loving church communities who lived out Micah 6:8's prophetic call: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." I saw them involved in so many social ministries, ones that addressed the roots of social injustice with Christ's care and compassion. Yet I struggled to see this shared within my Orthodox communities, even as we proclaimed an unbroken line back to Christ. When my husband was in seminary at Holy Cross, the seminary for the Greek Orthodox Church of North America, I walked daily past the grave of Archbishop Iakovos, who famously marched with Martin Luther King. I read about St. Maria of Paris, who hid Jewish children in trash cans to save them from the Nazis. And as I wondered about their legacies, I also yearned for a voice in my own time to chronicle how Orthodox Christians addressed systemic social ills: poverty, injustice, care for the abandoned, and justice for the oppressed.

And then, I met Phoebe Farag Mikhail.

Phoebe and I connected in an online Orthodox women's group, where we found ourselves sharing a love for books, patristics, and words. We began a friendship that has spanned years of motherhood, clergy family life, and the many strains of this decade's political

Hunger for Righteousness

eruptions. And in those years, Phoebe's wisdom, righteousness, and generosity have sustained my faith and helped me see the wide history of Orthodox Christianity's devotion to biblical justice, particularly in her life as a Coptic Orthodox Christian. Her desire to share her tradition's own historical and theological practices, particularly in social ministries, has both inspired me and anchored me.

This devotional work, *Hunger for Righteousness*, has the power to help inspire and anchor all readers, regardless of their tradition. Rather than simply cataloguing Coptic Orthodox practices with an empty triumphalism, Phoebe has mapped a path through Lent that brings us to Christ where he said we would find him—in the poor, in prisons, in the sick and hungry and forgotten. It is a path that is open to all to follow—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—and it is laid out for us with Phoebe's clear eye for beauty and theological acumen.

In our time, belligerence has become a virtue, and the voices of the loud and arrogant are too numerous to count. Phoebe's voice, however, brings us right to Christ, whose lifesaving love casts down our contemporary idols of power, violence, and empire. If we follow her words through Lent, I trust we will all see Christ as he has been: standing right beside us, lighting our paths in the darkness, his righteousness kindling courage in our hearts.

—Allison Backous Troy

*Presbyteria at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church,
Grand Junction, Colorado*

INTRODUCTION

One early spring many years ago in Queens, New York, my Catholic classmates in grade school asked me a confusing question: “What are you giving up this Lent?” I didn’t understand. As a Coptic Orthodox Christian, I had much in common with my Catholic friends—we went to church on Sundays, took communion, went to confession, observed the major Christian holidays (although on different dates), and observed the Lenten season before Easter. We even each had our own pope. But as an Orthodox Christian, I never “decided” what I would give up for Lent.

In my church, we all “give up” the same things during Lent. We fast Lent as a community, and we call it Great Lent because it is the longest and most important one of many “lents” or fasts we practice all year. We don’t have individual choices about what to “give up.” In fact, we rarely use this word “give up” for any fasting period. In general, we fast the same way, abstaining from food until a certain time of day and then eating a vegan diet at other times. There are obviously allowances made for children, for pregnant and nursing women, and for those with medical conditions, but otherwise, no one decides what they will “give up” for Lent. Lent in Orthodoxy, like most things in Orthodoxy, is a corporate, communal endeavor, not an individual one. Yet even Orthodox Christians, especially those of us living in the West, have absorbed this highly individualized idea of Lent, narrowing its purpose to a period focused on personal spiritual piety.

Yet if we pay closer attention to the earliest Christian Lenten traditions, we’ll discover how Lent was a period during which individuals who wanted to become Christian prepared themselves not for personal transformation, but to join the body of believers, the communion of saints, through baptism. By examining our liturgical prayers and Scripture readings developed over centuries, we’ll discover the ways Lent has always been a time for individual repentance, yes, but first for giving and forgiving, for mending

