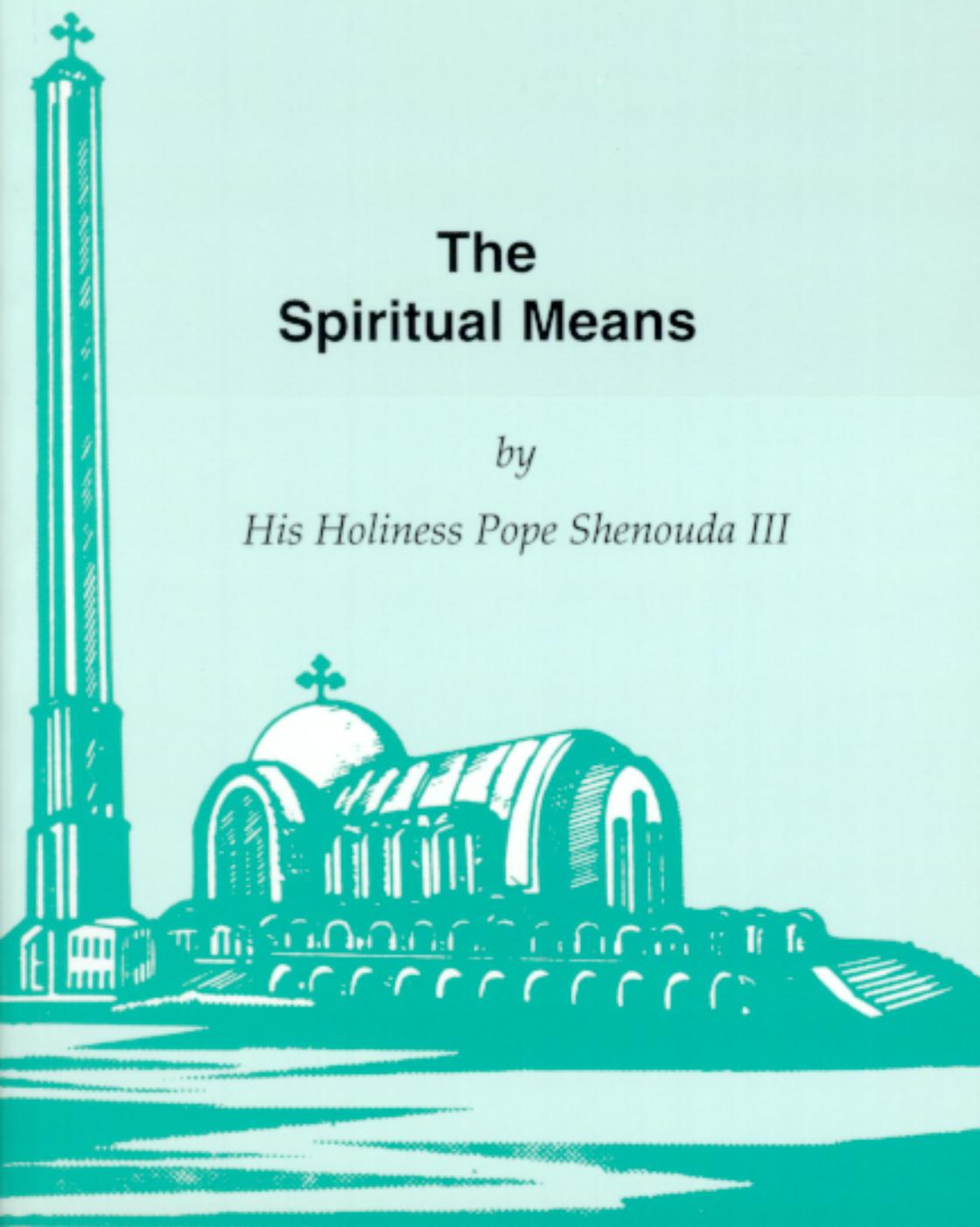


The Spiritual Means

by

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III



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**Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, King of Kings and
Lord of lords**



**His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria
and Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark**

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the
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INTRODUCTION

“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Rom 8:14).

He leads them through certain means which if they follow, they will take part in the work of the Holy Spirit and be in the communion of the Holy Spirit (2Cor 13:14).

We call these means ‘The Spiritual Means’ or the means of grace, that is, the means through which the grace of God works or with which it works...

In this book, I shall speak to you about eleven of these spiritual means. They are:

Prayer, The Holy Bible, Reading the lives of the saints, Contemplation, Spiritual Practices, Giving account of oneself, Confession, Holy Communion, Fasting, Alms Giving and Service...

These means are essential for every person.

No matter how high the spiritual level of a person may be, he could never survive without these means. They are his continual spiritual food. If he kept away from them or neglected practising them, the heat of his spirit will become lukewarm and he will expose himself to many dangerous combats...

The material of this book is the fruit of lectures that were given in the sixties, either in Cairo, Alexandria or Damanhour. Parts of these lectures were published in “El-Keraza” magazine and “Watany” newspaper. We have collected all these lectures in order to publish this book ...

There is no doubt that a separate book could be written on each chapter, but we wanted to present all these topics to you in a concentrated way.

Try to apply and practise these discussed topics in your life.

May God be with you, guiding your steps towards Him.

November 1992

Pope Shenouda III



PRAYER

WHAT IS IT ?
AND HOW SHOULD IT BE ?

PRAYER

WHAT IS IT? HOW DOES IT LEAD TO GOD?

Not each prayer is considered a spiritual means that would lead you to God... I remember here what was said about Elijah that, *“he prayed earnestly”* (Jas 5:17). His was a genuine prayer that was able to close heaven then again to open it. *“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”* (Jas 5:16).

What is prayer then ? How could it be defined?

Prayer is a bridge that links man to God. It has been compared to Jacob’s ladder which was set up on the earth, and its top reached heaven (Gen 28:12). Prayer is not just words, but a relationship... It is your relationship with God, with your heart and with your thoughts...

E E E

Prayer is a feeling that you are in the Divine presence.

Without this feeling, prayer would not be a prayer... It is the feeling of a heart that is directed to God, feeling that God is with him or that he is standing before God. As said by Elijah the Prophet, *“As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand”* (1 Kings 18:15) ... Before God, one forgets everything and nothing remains in his mind except God alone. Everything diminishes and God becomes everything, nothing else matters beside Him...

E E E

Prayer is the work of the heart, whether expressed in words or not.

It is lifting up the heart to God because the heart talks to God through feelings and emotions more than the mouth does with words. The heart may be lifted up to God without words.

Therefore, the sigh of the heart is a prayer before God. The heart’s longing to God is a prayer. Feelings of love towards God are a prayer. So prayer is a relationship between God and man. And if this hearty relationship does not exist, words would be of no use.

If you love God, you will pray. And if you pray, your love for God will increase. So prayer is a statement of love that we express in words.

We see this love and this sentiment clearly in the Psalms of David when he says: “O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You” (Ps 63:1), and “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God ?” (Ps 42:1-2). It is longing for God, thirsting for Him as a dry land thirsts for water...

Many pray and do not feel comfort because their prayer is void of love... It is just words!

God has rejected the prayers of those people and said about them, “...these people honour Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me” (Is 29:13). And the Lord Jesus Christ repeated the same rebuke, concerning the Jews, in the Gospels of St Matthew (15:8) and St Mark (7:6).

So then mix your prayer with love. Talk in your prayer to God with sentiment. Prayer is the longing of the soul and being in the presence of God. It is the longing of the limited to the Unlimited, the longing of the created to his Creator and the longing of the soul to its source and to its satisfaction...

E E E

The acceptable prayer is the one that comes from a pure heart.

The Bible says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, But the prayer of the upright is His delight” (Prov 15:8) and (Prov 21:27). God has rejected the prayer of the evil men and said to them, “When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from You; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood” (Is 1:15). On the other hand, the Bible says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (Jas 5:16).

So what would the sinner, who is burdened by his sins, do?

Pray and say, “Restore me, and I will return” (Jer 31:18). So prayer is the gate of help through which the sinner enters to repentance. Mar Isaac said, “Whoever said that there is another gate for repentance except prayer is being deceived by the devils”... So then do not wait until you repent then pray!! Ask for repentance in your prayer, as the Lord said, “Without Me You can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Prayer is opening the heart to God, so He would enter and purify it.

It reminds us of the prayer of the tax collector who lifted up a contrite heart before God, asking for His mercy (Lk 18:13). And so he went back to his house justified. Therefore, you should pray to acquire purity of the heart, while you say to God in your prayer: *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”* (Ps 50)... **Is not He the one who said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes”** (Ezek 36:26-27)... Ask Him in your prayers to fulfil this promise.

E E E

Prayer is consecrating the lips and the thoughts and it is the sanctifying of the soul. Furthermore, it is reconciliation with God...

It is natural for the one who has a dispute between him and God, not to talk to Him. He does not pray. He does not have the intimacy to talk with God. If he starts to pray, it means that he wants to reconcile with God... And if he prayed, he will be humbled by his talk with God and ashamed to defile his thoughts which were with God not so long ago. He will then reach modesty of the thoughts, which is a healthy, spiritual sign.

And so by praying, bad thoughts are abolished, as one continues to pray and uses prayer to enter into a spiritual atmosphere, far from the forces of darkness.

E E E

Prayer is the horror of the devils and the strongest weapon against them.

The devil fears the person who prays, for he will escape his grasp. He fears that through his prayer, this person may gain strength by which he could fight and defeat him. The devil would also envy him for having such a relationship with God, which he has been deprived of... Therefore, the devil fights prayer by all means. He tries to stop it by insinuating to the person that he is too busy and has no time, or he would make him feel tired and his body becomes heavy. If the person insisted on praying, the devil would try to distract his thoughts so that his mind would stray...

E E E

As for you, man of God, be firm in your prayer, no matter what the combats. Concentrate on it with all your thoughts and all your feelings...

And as the Apostle said, “*Resist the devil and he will flee from you*” (Jas 4:7). Do not give way to his thoughts. Be aware that his effort to stop your prayer is an implied confession from him about the power of this prayer as a weapon against him. So do not throw away your weapon but fight with it. Continue praying no matter how much your thoughts may stray. The enemy is bound to give up when he sees your spiritual struggle and leave you. Besides, God’s grace will never leave you but will be with you.

E E E

In your prayer, open your inmost soul to be filled by God.

Ask for God Himself, and not only for His blessings. Say to Him, as David said before, “*Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide Your face from me*” (Ps 27:8,9). Be sure that your soul which feels what it lacks, will continue being empty until God Himself perfects it. It needs love stronger than all the world desires. It is thirsty and the water of the world will never quench its thirst (Jn 4:13).

Tell Him: ‘O Lord, I cannot find anybody except You who understands me.’

For with whom I feel safe, I open my heart to Him, tell Him all my secrets and explain my weakness, which He will hear and not despise. I pour my tears before Him and reveal my longing. With Him I don’t feel alone but with a heart that holds me and power that supports me... Without You, O Lord, I feel empty and void of any real existence. You are Emmanuel, God with us... My soul longs for Your omnipotent soul, and longs for what is above the material; the world and all that is in it... Yes, inside me there is longing for the unlimited and nobody will satisfy it except You...

This is the prayer of love whose level is higher than that of request. In it you pray and might not ask for anything...

Your prayer could be thanksgiving for what God has given you. You thank Him for taking care of you, looking after you, for His protection, assistance and all His benevolence for you, your friends and all your dear ones... And your prayer could be praising God, like the prayer of the Seraphim

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; heaven and earth are full of Your glory” (Is 6:3).

Your prayer could be just contemplation on God’s beautiful attributes as in the prayers of the Liturgy according to St Gregory and as in many Psalms and Agpia prayers. And it was said by St Basil the Great: “Do not start your prayer by a request, lest it is thought that if it was not for the request, you would not have prayed.”

E E E

Consider your prayer as just a delight in God’s fellowship or as some fathers call it, “A taste of the Kingdom.”

Just being in the presence of God is an enjoyment, even if you do not open your mouth and utter one word, even if your mind does not hold any thought, like a child in the bosom of his father. He does not ask for anything except to remain as such...

I wonder what could we ask for in the Kingdom of Heaven?! Nothing, of course, because there we will lack nothing. We just enjoy what the Psalmist expressed when he said, “*Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good*” (Ps 34:8). Prayer is a taste of this kingdom. We taste here on earth what we will enjoy in Heaven...

E E E

Therefore it was said about prayer that it is the food of angels.

It is food for their souls and nourishment that satisfies them. It is also the same for the souls of the saints, and on earth it was food for the monastic fathers and the anchorites... They fed on it, with the love of God and His fellowship and the enjoyment of their spirits with it. As David the Prophet said to the Lord, “*But it is good for me to draw near to God*” (Ps 73:28).

E E E

Blessed is He, our good Lord, who granted us to pray. It is humility from Him to allow us to talk to Him.

And it is humility from Him to listen to us... Who are we, but dust and ashes, to get close to God and stand before Him and talk to Him...? We add ourselves to the ranks of angels, standing before His throne, praising and blessing His name, and become blessed for being in His presence. Truly, it is humility of the Creator to allow us, His creation, with such intimacy, to talk to Him and for Him to hear us.

Therefore, it is a great shame and a most serious sin to say: I have no time for prayer...!!

How dare the slave say he has no time to talk to his master?! It is so amazing that the created has no time to talk to his Creator!! You find time for many trivial matters... and you find time for conversation of no value. Why then do you consider lack of time as an excuse not to talk with God ?!

David the Prophet was a king, a leader, and a judge for the people, with a big family, and in spite of all this he says to the Lord, *“Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgment”* (Ps 119:164), *“Evening and morning and at noon”* (Ps 55:17) and *“At midnight I will rise to give thanks”* (Ps 119:62).

The problem then is not in time but in the interest. If you have the interest to pray, you will no doubt find the time.

E E E

You must also know that prayer is a blessing for you. In it, you take and you do not give.

Do you think you are giving God time when you pray ?! Does God need you or your prayers?! But by praying you gain strength, support and blessing. You also take spiritual enjoyment, delight in your fellowship with God and solution for your problems...!

You must change your thoughts about prayer so that you realize you cannot survive without it, for it is the strength of prayer that you will depend on.

If you realize this, you will rely on prayer as an essential spiritual means in your life.

And so, would I be able, in this article, to talk to you about everything that relates to prayer?!

No, but after all that, I leave you to pray and also to remember me in your prayers...

CONDITIONS OF THE ACCEPTABLE PRAYER AND EXERCISES IN PRAYER

Not each prayer is acceptable because not each prayer is a PRAYER.

The prayer of the proud pharisee was not acceptable like the prayer of the contrite tax collector, who returned to his house forgiven (Lk 18:14). The same with the prayer of those whose hands are full of blood. The Lord said about them, “*When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear*” (Is 1:15). And also the prayer of the hypocrites (Mt 6), and those who for a pretence make long prayers (Mt 23:14).

You might pray a prayer and one of the twenty four elders would proceed and take it in his golden censor and present it to God, a sweet aroma of incense... (Rev 5:8). While another person would pray all day long and the angels would wonder at him, as none of his prayers ascended!

E E E

What are then the conditions of the acceptable prayer ?!

There are many conditions: We mention here that it has to be in the spirit. In it, one's spirit talks to God's Spirit, and his heart becomes linked to God's heart. This is the prayer that is from the spirit and the heart. It is the one that opens the gates of heaven and enters into the presence of the Lord, talks to Him with intimacy, enjoys Him and takes from Him whatever the spirit wants... This is the prayer that satisfies the spirit, as the Psalmist said:

“ I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness ” (Ps 63:4,5).

