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PREACHING
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St. Paul looks to the Church as the pure virgin bride; at the same time she is a mother who brings forth children of God unceasingly. Her virginity is perpetual, and her motherhood also perpetual. Without her virginity and motherhood she loses her identity. The apostle says, "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." (2 Cor 11:2) St Luke refers to her perpetual motherhood, saying, "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:47) Solomon also says, "Your teeth are like a flock of shorn sheep which have come up from the washing, every one of which bears twins, and none is barren among them." {Song 4:2, cf. 6:6}

PREACHING AS DAILY EVANGELIC EXPERIENCE

Rarely can you find any article or book concerning preaching in the writings of the early Fathers. For to them preaching is not a subject for searching or discussing, but it is an essential message for every member of the church, regardless he is a priest or layman, male or female, well educated person or illiterate. Without the spirit of preaching the believer loses his/her characteristic as a Christian person. St. John Chrysostom says, "What is the profit of a lamp without light, and what is the profit of a Christian without love (the love of the salvation of his/her brethren)?"

The writings of the Early Fathers in all their branches have the spirit of preaching and witnessing to the Lord Jesus Christ and His redeeming work. This is very clear in their commentaries or homilies on the Old and New Testaments, their spiritual discourses, apologetic, ascetic writings and sacramental discourses.

Here I refer to some examples

1. THE BIBLICAL STUDIES AND THE SPIRIT OF PREACHING

When we refer to the biblical studies we cannot ignore Origen, the dean of the School of Alexandria in the second century. His ardent love to the Holy Bible through the spirit of preaching attracted pagans not only to attend his lectures, and to

be converted to Christianity, receiving the sacrament of baptism, but also as they believed they offered their lives as sacrifices of love towards their Crucified Lord through martyrdom. Thus was the effect of the word of God that attracted non-believers even to martyrdom joyfully.

2. THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY AND PREACHING

St. John Chrysostom clarified the Episcopal (priestly) work as carrying the burdens of others, and not as a position for dignity and rest. He also says to the priests, “O priests you are the father of the whole world,” and not of the Christians only. For the congregation, he used to say to them, “You are the bishop.” He considers the people are more capable of preaching than the clergymen, for they are in close contact with the non-Christians in the markets, business and schools more than the clergymen. The child is more capable of attracting his/her friend to the Holy Trinity, than the priest. The same is true for the young people.

In his discourse concerning the message of the Christians who attend the Church meetings, St. John Chrysostom says,

[How great loss the brethren suffer, for few are those who take care of their salvation! The majority of the body of Christ looks like a dead man.

You say, “What concerns us in this matter?”

You have great abilities for the benefit of your brethren. It is your responsibility if you do not advise them, prevent them from committing evil deeds, attract them strongly to come here, and protect them from their carelessness. It is fit for man not to be useful for himself alone but also to many.

Christ clarifies that when He called us “salt” (Matt. 5:13), “yeast” (Matt. 13:23) and “light” (Matt. 5: 14), for all these things are useful to others and to themselves.

The lamp does not shine for itself but for those who are sitting in darkness. You are a lamp, not to enjoy light to yourself alone, but to render to it those who have astrayed away. For what is the profit of a Christian who does not help others? And who does not render others to virtues?

Again the salt does not protect itself, but it protects the

food so that it will not be corrupted... God makes you a spiritual salt to bide the corrupted members, or the careless and lazy brethren, and to attract and deliver them from laziness as if from corruption, and to unite them with the other members of the body of the Church.

This is the reason the Lord calls us “yeast,” for the yeast does not leaven itself, but a little bit of it leavens the whole dough regardless of its size. Thus you also have to do. Although you are small in number, you are many and strong in faith and your zeal towards God. As the yeast is not weak in its effect in comparison with its size, for it is powerful by its nature... thus you can attract many persons more than your number, and they will have the same zeal as you have.]

It is said that when St. Gregory of Nyssa was ordained as a bishop there were only 13 families in his diocese, and on his departure from this world there were only 13 pagan families.

3. HOMILIES AND PREACHING

The homilies of St. John Chrysostom are good examples of the homilies that encourage peoples for preaching. He loved the personality of St. Paul as a preacher fervently. He refers to St. Paul often as a man who had a very big heart, full of love, and a mind that was absorbed in the salvation of the whole world.