Hunger for Righteousness

relationships and building new ones, for fighting injustice, and for growing in intimacy with God communally, not just individually.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria's Lenten tradition has strong links to this early Christian heritage. Founded in the first century by St. Mark the Evangelist during his preaching in Alexandria, Egyptian Christianity spread and flourished throughout Egypt, becoming the primary religion of the country within a few centuries, despite brutal persecution by the Roman Empire. The months on the Coptic calendar date back to Egypt's Pharaonic period, but the Coptic Year begins in A.D. 284, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who brutally persecuted Christians, especially in Egypt. This book was published in the year 2025 Anno Domini, the year of our Lord, but also 1741 Anno Martyrum, the year of the martyrs. Egyptian Christianity survived through the centuries, even after the Arab invasion in the seventh century that eventually led to the conversion of many Egyptians to Islam, in part due to discrimination and sometimes persecution. During this period Egyptians became known as "Copts," an Arabization of the Greek word for "Egyptian." Eventually, only the Egyptian Christians were referred to as Copts. The Egyptian language, first written in hieroglyphs, then a Demotic script, and lastly in Greek letters with a few Demotic characters, became known as the Coptic language.

Outside of Church liturgical practice, most Egyptians have stopped speaking Coptic day to day, except as it survives in the unique vocabulary of Egyptian colloquial Arabic—and sometimes even in Modern Standard Arabic. The Arabic word for the Egyptian "crocodile," "timsa7" (تمساح) comes from the Coptic word for it: emsah (ⲙⲥⲁⲩ). An Egyptian might ask you not to overthink something, and that word, "makmaka," comes from mokmek (ⲙⲟⲕⲙⲉⲕ) in Coptic, which means "to think" or "to ponder."¹ Some even believe the word "falafel," a favorite Lenten meal for Copts today, originated from a more modern Coptic phrase (Φα λα Φελ) that loosely translates to "of many beans," although this etymology is hotly debated.

Today Coptic Orthodox Christians are the largest population of Christians in the Middle East and North Africa, numbering

Introduction

between eight to ten million adherents, with almost one million more living outside of Egypt. Pope Tawadros is the 118th Patriarch of Alexandria, the See of St. Mark and All Africa in an unbroken line of apostolic succession that began with St. Mark before his martyrdom in Alexandria in A.D. 64. Although many of us in the West associate the title “Pope” with the Pope of Rome, church historian Eusebius records the earliest use of the title “Pope” in Christianity in reference to the thirteenth Alexandrian Patriarch, Pope Heracles. We continue to use this title for the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. We are a member of the Oriental Orthodox family of churches, along with our sister churches, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Indian Orthodox Church (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church), and the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. Each of these apostolic churches maintains a rich heritage of Orthodox Christianity that has been passed down from generation to generation.

While in this book I reference many different Christian church communions and traditions, I draw most upon the Coptic Orthodox tradition, since it’s what I know best. Still, Lent is practiced globally by Christians from many denominations, because we all draw from the same well, and the well is deep and wide. I hope that readers unfamiliar with the Coptic Orthodox Lenten tradition find stories, practices, and perspectives that enrich their own traditions and discover how their church’s Lenten practices align with the ones I share in this book. Most importantly, as we embark on this Lenten journey together, let us pray that together we might offer an acceptable fast to the Lord.

CHAPTER ONE

Where Does My Help Come From?

They told us it was just like walking up a wheelchair ramp. Well, two hours later, in pitch darkness, I lagged behind the rest of my group, wondering why this seemed easier for everyone else. Every step forward got harder and harder. I had not prepared well for this.

They told us that it was easier to climb Mount Sinai (Jabal Musa) in Egypt on foot than to take a camel. Climbers can take one of two paths: the “Steps of Repentance,” a steep 3,750-step climb carved into the mountain by monks, and the “Camel’s Path,” a wide, winding slope that climbers share with camels. Both paths meet at a rest area before the final 750-step climb to the summit. I joined my church’s group for the climb, excited to be walking where Moses had walked to meet with God and receive the Law. We took the Camel’s Path and began at night so that we could see the sun rise at the top of the mountain and descend before the sun’s heat battered the mountainside.

I struggled to make it to the final rest area before the last 750 steps. Inwardly ashamed, I stayed at the rest area with a few members of my group while the others journeyed to the summit. Most of those who stayed behind were much older than I and had knee problems, but one of them was a friend my age. As the rest of the group went up the stairs, she burst into tears. I turned to comfort her, thinking she was ashamed, like me, that she could not reach the top.

“I’m so happy,” she said, between sobs. “This is my first time to ever climb a mountain! I did it!”