This is the prayer that is from the heart, in it one feels that he met with God. In it we either ascend to Him or He descends to us. But the main thing is that we meet . Or it is the Holy Spirit that elevates our hearts and thoughts to God. The saints say about this prayer that it is the coming of heaven upon the soul, or that the soul becomes heaven. And here, the prayer is distinguished by spiritual warmth.

The prayer that is with love and passion is a warm prayer.

The prayer that is with the spirit is warm by its nature. It is inflamed by the fiery spirit. Therefore, it was said about the prayers of saints Maximos and Domadios that it proceeded from their mouths like flames of fire. And so were the fingers of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite, whenever he raised his hands in prayer...

E E E

The spiritual prayer is also one of understanding and concentration.

Concentration keeps the thoughts from straying. Understanding also is another factor that enables the mind to concentrate and so does passion. As for the one who prays with no heart, no understanding and no passion, his thoughts will definitely stray in various matters because his heart is not free yet from worldly concerns. He is still attached to them, even during prayer. His prayer would not be pure because it is yet in close contact to the things of the world.

Therefore, when St. John of Assiot was asked, "What is the pure prayer?" He answered, "It is death to the world", because when the heart dies to worldly matters, it would not ponder on such things during prayer, so his prayer becomes pure without straying.

E E E

The spiritual prayer is also one of reverence before God.

We have spoken before about prayer with love, for love does not hinder reverence at all. Our love for God could not make us forget His solemnity, dignity and veneration. So our talk to Him is mingled with reverence and respect, and thereby we attain the manner of speaking with God. Our reverence is not the fear of slaves but the respect of children to their father and what a Father! He is not a Father on earth but He is our Father who is in Heaven. The One before whom stands the angels in reverence, "...each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet..." (Is 6:2). Therefore Mar Isaac said:

"When you stand up to pray, be like one standing before flames of fire."

Abraham, the father of fathers and prophets, also said, “*Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord*” (Gen 18:27). Therefore if you stand before God say to Him: Who am I Lord, to stand before You... You, before whom stand the angels, the archangels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim and all the countless gathering of the heavenly powers. How could I place myself among these luminous hosts?!

E E E

Your reverence before God is the reverence of the spirit and also the reverence of the body.

As for the reverence of the body, it includes standing, kneeling and prostration; it would not surrender to standing in a lazy way, or to the devil who tries, during prayer time, to make your body feel tired, sick, exhausted or in need of sleep...!

There are those who, if they stand to pray, they feel tired, while they stand with friends for hours without feeling tired! Therefore, beware of this illusionary tiredness which is of the combats of the devil. Saint Basil the Great said:

“Do not use sickness as an excuse for not praying because prayer is a means of recovery from sickness.”

And as it was said by Mar Isaac, “If you start the pure prayer, be prepared for what will come on you”, which means be prepared for the wars of the devil as he tries to hinder you from prayer.

Reverence of the body is essential because the body shares in the feelings of the spirit and expresses them. So reverence of the spirit is expressed by reverence of the body. Slackness and carelessness of the spirit show also in the movements of the body such as having the senses busy with something else during prayer either the sight, the hearing... etc.!

As for the reverence of the spirit, one must pray with a contrite heart.

Remember that God is near those who have a contrite heart... Do not forget that you are from dust and you are talking to your Creator who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:16). Do not also forget your sins by which you grieved God’s Holy Spirit, betrayed His love and met His lov-

ing kindness with ingratitude. Therefore stand in contrition before Him as the prophet Daniel prayed and said, “O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face,... because we have sinned against You... we have rebelled against You” (Dan 9:7-9).

Say to Him: I don’t deserve anything. But in spite of my many sins and ingratitude, Your long- suffering encourages me and Your big heart comforts me. You are the kind God who does not wish for the death of the wicked but that he should turn from his ways and live (Ezek 18:23,32). The greatness of Your mercies are revealed in me who has fallen.

E E E

Let your prayer be with faith...

Believe that God hears you and loves you and will answer you in whatever He finds good for you. The Lord said, “And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Mt 21:22). And if you don’t have this faith, ask for it in your prayer, as it was said to the Lord by the father of the boy who had a mute spirit, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24), or as the Apostle said to the Lord, “Increase our faith” (Lk 17:5). Remember this beautiful promise, “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mk 9:23).

Be confident that faith gives strength to prayer. Prayer also strengthens faith... But if you ask for something, do not be in a hurry to get it. Wait for the Lord. Believe that He will answer your request, no matter how it seems to you that He is slow in responding. Listen to David the Prophet, when he says, “Wait on the Lord; Be of good courage, And He shall strengthen your heart; Wait I say on the Lord!” (Ps 27:14).

E E E

Let your prayer be also with depth and understanding.

The more your prayer is with understanding, where you mean each word you say, the deeper the prayer. The Psalmist cries out in the psalm: “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!” (Ps 130:1), and “With my whole heart I have sought You” (Ps 119:10). Pray then from the depth of your heart, the depth of your faith and the depth of your needs... The depth of prayer gives it warmth...

EXERCISES IN PRAYER:

1. Train yourself to extend the time you spend in the presence of God.

How beautiful is the saying of David the Psalmist in Psalm 119:97, “*Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.*” Ask yourself then, how much time do you spend with God? There is no doubt that you spend much time in conversation and entertainment that you benefit nothing from... It is a wasted time. Would that you dedicate more time to talking with God. Do not make this time at the end of your busy schedule but on the top of it.

E E E

2. Train yourself to get up early and start the day with prayer.

This is when the heart is clear, not crowded by thoughts about work and other responsibilities. The house would be still quiet as the rest of the family is still asleep and no noise is heard. You will be alone with God, with no obstacles and God will be the first one you will talk to in your day and you will take a blessing for the whole day...

E E E

3. Give more care to the “Hours Prayers” from the Agpia:

If you can't pray each hour completely during the day, at least pray the parts and the absolution of each. You can be sure that it would not take more than a few minutes from you, during which you lift up your heart to God during the day's struggles and anxieties.

What would help you here is memorizing, so the more you memorize parts and psalms from the Agpia, the more you will be able to pray without a book and without anyone noticing...

E E E

4. Try to practise praying in all places.

Follow what the Bible says, “...Men always ought to pray” (Lk 18:1), and “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17)... Practise praying while on the road so you would not be occupied by its scenery. Practise praying while with other

people, especially if their talk is a stumbling block or it does not concern you. Practise praying when you enter your house and when you leave it, and also when you get to work and when you leave it... Pray also in each meeting, so God will give you grace and success.

E E E

5. Train yourself to pray the repetitive short prayers:

For example, the prayer: “My Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”, or “Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me,” or “I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I bless His name”, or “I thank you Lord on every occasion”... or any short verse that you make up for yourself as a prayer and that suits your condition and expresses your feelings... By repeating a prayer, it makes it register in your subconscious so it will be in your thoughts automatically and may stay with you, even in your sleep. The saying of the Psalmist, “...*I remember You on my bed*” (*Ps 63:6*), refers to this.

E E E

6. Train yourself to pray for others.

Practise praying for all those who are in need. For your relatives, friends and colleagues... for the church in general and for your local parish, and especially for the service... Another prayer could be for the sick and for those who have departed and for those who are in need of repentance. A prayer for the world and the nations... And by this way you will progress gradually in praying for others, until you even pray for your enemies and those who resist you.

E E E

7. Train yourself to bring God into each topic and each problem.

Do not face problems on your own, or depend only on your intelligence, or on your friends to solve your problems. But have the feeling that you can not do without God in whatever faces you. Be sure that prayer will give you a feeling of security, comfort and inner peace. Be confident that your problems are in honest, strong hands, capable of guiding all your affairs.

When you pray for a problem, either God will solve it and so it comes to an end, or if it remains, God will give your heart peace concerning it.

This is another way of solving the problem.

Although the problem is still there, you are not upset about it or disturbed; it is almost as if it does not exist. You don't consider it a problem any more... This is the effectiveness of prayer.

E E E

8. Train yourself on personal prayers, beside the ritual ones.

The prayer in which you talk openly to God and reveal all that is in your heart. There is nothing wrong in saying to Him, 'Lord, I love You but I feel that I love other matters in the world which hinder me from You. Whenever I try to remove them from my heart, I find myself weak before You. I know that, "*Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (Jas 4:4). Therefore, grant me Lord to love You with the perfect love and with Your strength, save me from any love that is against Your love.'

Don't let your prayer be just mere chosen and well selected phrases. Let it be in plain words that spring from your heart, without artificiality... Let your prayer express your condition and feelings with an open heart... Beware that you do not make your prayer just a routine.

E E E

9. Pray with understanding. Train yourself to contemplate on the psalms, the Agpia prayers and all the memorized prayers.

The deeper you go in the meaning of these prayers, the more you will find this depth accompanying you at the time of prayer. You will also learn the manner of talking to God; as the Disciples said to the Lord, "*Teach us to pray*" (Lk 11:2).

E E E

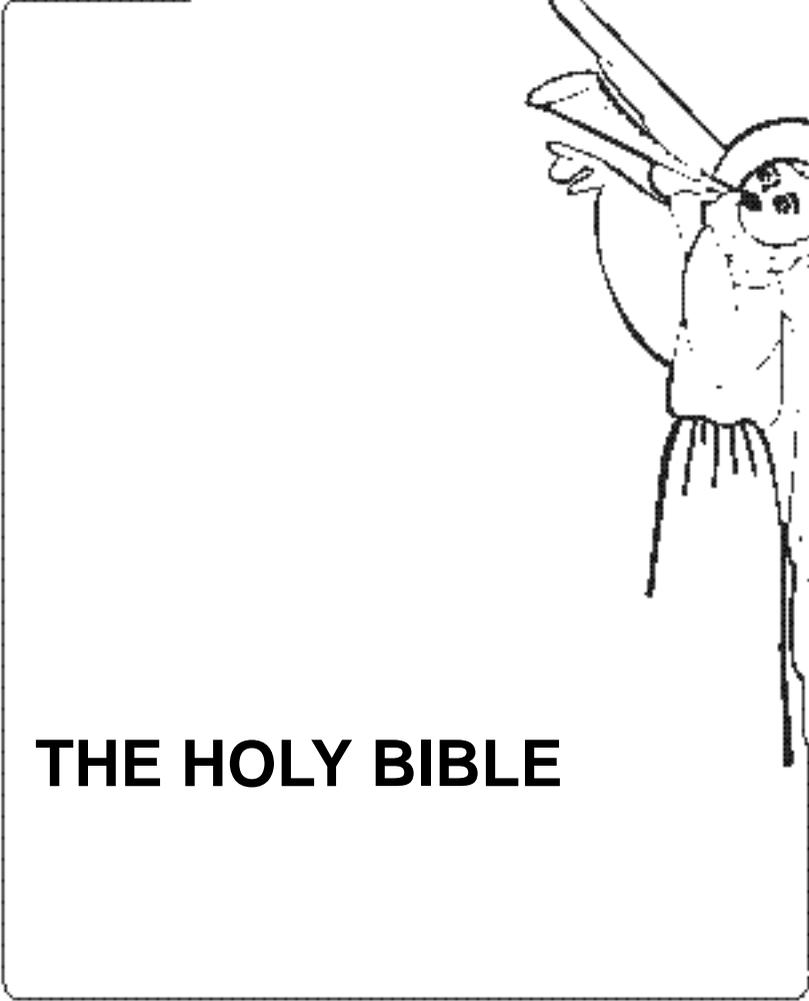
10. If you haven't reached yet the pure prayer, do not stop praying for this reason.

Prayer, like any virtue, is one in which progress is made gradually in order to reach its perfection. And as it was said by Mar Isaac, "If you are going to wait until you reach the level of perfect prayer before you even start praying, you will never pray, because it is through constant prayer that we reach the perfected and pure prayer..."

E E E

11. Train yourself to continue praying, whenever you want to end it...

It is a sign of success in praying that you feel you cannot live without it or leave it; it is as if you are communicating direct with God, saying, "Stay with me, my Lord." And you say with the Shulamite in the Book of Songs, "*I held Him and would not let Him go*" (Song 3:4) ... You will even feel the sweetness of each petition or word and you would not like to leave it. Or, as one of the fathers said about the prayers of the saints, "Because of the sweetness of the word in their mouth, they were unable to leave it for another word..."



THE HOLY BIBLE

ITS IMPORTANCE:

Blessed is He, the Lord God, who humbled Himself to talk to us who are but dust and ashes. And blessed is He for ordering His holy prophets, to record His words for us, so all was kept for us in the Holy Bible, a benefit for our souls and light for our path.

E E E

The Holy Bible is the book of books or it is ‘The Book’.

When we say ‘The Book’ only, we mean the Bible of God, His words by which He talks to us. It was inspired and told by the Holy Spirit through the words of His holy prophets. *“For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2Pet 1:21).* Therefore, in the Apostles’ Creed, we say about the Holy Spirit, “who spoke in the prophets.” And as the Apostle says, *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2Tim 3:16).*

E E E

The Holy Bible is a message presented to you, and who does not rejoice with a message from God?!

St Anthony the Great received once a message from the Emperor Constantine. His disciples greatly rejoiced but the saint put the message aside. His disciples were astonished and became enthusiastic to read the message. So St Anthony said to them, “My children, why do you rejoice so much for a message received from a man? Here God has sent us many messages in the Holy Bible and why don’t we receive them with the same joy and enthusiasm?!” After that, he read the Emperor’s letter and replied in order to bless him.

And you, if you receive a letter from a person who is dear to you, don’t you rejoice and read it time after time...? Isn’t it appropriate for you to do the same with a message that you receive from God...?

God's message that is sent to you, uttered by the Spirit and spoken by the prophets who were led by the Spirit, is a word full of the Spirit. We understand it through the Spirit and live it. It is, as the Lord said:

"The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (Jn 6:63).

It is food for our spirit. We are nourished by it and have life...

And as the Lord said in Deuteronomy (8:3), and was again repeated by the Lord Jesus Christ: *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).* Bread is food for the body and man is not just a body but he has a spirit, and the spirit is nourished by God's words which are found in His Holy Bible.

In the Holy Bible, we have our daily bread because we live *".. by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* It is the bread of life and the nourishment of the spirit.

It is probably part of what is meant by the phrase: *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

The man of God rejoices in the Bible: *".. But his delight is in the law of the Lord," (Ps 1:2)* and he meditates on it day and night. The word "delight" indicates that God's commandments are not a burden and not an obligation, but are the cause of one's delight...

E E E

His relationship with the Bible is permanent and continuous. He meditates on it day and night.

Do not take it as if it was said to the monks only, but to all. The Lord said it to the leader of an army who was burdened by responsibilities, leading hundreds of thousands of people... In the Lord's commandment to Joshua, the son of Nun, Moses' successor, God said to him:

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Josh 1:8). Imagine a very busy leader like Joshua, with all his great responsibilities, and still God says to him, *" This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth" ! ...*

These words are not directed to Joshua only but to each one of us. Therefore, the First Psalm says about the righteous man that ... **“his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night”** (Ps 1:2).

David the Prophet was a king, a leader and the father of a big family, with great responsibilities. And in spite of all this he says, “Your testimonies are my meditation”, and, “Your law is my meditation.” And he talks about his relationship with God’s commandment and law by saying: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”, “I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure”, and, “Your words are sweeter than honey in my mouth.”

How did David find the time to meditate on God’s words day and night and the words of the Lord became his lesson and his meditation?!

E E E

Our fathers the saints, used to learn by heart many books from the Bible, and so the Bible was revealed in their lives. Would that we organize more competitions on learning verses from the Holy Bible. I remember once that I said to the people:

“Learn the Gospel and the Gospel will protect you. Learn the Psalms and the Psalms will protect you.”

By learning verses, you will be able to repeat them within yourself, meditate on their meaning and their depth in any place: at home, at work, on the road, amongst people ... and so we befriend the Bible and its words and it becomes our best companion ...