In a speech with his people about the supernatural apostolic authority, St. John Chrysostom says,

[Why are angels not sent to preach the Gospel? So the man may not excuse himself for his laziness or carelessness, saying that he has a nature that is different than that which is of the angels, for the difference between the nature of man and that of angel is very great. Truly it is marvelous that the word which man utters by his earthly tongue has the power to uproot death, grant the forgiveness of sins, restore sight to blind men, and change earth into heaven. I wonder at the might of God, and my wonder and respect increase for the zeal of Paul for receiving this grace, and for preparing himself to receiving it.

I exhort you not just to wonder, but also to imitate him (St. Paul) as a supreme example of virtue. Thus, you shall be

worthy of sharing his crown, and you shall discover that any person can be in the likeness of Paul in his ministry, and to imitate him, repeating in his heart the words of Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only, but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (2 Tim 4:7-8) Do you see how he calls all believers to share his accomplishments, and subsequently the reward is offered to all.

May we all struggle to confirm our merit of receiving the promised blessings. May we see the glory of the steadfastness in realizing our goal, so we may enjoy this grace.

May we acknowledge that Paul has a nature that does not differ than ours by any means, he was exactly like us. That makes what seems hard and impossible very easy and light. For after a short time of work and struggle, we will wear the crown of incorruption, through the grace and goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ, for whom is due the glory and honor now and forever. Amen.]

In comparison between the apostle Paul and the Angels, St. Chrysostom wrote,

[At last we have to compare Paul with angels. May we leave earth and ascend to the gates of heaven. Nobody says that our words have supernatural boldness, for the Holy Scripture calls John the Beloved and the priests as “angels.” Then why do you wonder when we say that Paul is worthy to be called because of his sublime in all these virtues?

What is the cause of the greatness of angels? Is it their obedience to God. For this same reason David was admired. “Who excel in strength, who do His word.” (Ps 103:20) The obedience of Paul cannot be compared even by many of the incorporeal beings. They are blessed for their obedience to the commandment of God, and total refusal of disobedience. This is what Paul did in complete sincerity. He fulfilled the word of God and also His commandments. Not only His commandments, but also that, as he himself clarified, saying,

“That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge.” (1 Cor 9:18)

What does the psalmist see in the angels that are worthy of admiration? “Who makes His angels winds, His ministers a flame of fire.” (Ps 104:4) This also we see in Paul. He was like a fire and wind that pass through the earth’s length and breadth, and purified it through his journeys.

This what made Paul more distinguished, for while he was on earth in his corruptible body, he showed courage and overcame the invisible powers.

How could we be considered blameful unless we struggle to imitate him, especially for many supreme characteristics are gathered together in one person.

May we think deeply in these considerations, so that we may become blameless.

May we have the same zeal, so that we may share the same blessings through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and his love-kindness, to whom is due the glory and power now and forever. Amen.]

4. CHRISTIAN VIRTUES AND PREACHING

Christian virtues in fact are attaining Christ, the Lover of mankind. Virtue, in the Orthodox concept, is a joyful call for preaching and witnessing to the Holy Trinity. For Example:

- ❖ In his speech about **almsgiving**, St. John Chrysostom clarified that if a man bestows all he owns, it would not be equal of gaining one soul to Christ who died for this soul’s sake.
- ❖ **Repentance** is a call not to remember our sins, but in its essence, it is a return to the bosom of the Father, and to attain the divine love.
- ❖ **Obedience** is not subjection to the parents, priests, counselors, or leaders, but it is a kind of fellowship with Christ in His obedience to His Father.
- ❖ **Humbleness** is not a kind of despising oneself, but a unity with Christ to share with Him the last place in order to stretch our hands and embrace all mankind if possible.
- ❖ **Contenance** is not preventing from practicing certain sins,

but it is a reaction of our love towards the Holy One, and a desire to be an icon of Him, through the work of His Holy Spirit. For there are many who do not commit certain sins not for their love toward the Holy One, but because of their deficit, or their human pride, such as children.

5. THE ASCETIC DEEDS AND PREACHING

Some believers believe that ascetic deeds prevent the preaching work. In their concept, ascetic deeds has one aim, i.e. attracting believers to their inner man, and not to be involved in the salvation of others. But in fact the biographies of the great leaders of the monastic systems, their acts, and their writings witness that they practiced an evangelic and preaching life. For example we mention here the following:

1. Abbot Apollo, of Ansena, in Upper Egypt, attracted hundreds of the non-Christians to the Christian faith through his heavenly joy.