I swallowed my shame. In comparing my physical fitness to that of others, I had forgotten that this was my first climb, too. Even more importantly, I had almost forgotten that I was still sitting where Moses sat, where he might have even rested during his many

Hunger for Righteousness

days on this mountain. I thanked God for my friend's perspective. Turning with her, we watched the sun rise in silence. Unless we go back and try it again, we'll never know how it looked at the summit. But we know how it looked right there, and the sunrise still took my breath away.

I did not take up mountain climbing after that trip, and I have never gone back to Mount Sinai to try the climb again with more preparation. There are those who relish the hard work of mountain-climbing, the thrill of reaching the summit. I'm just not one of them. I prefer viewing mountains from afar, far enough to see their tops, and close enough to sense their majesty. I also enjoy seeing the view from a mountaintop, but not if I must climb for hours on foot in the middle of the night. While I know those mountaintop views are breathtaking, I'm not sure all the effort for that view is worth it. Thankfully, sunrises can be enjoyed at almost any altitude.

I much prefer walking to climbing. And in many ways, our spiritual lives can be likened to a walk. But along that walk sometimes there are hills, and sometimes mountains. And unlike the mountaintops we can reach by car, ski lift, or gondola, these spiritual mountains are the ones we must climb ourselves, like it or not.

Great Lent for me is one such mountain. Unlike physical mountains, Great Lent is a mountain I must climb as a Christian. I'll be honest—I often look towards the Great Lent climb with an impending sense of fatigue. I'd rather just skip to the Resurrection. I know this is a spiritual weakness on my part. Perhaps this is why the first book I wrote focused on the joy of the Resurrection, and the one spiritual practice I did not include was fasting.

The fact is, we do a lot of fasting, especially in Orthodox Christianity. All that fasting is for good reason. The church knows that most of us are not seasoned mountain climbers, and the church also knows that the safest mountain-climbing is done in groups. So, we fast together, with Lent arguably the most important fast of the year. Lent is a communal fast, a period when almost all Christians have decided to enter into a spiritual struggle. And, just as with climbing Mount Sinai in a group, we climb that spiritual mountain together.

Where Does My Help Come From?

Mountains hold a special place in Scripture—indeed, in all ancient Near Eastern religions. The idea of mountains as holy places seems ingrained in our human psyche. Mountains draw our eyes heavenward; their height, their majesty, their danger give us a glimpse of transcendence. Even as their summits seem out of reach, they paradoxically symbolize the nearness of God. “The elevation of mountains, as a geographical feature, qualified them to be a place of meeting between God the most high and His people on earth,” Fr. Morcos Daoud writes.² Hence, Moses would receive the law on Mount Sinai, he would view the Promised Land on Mount Nebo, and the temple where the Israelites worshiped would be built on Mount Zion.

Our Lord Jesus Christ could often be found on a mountain. He went to a mountain to pray, to seek solitude from the crowds. He fasted and prayed for forty days and forty nights on the mountain where the devil tempted him. He met Moses and Elijah on Mount Tabor and was transfigured before his disciples. His most famous sermon is the Sermon on the Mount.

On that mountain, the Lord taught us what it means to be blessed. Matthew uses *makarios* for the word “blessed,” and although, loosely translated, this word means “happy,” its root goes much deeper. Orthodox author and peace activist Jim Forest writes that *makar* in classical Greek is related to the gods, to immortality. “In Christian use, *makarios* came increasingly to mean sharing in the life of God.”³ The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—all who embody these qualities share in the life of God.

On that mountain, the Lord taught us how to share in the life of God by teaching us how to pray—how to communicate with God, how to be in relationship with him. The Lord told us to do some difficult things, like forgive those who have wronged us, love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and expect persecution. From a human perspective, these things are not just difficult, they can seem impossible. Without God, they *are* impossible.

Hunger for Righteousness

We might believe that like Moses, we will meet our Lord Jesus only if we make it to the top of the mountain, the heights of spirituality, the top of the ladder of divine ascent, and so on. The beauty of Lent, however, is that we don't need to wait until we reach the top. During Lent, Jesus climbs this mountain with us—just as he did in Matthew 5. He didn't fly to the mountain, despite having angels at his beck and call. He went up on the mountain with his own two feet.

During my first year of motherhood, I spent many hours alone at home with my firstborn. As much I treasured those days with him, I also often felt a crushing loneliness. I had just moved—twice. Once across the Atlantic to my parents' house, and once again into an apartment of our own. I was adjusting to new motherhood right as my husband was adjusting to his new role as a Coptic Orthodox priest.