E E E

To learn verses, repeat them, and meditate on them, is a virtue and to act according to them is a greater virtue.

Therefore the Lord Jesus Christ said: “...Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Mt 7:24). And the priest, in the Litany of the Gospel says, “Grant that we become worthy to hear and perform according to Your Holy Gospels” ...

The word “worthy” has a deep meaning because truly, who are we to be worthy of hearing God’s words and to be trusted over His Commandments?!

I would like to see your personal Bibles showing signs of being in use.

To show that it is getting old with underlined parts reflecting your readings and use of them ... They are all memories and contemplations that entered the mind and the heart and became part of life.

E E E

Read and contemplate. Mingle the reading of the Bible with your soul and enter to its depth.

Do not be satisfied just with the literary meaning ... Through contemplation, you will find that one verse is like a wide sea that has no limits. As David said:

“I have seen the consummation of all perfection. But your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps 119:96).

David said this at a time when all he had was about nine biblical books, while we have the whole Bible including the New Testament and all the books of the Prophets. Each word is full of depth and a treasure for contemplation.

E E E

The Holy Bible is not only a source of contemplation but also a source of consolation.

In each case of one's psychological state, there is a verse in the Bible that comforts his heart and satisfies him.

In his grief, he finds a word of solace and in his joy, he finds his delight in it. In his affliction, he finds a solution and in his difficulty he finds peace. In his despair, he finds verses about hope ...

The words of the Holy Bible are effective. You might read some of them and say to God, “Lord, there is no doubt that You said these words for my sake.”

E E E

Therefore, take God's word as if it is a personal message directed personally to you.

Specifically to you , and *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* The Spirit spoke through the prophets for your sake, specifically.

It is an epistle that He sent to you and not to the Romans or the Corinthians. When the Emperor Constantine sent a message to St. Anthony, his children were happy. So he said to them, "God, the King of Kings, sent us many messages. How come you did not rejoice in them in the same way?"

E E E

The Holy Bible is not just a message of consolation but also a weapon:

For each sin there is a commandment that you can place before it . You will find that the sin becomes weak while you gain strength from the commandment ... How strong is the word of God, even when brief.

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12).

Satan, in the temptation on the mountain, could not stand the words of God and could not respond to any of it ...

E E E

The word of God will be a witness against us on the last day, if we do not carry it out.

If we did not know, we would have an excuse. But what is our excuse now having God's words explaining every thing to us?! God's words were never just for knowledge but for life ... Therefore let us act according to His words ...

God's word will follow us in every place we go, echoing in our ears and troubling our conscience if we don't act according to it. All the excuses given by the mind, which is controlled by the desires of the soul, will never be of benefit for us :

At the same time, God's word in our mouth is an evidence of our spirituality and our religious faith.

There are people who, when they speak, their talk is full of the world's words. And there is the one who, when he talks, the language of the Bible shows. Due to him repeating phrases from the Bible, his expression becomes used to it and it affects his style of speech, therefore: "*The book of the law does not depart from his mouth.*" And whoever hears him says: "*Your speech betrays you*" (Mt 26:73).

Let us encourage our children to be accustomed to using and reciting verses from the Bible by saying a verse for everything they see, whether it be a book, a tree, a pen, the land, the door, the table ... whatever...

The child who is used to this adopts the language of the Bible in his conversation and his life. Therefore he does not know the language of sinners, the language of the world, and so he would not sin...

E E E

David said: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps 119:11).

The words should be put in the heart, the centre of emotions, love and feelings and not only in the mouth or in the mind, the centre of knowledge. When God's words are in the heart, one would not sin because the commandment of God has been mixed with our feelings. How beautiful is the Bible saying about the Virgin Mary that: "*She kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*" (Lk 2:19).

Our mother Eve is one of those who sinned because they hid God's words in their minds and not in their hearts. Our mother Eve was asked by the serpent about God's commandment. Her answer was accurate and very precise but at the same time, she broke the commandment and sinned.

E E E

Read the Holy Bible and be sure that every time you read it, you will find something new, because God's words are rich and full of goodness. They are an everlasting source of contemplation, therefore we find that David, who experienced this fact, says:

“I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps 119:96).

It means that there is a limit for each perfection, but as for God’s commandment, there is no such limit due to its depth. As God has no limits, so is the depth of His word. No matter how much you contemplate on it, you find that these contemplations open before you unlimited spheres ... **It is continuously new; new in your mind and for your understanding.** Therefore, Jeremiah the Prophet said: “*Your words were found, and I ate them*” (Jer 15:16).

David the Prophet says: “*The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; ... The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honey comb*” (Ps 19:7,8 and 10).

E E E

Be certain that every word you read from the Bible will have its effect on you with its strength and influence, even without explanation or preaching.

It is enough for God’s word to be mentioned to convince any person without argument or much effort. It is enough to mention God’s word to make one feel that God is present in the middle and to feel a special grace. This word gives light to his path.

The Holy Spirit that inspired the word gives strength for the word to be carried out. We remember that when the multitude heard the word on the day of Pentecost, it was said about them that ... “*They were cut to the heart*” (Acts 2:37).

St Paul also said to his disciple Timothy: “*...and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation...*” (2Tim 3:15). **One finds in it the divine guidance, as David the Prophet said:** “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (Ps 119:105). **He even said more than that:**

“Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction” (Ps 119:92).

Therefore we notice that our Coptic Church has given great attention to the Holy Bible.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLY BIBLE IN THE CHURCH

The holy Church gives great attention to the Holy Bible. In each Mass, we read a chapter from the Holy Bible during the raising of incense at Vespers, another chapter during Matins and a third chapter, which is the Gospel of the Mass.

Apart from the gospels, readings are also read from the Pauline Epistle, the Catholic Epistle and the Acts of the Apostles, with extracts from the Psalms before the Gospel reading.

E E E

When the Gospel is being read at church during the Divine Liturgy, two deacons stand holding candles, as a symbol that the Gospel is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path and that the word of God shines, giving light to the eyes.

Before reading the Gospel, the Church prays the Litany of the Gospel where the priest says to the Lord: **“Grant that we become worthy to hear and perform according to Your Holy Gospels, through the petitions of Your saints.”** It means that for just hearing the Gospel we need to be worthy and we need the petitions of the saints. The whole congregation stands up while the deacon calls out: **“Stand up in the fear of God and listen to the Holy Gospel”...**

E E E

All the congregation stands up in reverence and if a Bishop or the Patriarch is present, he takes off his crown as a sign of respect for the word of God.

The priest holds the Bible to his head as he proceeds around the Altar; this act symbolizes the spreading of the Good News around the world...

The Church sermons are all based on verses from the Holy Bible and so are the programs of the spiritual teaching.

With the Church's concern about tradition, we find nothing that contradicts the Bible but everything is supported by verses from the Holy Bible. Even the mere belief in tradition and the Apostolic teachings is a matter also confirmed in the Bible.

E E E

We see the Gospel constantly in our daily prayers.

The seven prayers of the Agpia, which the faithful pray everyday, are also prayed by the church during the Holy Mass and in meetings. These prayers include many Psalms together with a chapter from the Gospel in each hour, and in the Morning Prayer there is an introduction from the Epistle of St Paul to the Ephesians. And so, whoever regularly prays from the Agpia, will definitely learn by heart several chapters from the Holy Gospel as well as many Psalms.

E E E

There are also biblical readings when performing the rituals of each of the seven Sacraments of the Church.

For example, in the Unction of the Sick, seven chapters from the Bible are read during seven prayers. And in the "Blessing of the Water" for Baptism, many chapters of the Gospel are read. Even the prayers of the Holy Liturgy are all derived mostly from the Gospel of St John (20:22,23).

E E E

The same applies to the ritual prayers.

Various chapters from both the New and the Old Testaments are read during the 'Laqqan' (which is the ritual of the washing of feet performed on the eve of the Epiphany, on the day of Holy Thursday, and on the day of Pentecost). Readings are also said when consecrating churches, blessing new homes or in the consecration of monks and nuns.

During the vigil of the 'Saturday of Light', which is called "Apocalapsis", the whole of the Book of Revelation is read, together with many hymns, especially from the Old Testament. During the Passion week, many chapters are read from both the Old and the New Testaments. Many chapters are also read from the Old Testament during the Holy Lent, Jonah's Fasting and the Pascha prayers. The Bible is also the basis for many parts of the Psalmody.

Could there be more care given to the Holy Bible than that?!

During the consecration of the Patriarch or Bishops, the Holy Bible is placed on their head, so that they may be bound to its teachings.

Next, I would like to talk to you about the benefits of reading the Holy Bible in your life, how to read it and your relationship with it.

I would also like to give you some exercises to make your relationship deeper with the Bible.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HOLY BIBLE

Your relationship with the Holy Bible concentrates on certain main points. The most important point is: possessing the Bible, keeping it in your company, reading it, understanding it, contemplating on it, studying it, learning it. And above all is acting according to it, practising its commandments and turning them into life.

1- POSSESSING THE BIBLE

Everybody must possess the Holy Bible, either a big edition on his desk for reading and studying or a small edition that is kept in a pocket or a handbag so that it is always with him. It accompanies him on all his journeys, during working hours, at time of rest or while sitting with people.

The Bible becomes a friend and a companion in his coming in and going out, in his moving and his travelling. He feels that he can't do without it ever. If he forgets to take it with him, he feels that he has lost something very important.

I fear that the Holy Bible is a stranger in our homes or in our life, “... with nowhere to lay His head” (Lk 9:58), or He lays His head in your library or on your desk but not in your mind or heart! Yes, I don’t mean by possessing the Bible to be a rarity in your house or a charm in your pocket. It must be for your continuous use. You will never achieve this friendship with the Bible except if you have love for it ...

2- LOVE FOR THE HOLY BIBLE

You love the Bible because it is God’s message to you. You receive it with love ...

It is exactly like one receiving a letter from somebody he loves. He reads it and rereads it because it contains words dear to him ... As David the Prophet said about God’s words, “*More to be desired are they than gold... sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb*” (Ps 19:10). And in the long Psalm:

“How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:103).

He also says: “... I love Your Commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold!” (Ps 119:127), “Your word is very pure; Therefore Your servant loves it” (Ps 119:140), “I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure” (Ps 119:162), “Behold, I long for Your precepts” (Ps 119:40), “I will delight myself in Your Commandments” (Ps 119:47), “I love Your testimonies” (Ps 119:119), “I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your Commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps 119:96). He also says:

“Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction” (Ps 119:92).

And so, if you love the Holy Bible, you will find enjoyment and pleasure in reading it.

This pleasure makes you continue reading it steadfastly and meditating on it.

3- PERSEVERANCE IN READING THE HOLY BIBLE

The first Psalm says about the righteous man who is blessed that:

“... His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:2).

This is the commandment that the Lord gave to Joshua, the son of Nun: *“This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it” (Josh 1:8).*

Reading the Bible will be of more profit if it is done on a regular and continuous basis, every day...

That is in order to absorb the spirit of the Bible and its effect becomes firm in you. Then reading it becomes a habit. You may specify certain extracts from the Bible to be read every morning before leaving home so that they become a source of contemplation during the day. It fills your mind during your walking, your coming in or your going out. You may also read another chapter before going to bed so you can think about these verses before going to sleep and they will accompany you even in your dreams...

Perseverance in reading the Bible helps one to enjoy it and become attached to it and it becomes continually in one’s thoughts ...

And so you will be able to *“meditate in the law of the Lord day and night”* according to the Commandment. If this meditation was possible for a great king like David the Prophet, or for a great leader like Joshua, in spite of their many responsibilities, how appropriate for us who, no doubt, have much less responsibilities ...?!

There are important factors to help you benefit from reading the Bible. One of them is:

4- READING IN REVERENCE

When you read the Bible, you listen to God talking to you, and so you must listen to Him in reverence...

And as much as you have reverence in reading, so would be the effect of God's words on you.

Because your heart at that time will be ready, aware of being in the presence of God ... Therefore when the Church reads to us from the Holy Bible, the deacon calls out saying: "Stand up in the fear of God and listen to the Holy Gospel" ... And before the Bible reading, the priest raises incense and prays a litany where he says:

"May we be worthy of hearing and performing according to Your Holy Gospels..."

For just hearing the Gospel, one needs to be worthy and to be prepared. We remember how the Prophet Moses called the people, before hearing the Ten Commandments, to sanctify themselves and be ready for three days in order to be worthy of hearing God's word to them (Ex 19:10-15).

The one who reads the word of God with carelessness and negligence would not be affected by it or benefit from it.

We must learn then to read the Holy Bible with reverence and respect ... Remember that at church, you stand up and the Bishop or Patriarch present takes off his crown during the Gospel reading, showing respect to the word of God. So do not be with one spirit at church then with another spirit at home ... And what else is important when reading the Holy Bible?

5- READING WITH UNDERSTANDING

Enter into the depth of the Divine words and understand what is meant by them ...

Read with contemplation and depth. ***"Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament" (Dan 12:3).***

The scribes and Pharisees were amongst the scholars of the Jews. But in spite of that, they couldn't understand the word of God or know God's intentions ...! For example, they never understood the Commandment of keeping the Sabbath holy. They also never understood the meaning of the word "neighbour" till the Lord explained the parable of the good Samaritan...

E E E

The element of understanding is very essential so that the Lord says:

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6).

Among the requirements of knowledge is not to depend on one verse. The Bible is not one verse but a Book. And a mere verse does not give a complete meaning of God’s aim and commandment ... Therefore:

Collect the verses that relate to one topic and receive a complete meaning.

E E E

Among the conditions that help you to understand God’s word:

To read with spirit and in depth ...

It is not important how much you read without understanding and without contemplation!! But your benefit lies in the depth with which you read, where the word of God enters into the innermost of your thoughts and your heart, making it touch your feelings ...

E E E

Therefore, consider the spirit of the commandment seriously, and not only the literal meaning.

As the Lord says that God’s words are *“spirit and life” (Jn 6:63).*

So the importance lies in understanding the spiritual meaning of the commandments and not just merely its literal interpretation, as the scribes and Pharisees did. St Paul the Apostle says about that:

“... not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2Cor 3:6).

E E E

Understanding the Bible is very essential, whether it concerns spiritualities or dogma and faith.

Many used to read the Bible but they went astray because they did not comprehend its meaning and relevance. They did not perceive “*what the Spirit says to the churches*” (Rev 3:6). And so says the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom is the glory: “*You are mistaken, not knowing the scriptures*” (Mt 22:29). Therefore try to understand the significance of everything you read. And if you fail to understand, consult and ask ...

E E E

Many heretics used to read the Bible. They were even considered by some as scholars, but they strayed from the right path because of lack of understanding.

Or maybe, sometimes, they would select one verse from the Bible and ignore the rest of the verses so that their understanding was not complete. Take, for example, the Lord’s saying: “*... My Father is greater than I*” (Jn 14:28). They consider this verse without considering: “*I and My Father are one*” (Jn 10:30).

Or some of them would say: The Apostle said, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household*” (Acts 16:31), and they do not mention with it the Lord’s saying: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mk 16:16).

E E E

Therefore if anyone says to you: ‘So and so is written’, reply, ‘And the Lord said “Again it is written...”’ (Mt 4:7).

If a bitter person says to you: ‘It is written ... “*By a sad countenance the heart is made better*”’ (Eccles 7:3), reply: ‘It is also written ... “*Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!*”’ (Phil 4:4). And it is also written: “*To everything there is a season, ... A time to weep, and a time to laugh*”’ (Eccles 3:1,4). And so this way you become wise in understanding what you read ...

E E E

If the Adventists debate you on keeping the Sabbath saying: ‘It is written, “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it Holy*”’ (Ex 20:8), say to them: ‘It is also written, “*Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come*”’ (Col 2:16,17).