2. St. Moses the Black, as a monk, attracted many thieves to the Christian faith, and to the monastic life. Also when a noble lady came from Rome to visit St. Arsanus, and she met St. Moses who spoke with her concerning the work of Christ, witnessing to the Gospel of Christ.

3. When St. Macarius the Great met a pagan priest he attracted him through his decent speech about the Christian faith, and the monastic life.

4. The Ascetic homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian and the hermit have a call to the inner joy and sincere love towards the brethren, the two spiritual nets that catch the souls to accept the practical and living faith.

6. LITURGIES AND PREACHING

The writings of the Fathers of the Church from the apostolic era till the fifth century do not mention the details of the rituals of the liturgies. This is because of the varieties of local traditions; moreover the Fathers were involved in the core of the liturgies. They were interested in practicing liturgies as practical fellowship and unity with the God the Father, in the Only-Begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

By this spirit, even the liturgies attracted many non-Christians through the ages to the true faith. All the church liturgies, if are practiced by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, instead of as formalities that must be fulfilled, the hearts of the whole church, clergymen and laity, ascend to heaven, and share with the heavenly hosts their love and praise God in unity. This is the feeling not of the worshippers alone, but even of the non-believers who attend the liturgies. The world is thirsty to see the icon of heaven on earth.

7. CHURCH RITUALS AND PREACHING

I know how this matter is so touchy, for some believers think that if any one does not keep certain church ritual, even for the sake of the salvation of man, even if it is secondary, it would be considered as a destruction of the church.

Here, I leave the floor to St. John Cassian of the fourth and fifth centuries as an eyewitness of the church monastic ritual in Egypt, for he is the best one who can tell us about the priority of the salvation of man over keeping the literal fulfillment of some rituals.

In chapter 9 of his work "*The Institutions*," he tells us that the Egyptians do not care for reciting all the psalms to be sung in one shot without stopping. However, they divide them into two or three groups according to the number of their verses. They do not care for the quantity, but for the attentiveness of the mind and understanding. They prefer that a person prays ten verses, singing them in understanding, with an attentive mind rather than to recite the whole psalm with a distracted mind. This happens when the worshiper concentrates on the quantity, ignoring the meanings, as if he is in a hurry to finish his prayer. Because of lack of experience, a new monk prolongs singing the psalm, whereas a monk with good spiritual experience is more concerned with preventing those who share in the prayer from being bored as a result of prolonging the tune of the song.

In chapter 10, St. Cassian tells us that the prayers are short, so that distractions cannot penetrate the prayer while the worshippers are very warm spiritually. Satan cannot catch their thoughts and makes them astray, and the prayers may not

become lukewarm or cold.

In chapter 11, St. Cassian mentions that the Egyptians did not care for the quantity of verses that were sung in the prayer but for controlling the mind, aiming to fulfill what the apostle says, “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind” (1 Cor 14:15). He also assured that the worshipper had to pray in very clear utterance and with understanding.

The Early Fathers prefer the short prayers to be repeated unceasingly, so that from one side we can cleave to God continuously, and from the other side we are protected by its shortage from the arrows of the enemy, by which he wants to wound us through our prayers. St. Augustine in his letter 130:20 writes, [It is known of the brethren in Egypt that they practice many various and very short prayers. They shoot them suddenly and quickly so that the wakeful mind will not be distracted, the thing which is considered as the most precious in prayer.]

8. THEOLOGIES AND PREACHING

St. Athanasius the Apostolic, the disciple of St. Anthony the Great, learned theology from his teacher. He was interested in the salvation of every soul. In his youth he wrote “*A Letter to the Heathens*,” its goal is attracting them to the knowledge of their need of the Savior, and discovering the real personality of the Savior, the Lover of mankind. Although St. Athanasius devoted all his life for defending the divinity of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit, his writings were soteriological, for he was not eager to enter in discussions with the Arians just to overcome them, but he aimed to attain their salvation, and the salvation of every single soul, and to have the experience of the supreme redeeming work of Christ.

9. BELIEVING IN THE HOLY TRINITY AND PREACHING

The writings of the Fathers concentrate on believing in the Holy Trinity, the divine work in the life of mankind, and in the life of every believer. All other religions look to God as if He is isolated in His heaven, far away from man. For them, God loves them, sending others to help them. For us, God is so near to us. His pleasure is to abide in our souls, and we abide in Him.

He is concerned for every man, and does not trust any creature in heaven or on earth for realizing our salvation.