Our apartment had a large balcony window, and from the sixteenth floor I had a view of the hills far beyond our street. Those hills became a comfort in my loneliness. Whenever I looked at them, Psalm 121 would come to my mind: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills—From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth." The hills stood far away, yet I could see them. Help from the Lord would come.

On that mountain in Matthew 5, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." He did not say, "Blessed are those who *are* righteous." He said, Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst for it*. This is all he asks. He asks us only to *desire* righteousness, and he will fill us. He will fill us because Jesus Christ himself is righteousness, and all he asks is that we desire him. All we need to do is turn our eyes to the mountains. Our help will come from the Lord.

Books and books have been written on the Sermon on the Mount. In this book we will focus on this one Beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." We'll explore in practical terms what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We'll learn about righteous people and discover how their intimacy with God and love for their neighbors

Where Does My Help Come From?

led to their being called righteous. And we'll use Great Lent as a chance to begin our ascent, our opportunity to cultivate a desire for that righteousness.

This book has ten chapters, this one being the first, so it is set up to be started before Great Lent begins and completed after the Feast of the Resurrection. For Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Eritrean Orthodox, and Syrian Orthodox Christians, this means that if you started this chapter the week of Jonah's Fast (the Fast of Nineveh), you can read one chapter per week, finishing the last chapter during the first week of the Holy Fifty Days. Eastern Orthodox readers can start with this chapter when the Lenten Triodion (the three-week period before the start of Great Lent) begins. Armenian Orthodox readers can start with this chapter during the Fast of the Catechumens, which for Malankara Indian Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant readers also coincides with the three weeks before the start of Great Lent.

May we offer our Lord Jesus Christ an acceptable fast, during which our hunger and thirst for food and drink lead us to a hunger and thirst for righteousness. When we sing the refrain "Jesus Christ fasted for us/forty days and forty nights," we are not simply telling the story of what Christ did, but what he did for us and for our salvation. Through this fast he fasted for us, he was "paying in advance a deposit for our own fasting," St. Fr. Bishoy Kamel says, "so that when we fast, He is our partner in the journey of fasting. He set the plan, now He is our partner in it."⁴ So, with the Lord himself as our partner on this climb, let us begin.



Part I

HUNGER AND THIRST



St. Abraam of Fayoum

Abba John the Dwarf said, 'A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top.' They said to him, 'What does this saying mean?' He said, 'The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win, and that is the place to begin. For all the commandments of Christ depend on this one.'

—Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 93¹

Now what is hunger? Surely the desire for the food one needs. For when the physical vigour is gone, its lack is to be made up again by taking the necessary nourishment. Then nature desires bread, or something else to eat. If, therefore, someone took gold instead of bread into his mouth, would he meet the need? Hence, if a man cares for things he cannot eat instead of for food, he is evidently concerned with stones. While nature seeks one thing, he is busy trying to find another. Nature says—in fact, by being hungry it almost cries out—that it is now needing food. . . . But you do not listen to nature; you do not give it what it is seeking. You think instead of the load of silver you want to be on your table, and so you look for metalworkers. . . . Nature wants to drink—but you prepare costly . . . mixing bowls, jars, and a thousand other things which have nothing to do with the need in question. . . . This is the advice the enemy gives in the matter of food; such things he suggests by turning to stones, instead of being content with the ordinary use of bread. But He who overcomes temptation does not eliminate hunger from nature, as if that were a cause of evil. He only removes the worry and fuss which the counsel of the enemy causes to enter together with that need. He does not eliminate hunger, since it is needed to preserve our life; but He does sift out and cast away the superfluous things that have become mixed up with this need, when He says that he knows a bread that nourishes indeed, because the Word of God has adapted it to human nature. If, therefore, Jesus has been hungry, the hunger that is in us as it was in Him should truly be blessed. What is this food that Jesus is not ashamed to desire? . . . "My meat is to do the will of the Father." . . . Now if the Father desires that we should all be saved, and if, therefore, our life is Christ's food, we know how to make use of this hungry condition of the soul. What is this? That we should hunger for our own salvation, that we should thirst for the Divine Will, which is precisely that we should be saved.

—St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sermons on the Beatitudes²