The verses of the Bible - if collected together - will form integration, consistency and depth of understanding.

And what else about your relationship with the Bible? There is another important point, which is:

6- MEMORIZING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

Try to memorize verses from the Bible that represent specific spiritual principles or bases of the dogma and faith, or promises from God that would encourage and comfort you, or ones that contain answers to matters that involve you. Repeat these verses many times in your mind and in your heart, in a reflective way so that they will penetrate into your soul and your subconscious, having thus been engraved in your memory, and becoming a source of comfort and support whenever needed...

E E E

There are many examples of verses to memorize from the Bible:

Some memorize the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:7), or the characteristics of love (1Cor 13), or many spiritual recommendations found in Romans 12 and in 1 Thessalonians 5, or parts of the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastic, or the Ten Commandments as in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, or memorizing a good number of the Psalms and prayers of the prophets in the Holy Bible, or various verses that touch your heart when you read them. Or verses that concern certain virtues, or concern dogmas of the faith or present answers to spiritual warfares ... There are so many examples ...

If the spiritual person memorized one verse a day, how many would he memorize in a whole year? ...

And how much more would he memorize in a number of years?! Even if he memorized one verse every week, there is no doubt he will have 52 verses memorized by the end of the year, or 520 verses in 10 years, and this, having been done, would be considered very little and would bother his conscience.

What is left now is putting these memorized verses into action ... I used to repeatedly say to my spiritual children concerning this matter:

Learn the Gospel and the Gospel will protect you ...

Learn the Psalms and the Psalms will protect you ...

But how do they protect you? David the Prophet has many contemplations on this matter.

Now I move to another point, which is:

7- CONTEMPLATING ON THE BIBLE

Whatever you read from the Bible and whatever you memorize from its verses could become a source of your contemplations. You mingle it with your soul and thoughts and you will find the result in what will be inspiration for you. You will see that each word has meanings and significance that will be renewed and increased in your heart and make you enter into a spiritual atmosphere.

My advice to you then is not only to read, but enter into its depth through contemplation; I have written an article on contemplation that you can read.

Another advice concerning reading the Bible is:

8- READ WITH THE SPIRIT OF PRAYER

Start reading by praying, asking God to give you understanding and reveal to you His will. Say to Him what David the Prophet said in his long Psalm:

“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Ps 119:18).

Conclude reading by a prayer, asking the Lord to give you strength for application. And as He gave you understanding, to give you desire and will.

Let your reading be also accompanied by prayer, as the Bible says: *“And lean not on your own understanding” (Prov 3:5)*. Try to receive God’s message to you through prayer.

Some put in their mind a specific idea that they have already decided on, then read to search for a verse to confirm what they have made up their

mind about. Or they try to subjugate what is written in the Bible to their own thoughts. As for you, do not be like that, but read to learn and to know.

E E E

What you need to apply this is the spirit of humility in your prayer ...

Humility through which you submit to the teaching of the Bible, through which you change and correct your thoughts ... Humility through which you ask for knowledge, saying with David the Prophet: “*Show me Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths*” (Ps 25:4). While you are reading say to Him:

“Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 9:6).

As for what to do, that is what I want to talk to you about later on.

THE EFFECT OF THE HOLY BIBLE

ITS POSITION IN YOUR HOME AND EXERCISES CONCERNING IT

One of the very clear verses about the effect of God's word is His saying, blessed be His name: *"So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it"* (Is 55:11).

Yes, the word of God shall not return empty.

It has its power and its effect. Those who experienced the power of God's word in their life are able to pass this power to others also ... St Paul the Apostle, when explaining the power of the word and its effect, said: *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"* (Heb 4:12).

E E E

Maybe one would say: Why then do I read without being affected?!

Surely the fault is in you yourself and not in the word. The word of God is like a two edged sword. It cuts meat but would not cut stone. Therefore the Lord said in the Book of Ezekiel the Prophet: *"I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh"* (Ezek 36:26). What kind then is your heart which receives the word of God. Is it a heart of stone or a heart of rock? The Shulamite in the Song of Solomon heard the voice of the Lord calling her saying: *"Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night"* (Song 5:2). Yet in spite of that she did not open and made excuses ...!

E E E

The word of God is alive and effective. But it works more in those who open their hearts to it and want the word to work in them.

If the word of God does not work in you today, it might work after a while ... but it shall not return empty.

It will remain firm in your subconscious and at a certain time, when your heart becomes prepared for it, and when the circumstances are suitable, you will find that the word of God will penetrate into your memory and your heart and be effective in your life.

It will be as if your lack of response at the beginning was a momentary action, a short while of lukewarmness after which you wake up to yourself. It is like the Shulamite in the Song of Solomon who at first was neglectful in not opening the door of her heart, but then turned saying: *“My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for him ... I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone”* (Song 5:4,6).

E E E

Not each seed that is cast to the earth gives fruit instantly. It could take days or months ...

Therefore, store God's words in your heart and in your thoughts. They will give fruit in due time, especially when given good care and perseverance day and night, protecting them from obstacles that would stop their work, whether interior or exterior ... It is like a seed in soil that has not been watered. So it remains as it is with life concealed in it. But after days when the water reaches it, this life will become active and be revealed. How beautiful, therefore, is the saying of the Bible: *“Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days”* (Eccles 11:1).

E E E

So do not despair in the service when you do not see instant fruits...

Be patient and wait for the Lord and do not become weary. Not all souls are of one kind. And not all of them are quick to respond. Not all the outside circumstances are suitable ... There is the one who would hear the word and is quickly affected and another who would need explanation and convincing, following up and solving of the problems that face him in carrying out the word ...

And there is the one who takes the word for knowledge and not for life.

He receives it by his mind and not his soul in order for him to widen his understanding but not to purify his heart ... and that is the difference between the scientist and the ascetic. The scientist reads the book, studying, explaining and interpreting it, as the scribes and Pharisees used to do (Mt 23:2); they taught but did not act accordingly. As for the ascetic, he is like David the Prophet who said: *“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You”* (Ps 119:11). And this was his intention from God’s words...

ITS WORK IN YOU

If you responded to God’s word and let it work in you, what work do you think the Divine word is going to do in you? There is no doubt that the outcomes are many. Let us consider them ...

1- It gathers the scattered mind and occupies it with the divine.

If your thoughts are scattered, you will never know in what areas they may stray. But reading, generally, collects the mind from straying and makes it concentrate on the topic being read. As for specifically reading the Bible, it guides the thoughts to a safe harbour. Reverence in reading gives more concentration due to your respect to God’s word. This concentration will have its spiritual effect.

2- Reading the Bible grants you understanding, enlightenment and knowledge...

Therefore the Psalmist says: *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”* (Ps 119:105). He also says: *“The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes”* (Ps 19:8). This is why we light a candle during the Gospel reading, remembering this enlightenment. As for understanding, the Psalmist says: *“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple”* (Ps 19:7).

He also says: *“I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation”* (Ps 119:99). With this understanding one learns the way of the Lord and knows how to act and acquire the gift of discernment and wisdom. Especially if one showed interest in how the righteous people of the Bible used to act and how they used to deal with God and with people, *“Considering the outcome of their conduct”* (Heb 13:7).

3- Reading the Bible even guides you to the right faith.

That is if the reading is done with understanding, discernment and with guidance. And for each belief, memorize one verse or more. Each verse in the Bible becomes a protection against heresies and wrong teaching. That is what the great fathers of the Church, the heroes of faith, used to do. They used to resist the heresies through their understanding of the Bible and the amazing amount of verses memorized in their minds.

4- The Bible also guides the reader to a life of repentance and spiritual growth.

In the light of its commandments, one could reach giving account of oneself in a correct way and uncover his weaknesses and sins. He would also know that what is required from him is not only repentance from sin, but at most, a life of holiness and perfection according to the Apostle's saying: "*But as He who called you is Holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am Holy" (1Pet 1:15-16), and (Lev 11:44). Also the Lord says: "Therefore you shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48).*

The Bible explains the details of the life of repentance, holiness and perfection, presenting examples. And in contrast, He says: "**You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures" (Mt 22:29).**

5- Reading the Bible also gives the mind and the will a kind of modesty if one faced the temptation of sin.

Because how could his thought that has been sanctified by God's words and by the spiritual atmosphere during his reading, become defiled by the thought of sin!!

6- In diabolic warfares, one could answer the sin with a commandment.

This is according to what Mar Ogris explained in his book about warfares of the thoughts: 'If your time is wasted in chatter and much talk, remember the Bible's saying: "*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking" (Prov 10:19), and also the saying of the Psalmist: "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips"' (Ps 141:3).*

If the devil fights you with anger, remember the Apostle James' saying: "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (Jas 1:19-20). **And also the saying of the Bible:** "Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go" (Prov 22:24).

And if the devil fights you with lustful thoughts, remember the Lord's saying: "... whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). **And remember also the saying of the righteous Job:** "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?" (Job 31:1).

And so having the verses of the Bible firm in your mind and in your heart, you are able to recall them and use them to answer any spiritual warfare that the enemy wages against you ... The mere recalling of the commandment will embarrass you and keep your heart from committing the sin. The one who sins is most probably in a state of forgetfulness of God's commandments. The love of sin has stupefied him ...

7- The words of the Bible also give you comfort in time of distress and strength whenever you are weak.

Many a time it was said by David the Prophet in his Psalms to the Lord: "... I hope in Your word" (Ps 119:81). **He also says:** "Remember the word to Your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope. This is my comfort in my affliction" (Ps 119:49,50). ... **And whenever he experienced satanic wars he would say:** "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when man rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive ... Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (Ps 124:2,3-7,8).

How many are the words of the Bible about hope ...!

For the one who reads and memorizes them, his heart will be comforted and will find peace, even as the Apostle says: "... Rejoicing in hope" (Rom 12:12). ... **God's promises in His Holy Bible give the soul an amazing tranquillity, as in His saying:** "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20), **and His saying:** "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore ..." (Mt 10:30,31), **and His saying:** "I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you" (Acts 18:10) ... **Many are such verses ... Would that you collect them and memorize them ...**

And to talk about all this, time and space would fail me.

8- The Bible has everything, for everyone and for every situation.

No matter what your circumstances are, what psychological state you are in, you will find in the Bible a message that gives you comfort. You will find in it all that you need and what suits you. It is sufficient, for example, to take the Book of Psalms that expresses all types of feelings and prayers. The Book of Proverbs has all kinds of advices. Each book contains a specific message for you, if you choose it well and understand it ...

YOUR USE OF THE BIBLE

1- You can use it first of all as material for prayer.

In addition to your prayer before and after reading, reading the Bible kindles in you specific feelings that you will find yourself in need to transform them into prayer. And so, reading the Book of Psalms for example teaches you how to pray and in what manner you should talk to God. It is the same when you read the prayers of God's men in the Bible, such as the prayer of Daniel the Prophet (Dan 9), and the prayer of Ezra (Ez 9), and also the prayer of Nahum (Nah 1), and the prayer of Solomon (1Kings 8), and the prayer of Jonah while in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2), and the song of Mary (Lk 1), and the rest of songs and prayers that are in the Bible.

2- The Bible could be a material for contemplation:

By selecting a specific event from the historic books and contemplating on it or on one of the miracles or a verse, with your heart and thoughts.

3- Make the commandments of the Bible a field for spiritual exercises.

Choose what suits your spiritual level and need, in order to grow in the life of virtue. You will find a detailed explanation of this in our article on spiritual exercises.

4- Or make the reading of the Bible an opportunity for repentance.

If you read, for example, the Lord's saying: *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift"* (Mt 5:23,24), you will find inside you a strong urge to go and reconcile with whoever you have offended. And if you read verses about vows (Eccles 5:4,5), you will find yourself obliged to pay to the Lord your vows which you may have delayed.

5- Memorizing many of the verses.

EXERCISES TO MEMORIZE THE BIBLE

1- Memorize some of the important main chapters of the Bible:

For example, the Sermon on the Mount, the constitution of Christianity (Mt 5:3-10), the chapter on love (1Cor 13), the beautiful commandments (Rom 12), Christ's long prayer before going to Gethsemane (Jn 17) and some of the Lord's words to His Disciples (Jn 14-17).

2- Train yourselves and your children to memorize alphabetical verses.

Verses that start with letters of your names, names of saints, virtuous characteristics or verses of a suitable word such as church, education, clergy...

3- Memorize verses that include specific words:

You may say to a child: recite verses that relate to the room (chair, bed, floor, lamp, door, light) or verses about the members of the body (face, eye, lips, leg, hand ...)

4- You may also memorize objective verses:

Verses about joy, comfort, gentleness ... verses to fight certain thoughts. Verses to encourage those in despair, verses to advise the sinner or to give thanks ...

5- You may practise the use of memorized verses while conversing with people.

Let the language of the Bible be ready in your mouth to be used in your speech, your talk and your stories. By doing this you will reduce the chance of sinning and so you shall be a true Christian role model. In every situation, try to remember a verse ...

6- You may also write down in a note book your favourite verses - Write the verses that touch you and are significant for you, then memorize them.

I would like to work on arranging a competition in memorizing or publishing booklets to help in memorizing verses on various topics...

THE BIBLE IN YOUR HOUSE

Here, I place before you the Lord's saying in the Book of Deuteronomy:

"... and these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up ... You shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6:6-9).

E E E

To what extent do you carry out these commandments?

A - Are there framed verses that hang on the walls of your house so you, your wife and your children can memorize them.?

B - Do you teach your children what is written in the Bible, according to His saying: *“Teach them diligently to your children,”* or you depend on Sunday School and release yourself from the responsibility?! The children will then realize that their parents never talk to them about the word of God!!

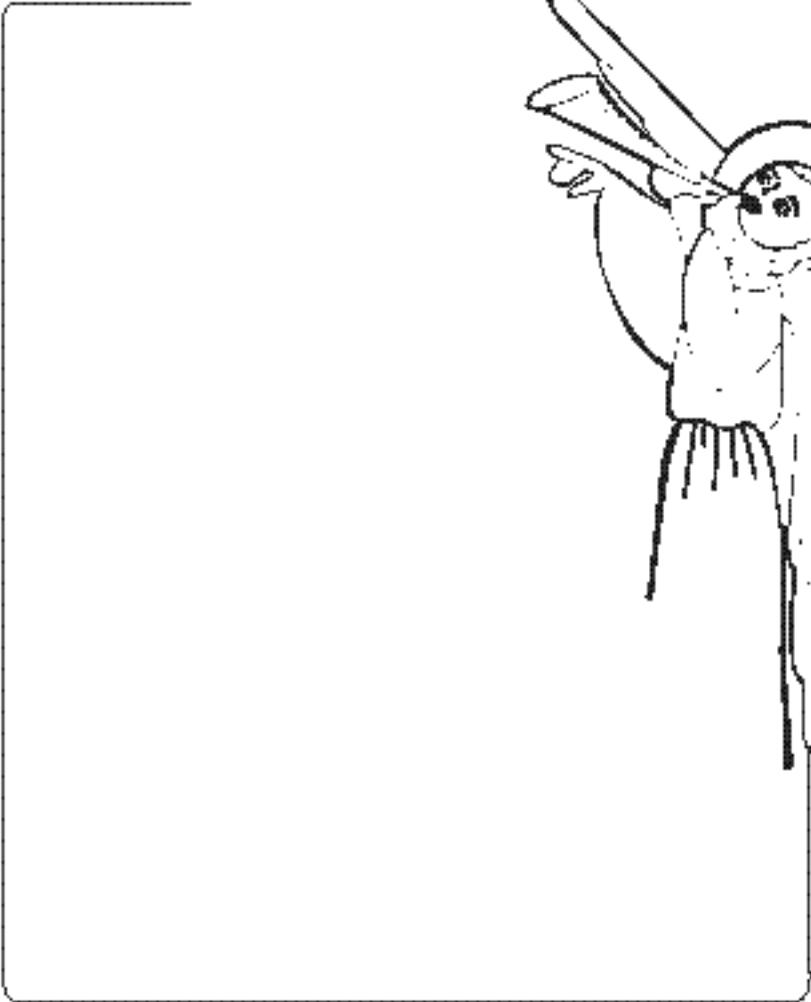
C - Do you use the language of the Bible in your house according to the commandment: *“Talk of them when you sit in your house”*?