The Father presents His unique fatherhood to His dearest creature, man. It is His pleasure to send His Only-Begotten Son for man's salvation.

The Only-Begotten Son became Man, sanctified our nature, our world and our work. He united us with Him by the work of His Holy Spirit, so that we may become children of God and members of Christ's Body. He is still involved in preparing us to share with Him in His eternal glory.

The Holy Spirit dwells in us, sanctifies our hearts, as the holy temple of God, wherein the Holy Trinity abides.

In brief, the world is in need to see and to be in touch with the work of the Holy Trinity in the lives of the believers. Thus, the world is not in need to enter in theoretical discussions concerning faith, but it surly will be attracted in its depth to have the same experience of the true believers.

10. PREACHING AND MINISTERING THE TABLES (THE SOCIAL ACTIVITIES)

In the Apostolic era, the people chose seven deacons, among them was St. Stephen, and the apostles laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:6) St. Stephen's responsibility was to take care of the widows, the poor and the sick people. This service did not prevent him from preaching, but on the contrary it encouraged him to serve men so that they may attain the heavenly feast.

Unfortunately the hearts of many of the deacons and deaconesses and occasionally priests were attracted by the service of the tables to the material things, while St, Stephen's heart was always ascended to heaven. In his trail it was that those who were present looked at his face as a face of an angel (Acts 6:15).

When the high priest asked him concerning the accusation that was addressed against him, he didn't defend himself, but considered it a good chance to stand before the high priest, some rulers, and Jewish leaders, for the last time, to present a sincere biblical call to attain the living faith. He was a real preacher.

11. PREACHING AND THE EARLY APOLOGISTS

In his defense of Christians, Athenagorus wrote to Emperor Aurelius Antonius (161-180) and his son Commodus in details a reply on the three accusations that were addressed against Christians, but he passed over defending to preach. For him it was a unique chance to reveal the evangelic truth to the two emperors and to those who read his apology. His aim was not only to defend the Christian faith but also to attract every soul to the salvation that is realized by Christ.

12. PREACHING AND THE COMMUNAL WORK

Communal work was very essential in the Apostolic and post-Apostolic eras, on all levels, such as the church of the village, the dioceses, the Apostolic Sees, and the Catholic (Universal) Church. This true ecclesiastical life had its attraction and power for preaching. From one side it attracts the Grace of God that desires to work abundantly where there is love and unity, and from the other side to attract men who sincerely search for the truth, that is not separated from love found in the church, the icon of heaven, and a practical picture of the work of the Holy Trinity in the lives of men.

The world acknowledges the dogma of the Holy Trinity through the communal church life. Men can see a living picture of the concept of perfection and a Unique Model for the democratic life, for the Holy Trinity sharing one to another in their one will. The believer, who imitates the Holy Trinity, does not ask what is his own on account of others, but what is other's as if it is his own. Believing in absolute oneness of God supports the individual doctorate system. Christianity therefore, with its faith in the Holy Trinity, supports the true democratic system.

Every believer is eager to imitate His God, believing in absolute oneness of God. The sign of His perfection is the imperfection of all other beings. But believing in the Holy Trinity grants us a very large concept for perfection, for some persons ask, "How can the Father be perfect in His characteristics, while the Son and the Holy Spirit who are not separated from Him share in His perfection? The same thing is concerning the Son and the Holy Spirit. We reply on these

questions, saying that the true perfection is not realized through self-satisfaction and individualism, but through the eternal movement of love in God and the infinite interrelationship between the three Hypostasis. The Son and the Holy Spirit share the absolute perfection of the Father, for They are one with Him in the same essence. Thus the faith in the Holy Trinity inspires us the spirit of fellowship and unity. The perfect one reveals his perfection through the perfection of others.

Man can attain perfection not through self-glorification, and self-satisfaction, but through unity with others that is based on love. The perfect person is he who does not feed his ego for attaining vainglory or looks to his own profit, but who loves others and accepts their love towards him.

YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SALVATION EVEN OF THE ILLEGITIMATE CHILD

The salvation of every single soul is so precious in the sight of God; therefore it is too hard to evaluate the responsibility of the believer for the salvation of others, who are the subject of God's love personally. St Basil the Great assures this responsibility even concerning illegitimate child. He says, [A woman who brings forth a babe and leaves it in the road, and does not care although she has the opportunity to save it, believing that thus she can hide her sin and leaves him through inhumanity, is condemned as a murderer.]