D - Do you read the Bible daily with the members of your family? Do you have a family gathering around the Bible?

E - Do you organize competitions for your children to memorize verses and train them in that? ... I am asking you before God asks you about that.



CHAPTER 3



READING THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Reading the lives of the saints is one of the most important spiritual means that is used by the grace of God to make our relationship with the Lord grow and inflame our love for Him and for His Kingdom.

It offers us the practical way to carry out the spiritual principles.

Many of the commandments and teachings may seem to us as being theoretical. But in the lives of the saints, we see them carrying out the Lord's commandments in their everyday lives.

And so the lives of the saints show us that God's commandments are beautiful and possible, and not just theoretical ideals.

Many a time some would say in amazement: Who can carry out these ideals?! Is it really possible for one to turn the other cheek to the one who slapped him?! (Mt 5:39). Is it possible that one always ought to pray and not lose heart (Lk 18:1)? And to pray without ceasing (1Thess 5:17)? And is it possible for one to give all he has to the poor (Mt 19:21)?! We see all these questions and many similar ones answered and presented in the lives of the saints.

E E E

The Lord permitted that these saints be to us high models in all virtues without exception.

In a truly amazing way that calls for great admiration of the spirituality of these righteous ones, they were raised above the level of material and body, as if they were earthly angels. They lived in the spirit with God, a life of complete victory over all the wars of the enemy. We may even say that they returned to the divine image in which Man was created from the beginning ... Their lives give encouragement to any person to continue on the spiritual path with no fear or hesitation.

So when we read about them we say in confidence:

God is capable of supporting us as He supported them ...

The life of righteousness is then possible and available for whoever asks for it. The grace of God is willing to work in every heart and raise it to the highest level, no matter what its condition ... The Spirit of God works, leading souls towards God, granting them all prospects and gifts.

E E E

What the saints did is what the Spirit of God did in them. I wonder, when we read the stories of the saints, do we read about how God worked and was glorified in their lives, or do we just read an account of the saints' heroic deeds?

Do we read about "*The communion of the Holy Spirit*" (2Cor 13:14) in their lives? When we read the stories of the saints, is it a matter of them being attracted to God, or is it God attracting them by force? Or is it a matter of, as Solomon said in the Song of Songs: "*Lead me away! We will run after you*" (Song 1:4)?!

E E E

The lives of the saints deeply affected all generations throughout the ages.

The story of St Anthony that was written by St Athanasius the Apostolic had an amazing effect on the people of Rome that it became the cause of monasticism spreading there. When St Augustine read it, he was greatly affected and it hence led him to repentance. The same with the lives of the monks in the wilderness of Shiheet. They were attracted by the lives of the anchorite fathers, and so they journeyed from afar to see these earthly angels, and hear from them a word of spiritual benefit. Many recorded the lives of these virtuous fathers, which history has preserved for us to this day.

E E E

These saints never wrote about their own lives, but their lives, which others recorded, were a most desirable book.

It was the living history that was read by their generation who lived with it and passed it onto future generations.

It was the divine inspiration itself that passed to us the lives of many prophets and apostles, and so some of the books in the Holy Bible were named after them. These books explain to us God's work in them, the message that God entrusted to them and their holy lives.

E E E

The Church showed great interest in the lives of the saints.

They were recorded in a book called the "Synaxarium". During each Liturgy, we read one or more stories of those saints whose feast day falls on the same day as the Holy Mass. Their stories are read to comfort us and give us consolation. The church also reads to the faithful another part of the lives of the pure apostles from the "Praxis" which is "The Acts of the Apostles". Many are the feasts that the church holds for these saints, celebrating the memory and conveying to all their virtuous lives.

Their icons in the churches are placed with candles before them to remind us of the lives of these saints, which may become food for our spirit and an opportunity to contemplate on their virtues. How beautiful is the saying of Mar Isaac:

"Delicious are the lives of the saints, like water to new plants."

It is a spiritual food that nobody can do without. It brings to us the feeling of God's love and the love of His ways that lead to the Kingdom ... It also makes us love virtue and love those righteous saints and take them as our fathers and intercessors. We aspire to deepen our relationship with them, as if they were alive with us on earth, so we talk to them and call on them.

E E E

Due to our love for them and for their lives, we sometimes call ourselves after their names.

We thank God that in these days, many are named after the saints. We give their names to our children so they grow up to love the saints. It is also in recognition of our love for them and our admiration of their lives ... The same when one is consecrated a monk or ordained a priest. He is given the name of one of these saints to show our recognition of the holy life that belongs to this good name.

I would like here to record some of the spiritual effects of the lives of the saints:

E E E

THE FIRST EFFECT IS THE EXAMPLE

That is what St Paul the Apostle said: “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Heb 13:7).

Here, we find before us a very wide program. For each virtue that one wants to possess, he'll find a group of saints guiding him through their lives to the way of obtaining it, setting a practical example and an incentive that attracts him to it ... But I would like here to put an important remark, which is:

E E E

We have to take the saints as an example in whatever is possible for us.

For example, may be the life of martyrdom is not available. But we follow the steps of the martyrs in the strength of their faith, their courage, their endurance for the sake of faith, their readiness for eternity, the lack of love for the world or being attached to it ... All that is possible for us.

We might not be able to pray without ceasing, as St Arsanious the Great or St Macarius of Alexandria did ... But at least we should have the love for prayer and the longing to continue in it as much as our spiritual level permits.

We ought to know that the way the saints lived in the wilderness is different from the way we live in the world. So we should not imitate them in fasting for days, for they mastered this after many years of spiritual striving, and the life of calmness also helped them ...

E E E

Let then our imitation of these high virtues be under spiritual guidance and in wise progression.

There are other virtues that are available for all, such as humility, gentleness, calmness, serving others and tolerating them, keeping from anger and the like.

As for complete silence, it does not suit you. But you learn from it: talk when it is necessary and as it is feasible, choosing suitable words that build and are beneficial...

Do not imitate the virtue fully in a way that does not suit you or is not within your capacity. And do not reject it completely in despair. Take from it as much as you can, wisely, in progression and under guidance ...

E E E

Take the virtue in its spirit and not in its form :

When you read, for example, about the saints of repentance, try to be like them in the fervour of their repentance and in the way they never returned to their sin. Take them as an example in the contrition of their hearts and in their tears. But do not imitate literally those whose repentance led directly to monasticism such as Pelagia, Mary the Egyptian, Moses the Black and Augustine ...

Take the repentant's love for God and his return to Him, the depth of his regret and his disgust of sin... But live within the limits of your personality and your capability and the amount of grace that has been given to you...

E E E

THE SECOND EFFECT OF THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS IS STRENGTHENING THE FAITH

This comes from whatever the lives of the saints and confessors offer from holding fast to the faith, to the extent of dying for it or accepting all types of torment in contentment, joy and patience ...

Or what is offered by the lives of the heroes of faith - those who defended the belief with all strength and all understanding, enduring for its sake imprisonment, exile, homelessness and all means of persecution. Take, for example, Saint Athanasius the Apostolic: He was exiled four times from his See, accused of horrible accusations, sentences were issued against him and was told, "The whole world is against you, Athanasius" ...

E E E

We read about that and this generation becomes rebuked, those who do not care about the difference in belief or faith, forgetting how much pain the saints endured for the sake of protecting and preserving their faith!!

Local and ecumenical councils would assemble for one point of difference. The saints would do their best in defending the faith and verifying the correct belief. But now, for the sake of getting married or obtaining a divorce, one would change his religion so easily, carelessly or in ignorance!! Or maybe one will disagree with a member of the clergy so he leaves the whole church with its faith and belief. He would not care about the struggle of the saints for the sake of this faith ...

E E E

Therefore we need to read the lives of the saints, the heroes of faith, to implant within the souls of all the importance of faith and being firm in it, and rejecting what is called non-sectarianism!!

The church is not a sect and it is not a number of sects. But it is a group of the faithful who believe in the correct faith with all its details ...

This is the faith, for whose sake the saints were martyred in all generations and many saints suffered and were tormented. Amongst them were monks who lived in the inner wilderness, but lived in faith. How beautiful is the symbolism that is held in shrouding St Paul the Hermit in the robe of St. Athanasius, the defender of faith.

THE THIRD EFFECT OF THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS IS IMPLANTING FEELINGS OF HUMILITY AND CONTRITION

Whenever we read about the heights of spirituality that these saints attained, our souls will be humbled and we will feel as if we are nothing compared to them ...

Whenever we read about the life of the saint Abba Abraam and his gift of giving, would not our souls become contrite?! He who used to give everything, leaving nothing for himself. It even happened once that some gave him a piece of black material to make a garment, as the one he had been wearing was beginning to wear out. But he gave it to a widow who visited him... Or what do we say about Abba John the Merciful who sold all his possessions and gave to the poor. Then when there was nothing left, he sold himself as a slave and donated the money to the poor...!! Would not our souls be humbled when we compare our donations with what these saints gave?!

E E E

Truly, the lives of the saints cast away from our souls all the warfares of pride and vain glory, if the enemy attacks us with it.

If our thoughts attacked us concerning our service and we compared ourselves with the life of St Paul the Apostle, who laboured more abundantly than they all (1Cor 15:10). He preached in Jerusalem, Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and reached Spain. He founded uncountable churches and suffered indescribable hardships (2Cor 11). He used to write epistles even while in prison (Eph 4:1) ...Would not our souls become contrite with this comparison and other similar ones?!

E E E

No matter how much we become contrite, we will never reach the humility of the saints:

Those who, in spite of all their virtues, would weep over their sins?!

St Macarius the Great wept and made the whole council weep with him. St Moses the Black, St Shishwy, St Pachomios the Great ... What made all these great ones weep?

St Arsanious would stand up for prayer at sunset with the sun behind him, and would remain standing in prayer until the sun would rise once more the next morning before him. It was said that his eyelashes fell due to much weeping and he used to wet his palm leaves with his tears!! Where is then our humility, no matter how much we humble ourselves?!

St Macarius the Great, the founder of monasticism in Scetis, after having seen two of the anchorite fathers in the inner wilderness, said: "I am not a monk, but I have seen true monks" ...!!

The stories before us are endless, and should be sufficient for us ...

E E E

Maybe we are fought by pride when we compare ourselves with others who are living; we think we are better than them. But when we read the lives of the saints, every mouth will then be quietened and we will realize that we are nothing...

THE FOURTH EFFECT OF THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS IS THAT IT GIVES US THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM AND DISCERNMENT

It shows the correct path for us to follow ...

How beautiful is what we read about King David, when he wanted to buy a place to build the temple. Araunah the Jebusite agreed to grant him everything for free, but David refused and said: *"No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing"* (2Sam 24:24).

We also learn wisdom from Abigail and how she managed to rebuke David the Prophet in a way that made her win him on her side (1Sam 25:23-35).

We also learn wisdom from the lives of the wilderness fathers, even from while in their youth, such as in the example of St John the Dwarf and St Tadros, the disciple of St Pachomios was another one. We also learn from the wisdom of the old, such as Abba Agathon and Abba Isidore the Priest and many more ... The wisdom of the fathers is a treasure for whoever wants to learn ...

THE FIFTH LESSON THAT WE LEARN FROM THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS IS THAT OF CONTINUAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It is rising up with no limits ... An example of that would be St Paul with all his gifts, his service and how he was caught up to the third heaven. In spite of that, he says: *“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me ... But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press towards the goal”* (Phil 3:12-14).

The high spiritual levels which the saints achieved in each virtue, prompt us to constantly reach forward without ever being satisfied with whatever level we may achieve. The road before us is long, but the grace is ready to take hold of our hands and lead us through times of trial... following in the footsteps of these saints. Their lives give us ardour that is never suppressed or put out ...

E E E

THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS AFFECT US ALSO IN SO MANY OTHER WAYS

We learn how our confessions should be more accurate, as we discover many shortcomings in our lives, compared to their lives ...

We also learn the manner in which we address God in prayer when we read their prayers with all the intimacy, humility, love and warmth that they contain ...

We also learn the manner in which to deal with people; the way they faced spiritual wars and the way they were victorious.

The one who reads the lives of the saints will continually change for the better: his manner will change, his talk will change, his dealings with others will change. Try to attain this...

E E E

Now, on no account do I claim that I have given this subject its due in full. It needs a book or books. All I mentioned are just examples.

I leave for you, dear reader, this wide ocean of contemplation on the benefits of the lives of the saints.

There is no doubt that this subject could contain the whole spiritual life...



CONTEMPLATION

INTRODUCTION

What is the meaning of contemplation? When one contemplates on something, it means that he is examining it closely, exploring, inspecting and analysing, to see its depth.

Contemplation then is entering into the depth, either in the work of the thought or the work of the spirit.

It is reaching a type of knowledge that is much higher than ordinary knowledge, a knowledge that is above the senses, a knowledge that is new to you and is a delight to your spirit. You find in it spiritual nourishment and enjoyment.

Or contemplation is the opening of the mind, the heart and the spirit to receive the divine knowledge from above or from inside the person, from the Spirit of God that dwells in him ...

E E E

For contemplation, it is appropriate to have quietness and calmness, being far from noise that occupies the senses and thus occupies the mind and keeps it from the work of the spirit in it. Contemplation becomes deeper whenever the senses become free from outside disturbance and one is released from the control of his personal thoughts in order to receive what the spirit grants. What helps contemplation is the desire to understand and concentration on the divine.

E E E

There are many spheres for contemplation that we would like to discuss in detail ...

There is contemplation on the Holy Bible or on hymns and tunes. Or contemplation on the creation and nature or on heaven and the angels, or on death, judgment and what follows. And there is contemplation on events and the lives of the saints, on virtues generally and specifically, or on God's commandments. There is another type, and a more sublime one, of contemplation on God's beautiful attributes ... such as contemplation on the unlim-

ited, the truth and the grace ... However, the subjects for contemplation are countless so that the spiritual person could contemplate on everything, even the materials: trying to extract from them spiritualities that would benefit him...

FIELDS FOR CONTEMPLATION

E E E

CONTEMPLATION ON THE HOLY BIBLE

The words of divine inspiration are a spirit that is materialised into expressions. And it is not the body (that is, the expression) that will benefit you but it is the spirit which is in it that gives life. (2 Cor 3:6). Therefore the Lord said: “*The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life*” (Jn 6:63).

The words are just a covering which encloses meanings within; like a shell that contains a pearl. The pearl is the spirit of the words. Do not be satisfied with the shell. Uncover it and take the pearl that is inside. This happens through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, through prayer, as you say with the Psalmist: “*Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law*” (Ps 119:18). Or as Elisha prayed for his disciple, Gehazi, that the Lord may open his eyes that he may see (2 Kings 6:17).

E E E

Contemplation, then, is the enlightenment of the mind by the Holy Spirit.

So that we may understand the meaning of the books within the Holy Bible, delve into them and remove the shell so as to reveal the core. This is what is meant by contemplating on the Bible, trying to discover the divine mysteries that are present in the divine inspiration. Or as it was said about the work of the Lord Jesus Christ with His Disciples after the Resurrection: “*And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures*” (Lk 24:45).

Truly, Lord, through Your light we see the light.

We then need light from Your Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds, our hearts and our thoughts, to understand what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev 2).

E E E

As for the effort done by our thoughts, our hearts and our souls, we consider it just as a request, asking the grace to open our minds to receive what the Spirit pours in them ... Our job is to offer our minds to God, to fill them up with depth and understanding from above... We open the door for Him to come in and dine with us (Rev 3:20)... Yes, we dine with the Bread of Life that comes down from heaven (Jn 6:33,35). We live by this bread and by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4).

E E E

So, in contemplation, the step taken by the mind is opening the door to the Spirit.

That is why some of the fathers consider contemplation, in its depth, something outside the human effort; considering it a gift from the Holy Spirit. Or as the Psalmist says: *“I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for Your commandments” (Ps 119:131).*

Or contemplation is a period of study by the Holy Spirit. A training on how to take from the Spirit what He wants to give you.

It is not a matter of an effort by the mind to understand, or just a matter of depending on our intelligence and ability, as the Bible said, *“And lean not on your own understanding” (Prov 3:5).*

E E E

The purely intellectual thinking that is void of the work of the Spirit does not produce contemplation... It might produce knowledge or philosophy, but not contemplation.

There is a difference between a scholar and a worshipper, between the one who studies and the one who contemplates, between the one who searches the books and the one who receives from the Spirit.

Contemplation is not just a thought. It is mixing the thought with the heart, then leaving the heart as a tool in the hand of the spirit. Then the spirit prays to take from the Spirit of God. And what the spirit takes is given to the mind through the heart.

At that time, we realize the strength of the word because it takes strength from the Spirit ... Then do not stop, my brother, at the level of the mind but use the mind as means to reach the spirit. And the spirit will lead you to God who has all treasures of knowledge, and He will give unto you ...

The one who reads on the surface may read much with no contemplation.

As for the spiritual reader, the little he reads becomes a spring of contemplation that does not dry up.

He does not concentrate on how much he reads, but rather he contemplates on what he reads... A word or an expression might attract him, so he plunges into its depth and remains there. He says with the Psalmist: *“I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps 119:96)*... God may open his heart and in one word, he may see a great treasure that will never end, no matter how much he takes from it. As David the Prophet said in his prayers: *“I rejoice at your word as one who finds great treasure” (Ps 119:162)*.

E E E

Would that you take one verse per day for contemplation, as a spiritual exercise.

Consider a verse from the Bible that may have left an effect on you during your reading. But do not stop at the limit of this effect. Memorize this verse and take it as a field for your thinking and contemplation, giving the Spirit of God a chance to grant you something through it ... Or take a specific story from the Bible as a field for your contemplation.

E E E

God's dealings with people is a very wide field for contemplation ...

Consider God's dealings with His saints, those whom He loved and those who dearly loved Him and had an intimate relationship with Him, or even God's dealings with sinners who benefited from His long suffering and the abundance of His gentleness and so they repented, or those whose hearts were hardened...

Personalities in the Bible could also be used as a field for contemplation. ... And many are the books written on this topic...

E E E

What would also help you to contemplate is having memorized many verses from the Bible.

Whenever you start contemplating, you will find these verses coming back to you, each completing and complementing one another. Each verse presenting you with a specific meaning. They all present to you a beautiful bouquet of contemplations. In its co-ordination, we remember the saying of the Apostle:

"Comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor 2:13).

And so you occupy yourself during the day with spiritual thoughts...

These thoughts will penetrate deep within you. And these pure thoughts bring forth other pure thoughts. They also bring forth many feelings, emotions and contemplations. Your heart becomes pure and the word of God works in it, spreading within it spiritual contemplations ... These contemplations will also accompany you during prayer and will even cross your mind while conversing with others. The listeners will notice depth that is not superficial.

E E E

And so you will benefit from contemplation by deepening your spiritual life.

It will not be limited to the mere thought or spiritual feeling, or inner satisfaction, or the pleasure of knowledge ... But it will develop to have its effect on your practical life ...

Therefore when you read, whether it be the Bible, or lives of the church fathers, do not stop at the level of reading and contemplating only, but mingle what you read with your thoughts and your heart... Apply your contemplations to your life and develop accordingly a program to follow that will become a part of your relationship with God and with people...

Let your reading be accompanied by prayer ...

As said by David the Prophet in the long Psalm: *“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Ps 119:18)* ... We see here that contemplation needs divine uncovering ... Many a time one stands in a state of amazement before what God uncovers for him ... He may read a chapter from the Bible that he had read before, but new meanings are revealed that may never have crossed his mind before in his previous readings...

The same thing could happen while reading or praying the Psalms. And even perhaps when he prays the same Psalm a few days later, then he will discover new meanings that he never discovered before...

And so God opens for him windows of light that will shine into his mind.

This enlightenment is not due to his intelligence or knowledge. But it is a gift from God that He pours on him while praying, reading or contemplating. Prayer becomes a source of contemplation and is accompanied by contemplation. Also contemplation becomes accompanied by prayer... The meaning of verses becomes wider and unlimited and one experiences its depth all the time ...

If you don't have the gift of contemplation, read the contemplations of the saintly fathers.

A great saint like St John Chrysostom has a commentary on the Gospel of St Matthew, another commentary on the Gospel of St John and many other commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles and the fourteen Epistles of St Paul ... These books are full of explanations and contemplations. Follow him in the way he explains and contemplates and learn ...

Another great saint is St Augustine, who is very deep in his contemplation and the delicacy of his style. He has written a book of contemplations on the First Epistle of St John the Apostle, another book of contemplations

on the Psalms as well as various sermons on many chapters of the Gospels. Read his works and learn...

Likewise with the rest of the works of the saints, especially those who are known for their contemplations and not only for the depth of their teachings ... such as Mar Ephram the Syrian, St Jacob El Sorougy, St Didymos the Blind and others. Read their works, benefit from them and consider them as a school in contemplation.

E E E

Train yourself also to read the fathers who became famous in their symbolic contemplations on the Bible ...

You will find great depth in their writings, as they do not restrict themselves to the literary meaning of the verses of the Bible, but they go into the depth of the verses' meaning...

Appreciating symbolism would also help us in understanding the books of prophecies such as the Song of Solomon ... and understanding such things about the sacrifices, offerings and feasts; the laws concerning uncleanness and purification and other laws about which St Paul the Apostle said: "... *Are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ*" (Col 2:17).

E E E

Practise contemplation because it occupies your mind with something good and beneficial, instead of leaving the thoughts to wander in wrong or trivial matters that are void of any benefit ...

Be certain that your mind can be active in contemplating, but it depends on what you offer it for contemplation, whether it be good or bad, whether it is offered from your heart and thoughts, or something from the world...

So it is better to contemplate on what is beneficial.

E E E

You should know that the gift of contemplation is for all and not only for the saints, but even for the sinners...

There are many who have an amazing ability to contemplate, but on sin; one who loves a specific sin, how easy it is for him to wonder and contemplate on it deeply. It dominates his thoughts, his heart and his feelings to the extent that it could influence his imagination. This is what some authors, poets and novelists used to do. It is one type of contemplation, but they used it on sin ...

As for the saints, their contemplations are on spiritual matters. Therefore, those who contemplate on sinful things, if they repent and direct this gift of contemplation to a spiritual path, the good effect will then show. We mention here, as an example, St Augustine who after his conversion lived a life of repentance and spiritual growth, to the extent that he recorded all his sins in his book entitled "The Confessions".

Reading is one of the tools that produce contemplation...

We have spoken about reading the Holy Bible ... We also add to this the reading of spiritual books and the lives of the saints which needs from us more explanation.

E E E

But remember always that contemplation makes you perceive and enjoy the depth of the subject.

It keeps you from shallowness, offers you spiritual food that is good for your inner being, grants you wisdom and makes you feel God's work in you...

CONTEMPLATING ON NATURE

The first verse in the Holy Bible that refers to contemplation is what was said about our father Isaac, the son of Abraham: "*And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening*" (Gen 24:63). May be that introduces us to another type of contemplation: which is contemplating on nature.

E E E

It is not just contemplating on the beauty of nature but more on what it offers from spiritualities, according to the saying of the Psalmist: “*The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork*” (Ps 19:1). And here we progress from nature to the greatness of God, its Creator, or to the love of God who cares for it. Listen to the poet singing:

Here is nature let us stop, O traveller...
So I may show you the wonders of the Creator.

In the past, they used to study astronomy at the Theological College because of its wonderful, accurate system that proves the existence of an Almighty Creator. Even one of the philosophers gave Him the title: “the Greatest Architect”...

If the materialistic heaven, (i.e. the universe) is a great field for contemplation, how much more is the Heaven, which is God’s throne (Mt 5:34).

How beautiful is what St John the Beloved saw in the Book of Revelation, especially when he said: “*I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven*” (Rev 4:1). Add to that what he described about the Heavenly Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God with people (Rev 21) ...

Contemplating on heaven and on the heavenly no doubt elevates one’s mind and heart much above the level of the substance and material things ...

E E E

Contemplating on heaven also involves contemplation on the angels...

And on all the Heavenly Hosts: consisting of the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the Lordships and the Powers, the angels and the archangels, the multitude of thousands and ten thousands that are before the Divine Throne, and the angels that are: “*Ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation*” (Heb 1:14). What is the nature of these angels? What is their spirituality, their holiness, their love and their obedience? (Psalms 103, 104) What is their service for God and for the people? What would our relationship with them be like in eternity? And what are their stories that are mentioned in the Bible and in the lives of the saints ...? Here the thoughts float in a spiritual realm...

If this type of contemplation is deep for us ...

Let us contemplate on the spirits of the saints who have departed ... As the Lord told us about our father Abraham and Lazarus the beggar being in his bosom. We contemplate here either on the saints who are in paradise with God (Lk 23:43) or those sent by God to do services on earth such as the Virgin St Mary, St George and others. And the levels of all these, and how one star differs from another star in glory (1 Cor 15:41)...

Then what about the resurrection, and the spiritual, celestial, and heavenly bodies? (1 Cor 15:42-50). And what about eternity and the forthcoming glory, the Kingdom, the levels of saints and their relationships and the Kingdom prepared for us in the everlasting delight.

If we cannot do this, let us come back down to earth and contemplate on the creation that surrounds us, as the Lord said: "*Consider the lilies of the field ... look at the birds of the air*" (Mt 6:28,26). God does not mean sensuous contemplation concerning their beauty, multiple colours, aroma and co-ordination ... But their elevation over the senses, to God who created them as such that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them ... Contemplation here leads to God's wonderful care for all His creations. It also leads to faith, concerning God's care and depending on Him without feeling anxiety...

If we contemplate on the great difference between natural flowers and the artificial ones we will find that, no matter how much man masters their making, they remain with no life, no aroma and no growth. Even their colours could never compare to the natural ones, and this proves God's wonderful might. The same thing applies to the birds of the air in their multiple kinds, shapes and tune of voice, characteristics, travels and contentment ... You put next to that the Psalm's saying: "*Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped*" (Ps 124:7).

E E E

Truly how kind is God: "He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens that cry" (Ps 147:9).

The Lord even says: "*Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and God feeds them*" (Lk 12:24). Yes, the black ravens that some consider as a bad omen ... God gives such care to them. He even assigns them tasks:

ravens used to feed Elijah during the famine (1 Kings 17:6) . And other ravens used to bring food to St Paul the Hermit ... God sends them to His saints and they obey and know how to carry out God's will. And here you progress a few steps in your thinking, to a level deeper than the shallow thought during reading...

God's relationship with animals and birds is a long topic, but now, however, is not the time to talk about it, and contemplating on it is a longer topic...

But God gave us the opportunity to contemplate on even the small insects, so the Bible said: "***Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise***" (Prov 6:6).

Truly, I have never seen in my life one ant that does nothing... It is continuously moving, continuously working, it never stops. Groups of ants give an amazing lesson in co-operation for whoever contemplates on their group work, carrying things that equal ten times their size. It is also a lesson in discipline, as they always walk in a long queue towards a fixed target. They have amazing communication with each other.

E E E

As we learn lessons from contemplating on ants, we also learn from contemplating on bees.

Ahmed Shawky wrote a poem about bees where he said:

A planned Kingdom - by a commanding woman.
Who takes the control - among workers and skilled labourers.
I wonder for workers - who appoint a Caesar to rule them.

The astonishing system under which lives the kingdom of bees is another field for deep contemplation... How God created the bee with such abilities and capacities... How it collects the nectar and makes it honey. How it makes food for the queens! How it builds amazing and well designed hives. How it flies far away in search of flowers and nectar! How wonderful! And what a wonderful Creator!!

E E E

The spiritual person is capable of making everything a field for contemplation. He is also capable of extracting spiritual lessons from the materials.

I remember that I once published in the book “Words of Spiritual Benefit” a contemplation on spiritual lessons that we can derive from the River Nile. And also from the mere soft drops of water which, if they continuously fall on rock, shall engrave it... Also the banks of a river and how they do not limit its freedom but protect it from spilling. So are God’s commandments and the guidance of the fathers. They do not limit one’s freedom but protect him from doing wrong.

Likewise the human body is a wide field for contemplation, giving evidence to the greatness of the Creator.

It is enough to contemplate on the abilities of each member of the body and the science of physiology. For example, the brain with all its amazing centres for sight, hearing, movement and speech. If the blood does not reach any of these centres, its job stops and the person becomes disabled ...

The same with the heart, which is the size of one’s fist, but it is a very precise system that one’s life depends on as it also depends on the brain. We will be short of time if we talk about all the systems of the human body and how they work harmoniously in an amazing balance. If any of these systems are damaged, not even all the scientific progress in the world would be able to return them to their natural condition...

Therefore in the Theological Colleges they studied medicine and astronomy to deepen their faith in the ability of God, the Creator...

If these are the abilities of the body according to the creation of God the Almighty, what would the contemplations on the abilities of the spirit be?! But I would like to leave this point now to talk about another subject which is:

CONTEMPLATING ON EVENTS

By this, I mean the events that we experience daily which prove God's wisdom and planning, His intervention and care ... whether in our present time or God's hand in history... It is a matter that calls for deep contemplation. It is not spiritually good for us to casually pass by historical events without stopping for contemplation.

God's hand was involved in what happened to Arius, Diocletian and Nero. God's hand was with St Athanasius when the whole world stood against him. God's hand was with Yostina and Kebrianos the magician... God's hand was with the anchorite fathers in their solitude, guiding some of the saints to where they lived so that they can record for us their life story before their departure.

E E E

God's hand was in the church history and in the secular history and how they met and in the way everything was planned for good... Is history just a record of knowledge and events? Or does it contain lessons and divinity? I mean God's Divine work in it. This also needs contemplation.

Does not God's involvement with King Constantine call for contemplation and how it led him to issue the Milan Decree in 313 AD which granted freedom of religion? This event became a serious turning point in the history of Christianity and the history of religious persecutions.

E E E

Can we deny that God's hand was in the events that led to the change in the destiny of Russia and the Soviet Union? It influenced the wiping out of atheism that continued for seventy years. It concluded in an amazing speed that was unexpected, which proves that God's hand was involved...! Would such an event pass us by without a stop for contemplation that would result in the strengthening of our faith in God and His Divine intervention...? Only He is the maker of wonders ...

Separating history from God is not a spiritual act. As for those who are spiritual, they contemplate on the hand of God in history.

We move to another subject in contemplation which is:

CONTEMPLATING ON PRAYER

Whether it be during personal prayers or in the prayers of the Holy Mass, the Psalms or in hymns and praises, whenever one starts prayer by contemplating on the Psalms and the segments of prayer, the more one's prayer becomes deeper and with understanding ...

I remember publishing a book entitled "Lord, How?", contemplating on Psalm 3 from the Morning Prayer ... And another book on Psalm 20 in the Third Hour Prayer, entitled "The Lord Hear Thee", ... And another book of contemplations on some Psalms from the Ninth Hour Prayer ... I also published a book called "Contemplations on the Prayer of Thanksgiving and Psalm 51". Would that we take the rest of the Psalms as a field for our contemplations and publish more books on them...

The fathers never recited the words of prayers in a shallow, fast manner. But as Mar Isaac said about their prayers:

"Because of the sweetness of the word in their mouths, it was not easy for them to leave it for another word."

They used to pray with understanding, plunging to the depths of the meaning in contemplation that gave their prayers spirit, warmth and depth. In so doing, their feelings would become one with the words of prayer and the words uttered from their hearts. They never worried about the length or the amount of prayers but the contemplation and depth that they contain. And so Mar Isaac said to the one who wanted to rush through prayer to recite as many Psalms as possible:

If you are fought by this, say: 'I do not stand before God to count words...'

E E E

We say the same about the hymns and praises ... especially hymns that have the spirit of prayer such as "Your Mercies O Lord are abundant" ... and the chant "O my Lord Jesus Christ, my good Saviour" ... It is true that those who hurry in their prayers and chants lose their depth and contemplation. It turns from being a prayer to a mere recitation ...

If you don't have the gift of contemplation in prayer, I advise you to read the contemplations of the fathers on the prayers and Psalms, and there are many ...

We move here to another point in contemplation, which is:

CONTEMPLATING ON DEATH AND JUDGMENT

The Church teaches us in the "Prayer before sleeping" (the Twelfth Hour prayer) to pray saying:

"Behold, I am about to stand before the Just Judge in fear because of my numerous sins...", and "If this life was everlasting and this world eternal, O my soul, you would have a valid excuse. But if your wicked deeds and repulsive evils are exposed before the Just Judge, what answer would you then give, when you are lying on the bed of sin and fail to subject the body?!"

And in the Midnight Prayer, the Church directs us to contemplate on the end of the world and the second coming of Christ, the destiny of the wise virgins and the foolish virgins ... and the necessity for spiritual watchfulness ...

CONTEMPLATING ON GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

The attributes of God, blessed be His name, offer a deep subject for contemplation, presented to us by the Liturgy of St Gregory and the concluding prayer at the end of each hour in the Agpia: "Have mercy upon us, O God, have mercy upon us", as we contemplate on: "Christ, our good Lord, plentiful in patience, mercy and compassion, who loves the just and shows mercy to all sinners" ... We find the same contemplation in the Trisagion, as we say: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!*" (Is 6:3).

Our contemplations on God's attributes consist of two types: the attributes concerning His relationship to us and the attributes concerning Him only as a God such as the Eternal, the Unlimited, the Creator, the Almighty, the Everlasting ... They are all a field for deep contemplation ...

OTHER SUBJECTS FOR CONTEMPLATION

You can contemplate on one of the virtues:

Such as contemplating on wisdom and discretion, or on the virtue of mercy, love and long suffering, or on prayer and your relationship with God. You contemplate on the depth of the virtue, its causes inside the soul, ways of expressing it ... and whatever relates to all that from the verses and stories of the Holy Bible.

You can contemplate on the Church Sacraments:

Such as Baptism and the hidden grace that takes place in it and is explained by the verses of the Holy Bible ... or the holy Chrism (myron) and the work of the Holy Spirit in it and in us ... And so forth with the rest of the Sacraments, and the divine work that is concealed in the laying on of hands.

You can contemplate on God's will and His good planning:

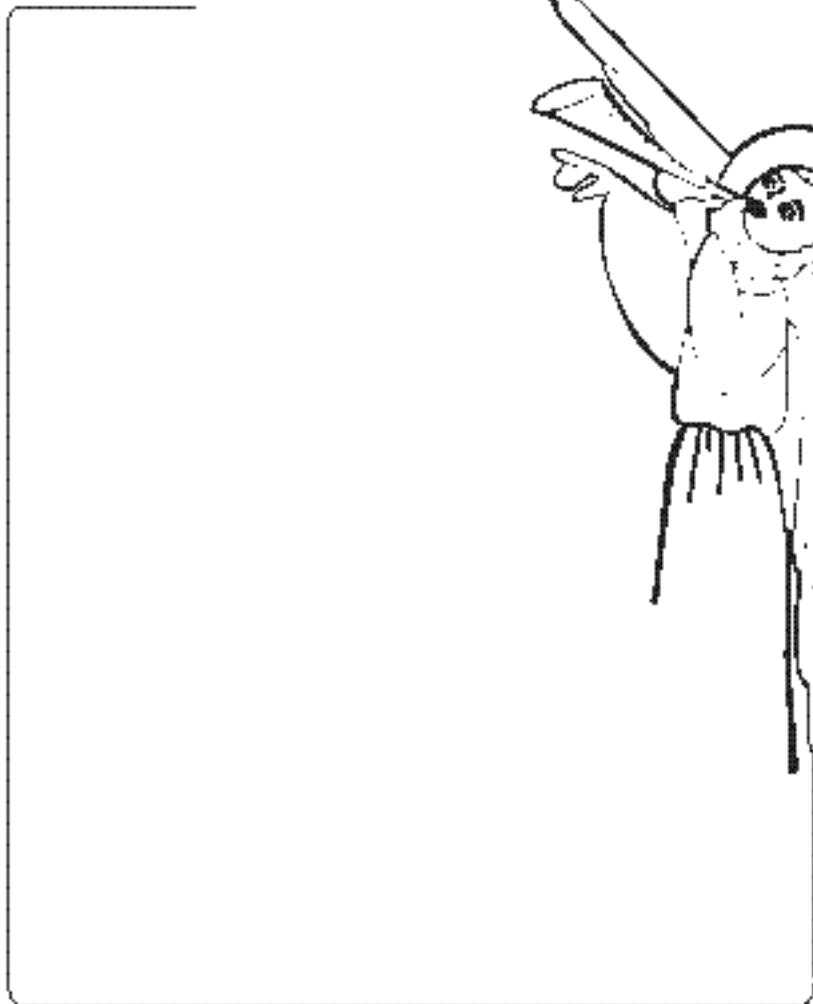
Or on the wondrous works of God (Job 37:14) and His strong hands. Or on God's way and method of dealing with sinners and with saints. And as David the Prophet says to the Lord: "*I meditate on all Your works*" (Ps 143:5).

CONTEMPLATING ON THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

This is a beautiful subject that is very beneficial. Contemplating on the lives of the saints is a desirable food for the soul and I don't want to cover it hastily. I would rather specify for it an independent subject, God willing.



CHAPTER 5



SPIRITUAL TRAINING

BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL TRAINING

Religion is not just mere information or mere fullness of religious knowledge. Knowledge on its own is not enough. What would one benefit if he knew all there is to know about virtues without applying it to his life?!

We read much and we hear much. But what matters is what we do.

In each Holy Mass, we hear a chapter from the Bible, readings from the Epistles of St Paul the Apostle, the Catholic Epistle and from the Acts of the Apostles. We also hear the lives of the saints in the Synaxarium, then we hear a sermon. If we attend the Vespers and the Matins, we will hear other chapters from the Bible, adding to what we read at home and in spiritual meetings ... But what is the effect of all that on our practical life? Are we satisfied by knowledge? Or our concern is to turn this knowledge into life, according to the saying of the Lord Jesus Christ, to Him is the glory: *“The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (Jn 6:63)*. How could this change happen?

E E E

Through spiritual training, knowledge is transformed into practice and the information into work.

We also notice that many go to church, confess and partake in Holy Communion and maybe serve also. But in spite of that, they have fixed weaknesses that are about to become part of their character, remaining with them for many years!! Why? ... Maybe because they did not give special attention to these weaknesses by training themselves on leaving them and observing the outcome of this training...

We say the same thing about many who repeat certain sins every time they go to Confession. They discovered these sins, knew about them and confessed them. But in spite of that continued in them. That is because they did not practically train themselves to leave these sins.

Here comes the importance of spiritual training: Where one comes into a practical confrontation with himself: Either to leave his sins behind or to acquire virtues or to grow spiritually....

He transforms the spiritual knowledge into life. He also transforms the spiritual longings into a spiritual life...

And in the practical training: he knows the reality of himself and from where does the mistake come to him, its causes and its sources. He then gets into the way of resisting, knowing the obstacles and how to overcome them. He does not stop at the point of knowledge and not even at the point of inner religious feeling.

E E E

In training, one struggles with himself and with God...

One listens to the rebuke of the Apostle Paul when he said: *“You have not yet resisted to blood-shed, striving against sin” (Heb 12:4).* He resists himself and struggles. At the same time, he does not depend on his human hand but he mixes the training with prayers, asking for help from above, according to the Lord’s saying to us: *“Without me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).* In all that, he puts himself and his training under the spiritual supervision of an experienced, wise guide, because the Bible says: *“And lean not on your own understanding” (Prov 3:5).*

E E E

The Holy Bible also offers us examples of exercises.

St Paul the Apostle said: *“I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil 4:12).* And he also said: *“...Those who by reason of use have their senses exercised” (Heb 5:14).*

GOD TRAINED HIS SAINTS

It was said about Moses the Prophet: *“Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3).* Do you

think he was born like that?! No, he even started his life of service very violent when he killed an Egyptian man and hid him in the sand (Ex 2:12). But God took him to the wilderness and trained him while working as a shepherd, to acquire gentleness, quietness and meekness during forty years till he reached this level ...

Do you think John the Beloved started his life with the love that was known about him till he said: *“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him”* (1 Jn 4:16). No. But he and his brother James were very stern, as they were brought up in the school of the firm John the Baptist who used to rebuke severely. (Mt 3:7-11). The Lord gave them the name Boanerges, that is, *“Sons of Thunder”* (Mk 3:17).

They were also the two who, when a Samaritan village rejected the Saviour, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem, they said to Him: *“Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?”* But the Lord rebuked them and said: *“You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them”* (Lk 9:52-56).

But the Lord trained the Son of Thunder so that John became a flame of love, unlike his beginning.

E E E

The same thing with the saints. They did not reach their high levels of spirituality at once, but trained themselves.

They trained through strife and toil for a long time. So we should not take what has been written about their spiritual peaks as starting points!! And we do not begin with what they have achieved at the end of their struggle, but we progress.

+ St Arsanious the Great, at the beginning of his monastic life, always made mistakes in the way beans were to be sorted, and learnt the correct method from an illiterate Egyptian. He considered this a lesson and said: *“This is a slap on your cheek, Arsanious.”* And through training over long periods of time, he achieved his level of holiness.

+ One of the fathers saw in a vision St. Moses the Black being fed honey by the angels. However, St. Moses did not reach the life of love, service, and

humility at once, but St Isidore the Priest trained him gradually until he reached such a high level of holiness and endurance.

E E E

Even in the field of service, the Lord also trained His Disciples...

He sent them for practical training and they returned and reported to Him the results of their services. They were rejoicing because the demons were subject to them in His name!! The Lord corrected this mistake and said to them: *"...Do not rejoice in this... but rejoice rather because your names are written in heaven"* (Lk 10:17-20).

He also trained them in another matter, and that was not to be concerned about who is to become great among them; He said to them: *"Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"* (Mt 20:26-28).

ADVICE IN TRAINING

Therefore we should not be satisfied by religious knowledge but let us give more care to work, training ourselves to carry out the commandments.

The Lord, after giving the Sermon on the Mount, concluded by saying: *"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock... Now everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand"* (Mt 7:24-26). And so He concentrated on the importance of acting according to what we hear. He also confirmed this by saying: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven"* (Mt 7:21). And so the priest prays in the Litany of the Gospel: *"May we be worthy of hearing and performing according to Your Holy Gospels, through the prayers of Your saints."*

Let us then train ourselves to act according to His commandments and the teaching of the Gospel.

INDICATIONS OF TRAINING

Spiritual training indicates that one is watchful for the salvation of his soul. He discovers his mistakes and weaknesses and trains himself to avoid them.

You must then discover your mistakes or the mistakes that others uncover for you, because without discovering your mistakes, you will never be able to train yourself to avoid them as: “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick*” (Mt 9:12). Do not be annoyed then with the one who uncovers a defect in you but benefit from it by training yourself to overcome this defect... But you too should try to inspect yourself well in the light of God’s commandments to discover your weaknesses.

E E E

Beware of self-justification and finding excuses for your mistakes.

The one who justifies himself will always remain where he is without any improvement because, in his eyes, his self is beautiful and without defect!! As for the one who gives account of himself accurately, and never makes excuses for himself, he will be able to overcome and confess his weaknesses before himself.

E E E

If you are ashamed that others might reveal mistakes in you, there is no doubt that you would not be ashamed in the same way from yourself!!

Sit with yourself and be totally honest. Try to touch the weak points that are in you which have been revealed through spiritual readings or from hearing particular sermons that you feel have touched your life.

E E E

If you train yourself once a week, or even once a month, to resist one point of weakness, you would be able in one year to overcome twelve weak points. Be certain that sins are interrelated. So to be free from a specific sin could free you from many others.

It is the same when you train yourself for acquiring a specific virtue, it will lead you to acquire other virtues ... Virtues are also interrelated, like links in one chain.

I will give you here an example of the linking of virtues.

Suppose you trained yourself one day to remain in solitude. You will find that you need to keep yourself busy during this solitude so you would not get bored. You may turn to reading for sometime, then praying for another time, or singing hymns, or memorizing psalms or parts of the Agpia or verses from the Bible. May be that will invite you to contemplate on these verses... And so you will find that training for solitude brings with it many virtues...

Or if one day you trained yourself to be silent, you will find yourself definitely in need to occupy your mind with something useful, so you would not ponder on what is unsuitable. And so silence will lead you to prayer or to contemplation or keeping yourself busy by reading... That is how one type of training brings forth many other types of training.

REMARKS

Be certain that when you start, the grace of God will definitely start with you:

God will never leave you alone in your training, but He will work with you, because you proved to be committed in your attitude towards life with God. The Divine help will respond to this feeling. And if the devil tried to fight you to break your training, the grace will support you to succeed. The main thing is never to draw back, to slacken or become idle, but to be firm with yourself...

E E E

If you trained yourself for acquiring a virtue, you must know that remaining firm in virtues is much more important than acquiring them.

It is easy to follow a specific virtue for one, two, three days or even a week... But what is important is to continue, till this virtue becomes a habit or part of your nature. That needs training for a long time until it is rooted in one's depth. And as Mar Isaac said, any planning that you don't remain steadfast in for long, will be fruitless...

That is because time and continuity are the practical measure to know the depth of the virtue in you. Time also gives you a chance to test the obstacles that hinder the training and the way to overcome them.

E E E

Therefore, quick shifting from one type of training to another does not benefit spiritually.

Many try to reach perfection in a very short period of time. The result is achieving nothing...!! Or they put before themselves many types of training at the same time so they forget some of them or fail to concentrate on all of them. As for you, train yourself wisely and gradually in order to attain. Here, I place before you some remarks.

E E E

+ Let the training be defined and clear.

Do not say, for example, I will train myself on all fourteen aspects of love, as St Paul the Apostle defines in 1 Corinthians 13, but be satisfied with one aspect at a time and concentrate on it. Do not say I want to train myself in the life of humility, gentleness or faith, while the details of each of these words are not clear before you. So you end up doing nothing... But, for example, say I want, in the life of humility, to train myself on one matter only, that is not to praise myself. When you master that, you say: I want to train myself not to seek the praising of people. When you master that, you say: I will train myself on something else, that is when somebody praises me, I immediately remember my sins and shortcomings. Then I convict myself from within.

E E E

+ Let the training be within your ability, so you will be able to practically carry it out.

Sometimes one selects for himself a type of training that is above the level of his capability or his circumstances would not enable him to do it. Or he may leap in his training to a high level where he would not be able to continue or maintain it, and so it would make him gradually retreat.

For example, don't put for yourself a training for fasting that is more than what your health can endure. Or a training in silence that does not suit your work circumstances, your meetings or your family life. Or a training in prayer or in service that your time does not permit...

+ You can progress in training if you take one step at a time.

As with silence, it is hard to train yourself in it, when you live in a society where you have to communicate.

But you can progress and say: I will train myself to make my talk short. What needs a word I will not give a sentence and what needs a sentence I will not give a lecture. If my listener understood my intention, then there is no need to increase my words...

When you master that, you may say: I will not talk except when it is necessary. Then you may move to another type of training, which is to abstain from speaking loudly. And you will say: I will train myself in speaking with "*a still, small voice*" (1 Kings 19:12). Then you will begin resisting mistakes of the tongue one by one...

+ Let your training be from the depth of your practical life.

The type of training that suits others might not suit you. As for your training, let it spring from resisting your personal mistakes, your spiritual shortcomings and what suits you in the life of virtue according to your spiritual ability. Your training should be in harmony with your internal and external circumstances.

A BOOK FOR TRAINING

+ Let there be a book especially for your training.

You write in it the type of training, a verse or a number of verses from the Bible to encourage you and motivate you in this specific type of training. Memorize these verses and repeat them continuously, so they become inscribed in your mind whenever you are being fought by something that is against your training. Remember also the stories of the saints who are virtuous role models for us in our own spiritual training.

+ If you fail at a time in your training, find out the reason so that you may avoid it in the future.

By doing that, you gain spiritual experience in all your practices, learn the wars of the enemy and the way to overcome them. Through such training, some became guides for others. It is like a mother who experienced life then was able to give her daughter practical advice for her benefit.

+ Try to benefit from the occasional failure that you experience in your training.

Let that be a reason for your humility so that you would not become proud due to repeated success.

Let it also be a reason to have sympathy on the weak and the sinners. Let your falls become a subject for prostrations before the Lord, where you offer a contrite heart and an opportunity for prayers to be raised to God, asking Him to grant you strength and grace.

STRUGGLE

And so, training in its visible picture is a struggle to reach purity of the heart till it becomes worthy of God to dwell in it. But it is not just a mere struggle, but a petition presented to God, asking for His intervention. But how?

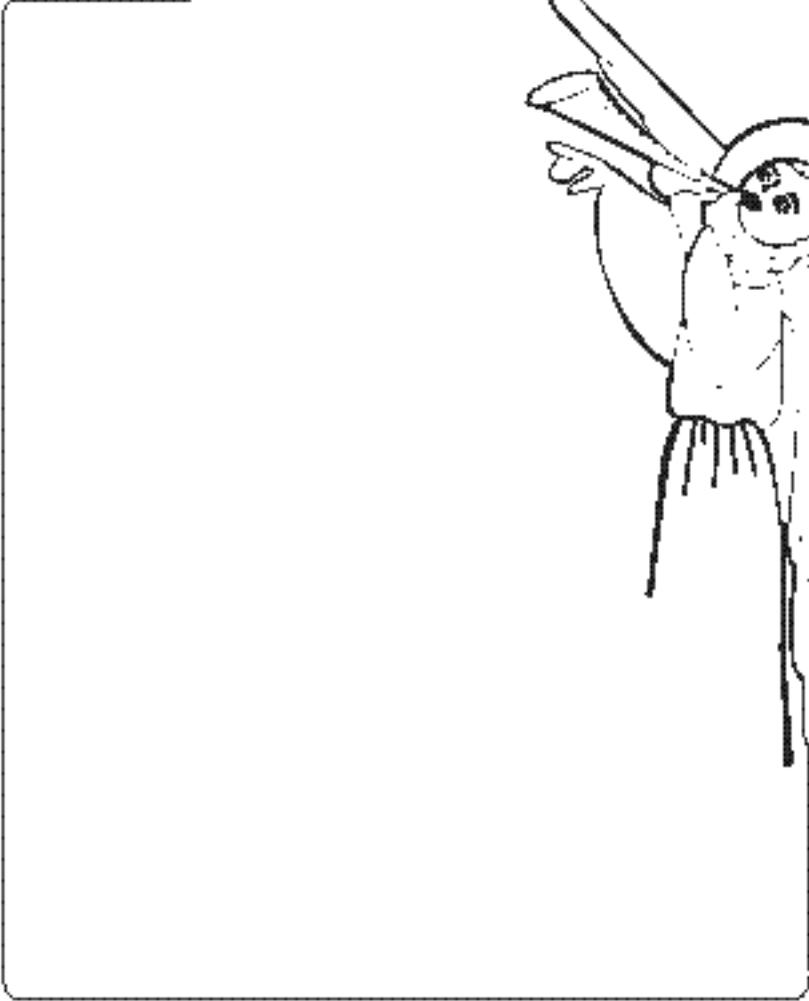
Many are those who present their spiritual desires to God in a theoretical manner, in the form of heart-feelings or words in prayer. As for the spiritual training, they are desires presented to God in a practical manner...

It is a practical struggle that cries to God asking Him to interfere and grant victory to this struggle... God is the One who works in us both to will and to work on behalf of His good pleasure ... It is the pleasure that His name is being glorified in us whenever we succeed in our struggle and our training.

May the name of the Lord be blessed, now and forever more. Amen.



CHAPTER 6



GIVING ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVING ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

One needs very often to sit with himself:

He gives account of himself and searches his inner self, observes his behaviour and settles accounts, so he would be in continual wakefulness. This self control and observation are necessary for everyone, no matter how elevated his spiritual life may be and no matter how high his position is. Therefore St Paul the Apostle wrote to his disciple Timothy the Bishop saying: *“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1Tim 4:16).*

E E E

Therefore the devil tries with all strength to prevent the spiritual person from sitting with himself, and he also prevents the sinner...

How easy it is to present many distractions, the importance of which would occupy all his time and control his feelings. And if the spiritual person was attached to the Kingdom of God, the devil can keep him busy with service and its needs till service occupies him and he will never settle down to think about his mistakes within the service. It is like the older brother who did not rejoice for the return of his brother and said to his father: *“Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time, and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends!” (Lk 15:29).* There is no doubt that this son who served all these years, if he sat with himself, would have discovered his many wrong doings, whether in his dealings or in his manner of speaking or in his love to his brother and his respect to his father...

Therefore blessed son, do not let the preoccupation of service stop you from sitting with yourself, and giving an account of yourself.

Does not service, sometimes, stop you from praying, reading and contemplating?! Don't you sometimes while serving, think of yourself more highly than you ought to (Rom 12:3). Don't you sometimes, while serving, fall into the sin of judging others and at times with a cruel heart, under the

pretence of defending the truth?!... And so many more... **Sit with yourself and examine it for fear of saying:** “...Lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27). **Or lest you hear the Lord’s saying to Martha:** “... You are worried and troubled about many things, but one thing is needed” (LK 10:41,42).

E E E

You need to sit with yourself to know your mistakes...

Whether they are mistakes of the tongue, the thought, the senses, feelings of the heart or mistakes of the body... in order to know your mistakes against God, against people and also against yourself..

Nevertheless, to study your constant characteristics that have not changed... It is also to know the sins that are disguised in the form of virtues and you may be proud of them!! Sit, my brother, with yourself and remember the saying of the Great St Macarius:

“Judge yourself, my brother, before they judge you...”

HOW TO GIVE ACCOUNT OF YOURSELF

Let giving account of yourself be open and serious.

The devil may try to interfere by one of two ways:

Either he will say to you: ‘Do not exaggerate in judging yourself, lest you suffer from a sense of guilt.’

Or he may say to you: ‘Beware of being cruel towards yourself, lest you suffer from depression.’

The devil is not honest in his advice because he wants to keep you from convicting yourself. Remember here the saying of the great St Anthony: “If we remember our sins, God will forget them, and if we forget our sins, God will remember them.” Remember also the saying of the Prophet David in his Psalm of repentance: “*My sin is ever before me*” (Ps 51).

E E E

This is because the devil may say to you: ‘Why do you remember your sins when they have been cleansed by the Honoured Blood?!’

They will remain cleansed as long as we live a repentant life, regretting what we have done with a contrite heart. David the Prophet continued to drench his couch with his tears because of his sins, even after he was forgiven and Nathan said to him: “*The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die*” (2 Sam 12:13). So too with Saul of Tarsus, after he received God’s call and became an Apostle and laboured more abundantly than them all (1 Cor 15:10). He said with a contrite heart: “*For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*” (1 Cor 15:9). Has not this sin been forgiven and cleansed by the Honoured Blood! But he still remembered it and convicted himself for it. He also says in his First Epistle to his disciple Timothy: “*Although I was formerly a blasphemmer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*” (1 Tim 1:13). Yet, in spite of this, he still remembered and convicted himself...

E E E

When you examine yourself, beware also of searching for excuses and justifications...

You may give account of yourself and realize your mistakes. So far, the grace would have worked in you. Then the devil would come to make you lose the work of the grace and keep you far from regret, contrition and self-rebuke. He would offer you excuses and justifications to cover your sin, as he did with our father Adam and our mother Eve... Beware of these excuses that falsely acquit one self in order to lighten the burden of guilt...!

If you truly love the self that God has given you, do not deprive yourself of feelings of repentance, regret and contrition; this will benefit you nothing. On the contrary, you might depend on excuses for continuing to make mistakes. Remember always the saying of the Apostle: “*Therefore you are inexcusable, O man*” (Rom 2:1), and again, “*Blind guides who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel*” (Matt 23:24).

E E E

If you found excuses for yourself because there were external obstacles that stopped you from taking the road of virtue, tell yourself ‘I should have fought to overcome these obstacles.’

Consider the righteous Noah who lived in a very corrupt generation so that God destroyed it with the flood. And in spite of that, Noah kept himself in the faith and was not affected by the environment surrounding him. And the righteous Joseph who was tempted by sin daily, yet in spite of that, he said his immortal phrase: *“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”* (Gen 39:9). And for refusing sin, he endured imprisonment and disgrace...

Daniel and the three young men were threatened to be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace or into the lion’s den. But such a threat did not ever make them turn from the fear of God. And this is the endurance and faith all the martyrs and confessors have had when faced with persecution and death.

E E E

Only internal weaknesses surrender to external pressures.

Convict yourself by this phrase and say : ‘I must be strong within in order to overcome all the wars, no matter how severe.’ Let the saying of St Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews convict you: *“You have not yet resisted to blood-shed, striving against sin”* (Heb 12:4). Therefore, when you give account of yourself, do not say, I was weak and sin was stronger. But remember how the righteous Joseph was victorious over sin. Do not say the commandment was hard and I couldn’t carry it out!! But remember how Abraham took his only son, the one he loved, to offer him as a burnt offering (Gen 22).

Remember stories from the Bible about overcoming obstacles:

Remember the friends of the paralytic who, when they could not come near Jesus because of the crowd, they did not give up. They made a hole in the roof and let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying (Mk 2:4). Remember also the temptations that were offered to David to kill King Saul who was chasing him, and how David said: *“The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord”* (1 Sam 24:6).

When giving account of yourself, consider excuses as pampering your self.

Like the Shulamite in the Song of Solomon who did not open for the Lord, whose head was covered with dew and his locks with the drops of the night. She said: *“I have taken off my robe, how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet, how can I defile them?”* The Lord did not accept her excuse but turned away and was gone. When she was crushed by torment, she then said: *“I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer”* (Song 5:2-6).

Do not be like the servant who was given the one talent then hid it in the ground, and to find an excuse for himself, he said evil words to his master who in turn reproached him (Mt 25:24-28).

E E E

Many are those who sinned then gave excuses that were all unacceptable.

Like King Saul when he offered a burnt offering (1 Sam 13:11,12) and the Prophet Jonah who, because of God’s righteousness was angry, even to death (Jon 4:1-3) And like Elijah when he feared Jezebel and ran for his life (1 Kings 19:1,14).

Like those also is the one who would break his fasting and when his conscience convicts him he uses the excuse of poor health. And the one who would break the commandment of the tithes and when he gives account of himself he would use his financial situation as an excuse. The same with the one who fails to fulfil his vows... David did not find an excuse for himself *“when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock”*, but he went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth (1 Sam 17:34,35)... And if David excused himself from saving the lamb, we would have found his excuse acceptable!! His conscience, however, was stronger...

Many are those who sin and instead of blaming themselves, put the blame on the church to find excuses for themselves!!

They may say: ‘the church did not miss me! My confession father does not care about me! I could not find a guide to show me the way! Where are the fathers?! Where is the work of the clergy?!’ And none of them would

say: The mistake was obvious and my conscience convicted me, but I was disobedient...!

St Anthony the Great was alone in the wilderness, without a guide, and he persevered on the right path and did not take the lack of guidance as an excuse... And so did St Paul the Hermit and others who are among the great saints...

E E E

When you give account of yourself, it is better to judge and convict yourself.

It is of more benefit for you than justifying yourself and putting the blame on others... How beautiful was the answer of the father of the Nitria Mount when Pope Theophilus asked him about the best virtues that they have mastered in their life of solitude. He replied: "Believe me, my father, there is no better virtue than for one to blame himself in everything..."

As for obstacles, they are not to be used as an excuse, but an opportunity for training oneself to resist them and pray that God may give the grace to overcome them.

E E E

Giving account of oneself is followed by self-conviction then remedying of oneself.

Then all these weaknesses are used as an opportunity for spiritual training, spiritual struggle and prayer. They would also be mentioned in confession and when asking for wise counsel...

These weaknesses would also be a reason for self-humility and abstaining from thoughts about vain glory whenever one is tempted after doing a good deed.

And so these weaknesses become a reason for having pity on sinners instead of condemning them. As St Paul the Apostle said: "*Remember the prisoners as if chained with them, and those who are mistreated, since you yourselves are in the body also*" (Heb 13:3).

Give account of your negative actions and also of the virtues that you lack. Do likewise with any hindrance in your spiritual growth. Here, you put before you the saying of St Paul the Apostle: “... *But I press on, that I may lay hold of that... Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press towards the goal*” (Phil 3:12-14). Consider what caused the hindrance of your growth - are they internal or external obstacles?

WHEN DOES GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF TAKE PLACE

One question remains, which is: When do we give account of ourselves?

Some give account of themselves on special occasions, such as in the new year, or on their birthday. Some prefer to give account of themselves before each confession and partaking of Holy Communion. What is better than both these two is giving account of yourself at the end of each day, and the best of all is giving account of oneself and convicting oneself immediately after the deed...

However, the ideal is when you give account of yourself before committing the deed.

For example, before you utter a word, ask yourself: Is it fit for me to say this word? What would its effect be on others? Would some understand it differently, from my intention? And so if you find a mistake, you avoid it before it happens... The same with every action and every thought...

By doing that, you progress towards perfection, and may God be with you...



CHAPTER 7



CONFESSION

Confession is one of the spiritual means for one's repentance :

In the church belief, the sacrament of confession is even called 'The Sacrament of Repentance'. It actually leads to repentance if practised in a proper, spiritual way. Confession is not mere words said by the confessor to the priest. It must be mixed with specific feelings that would lead the sinner to true repentance. How is this so?

ELEMENTS OF CONFESSION

What are the elements of confession that make it complete ?

Confession consists of four elements that should be completed:

1. Confession to God Himself:

As the Prophet David says in Psalm 51, the Psalm of Repentance: "*against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight*". In this confession, we ask forgiveness from God, as we say in the Lord's prayer: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" And you ask God to remove His anger from you, though you deserve it because of your sins. As we say in the Psalm: "*Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak*" (Ps 6:1,2).

E E E

2. And as we confess to God, we also confess to our confession father:

We confess to him as a steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1), and (Mal 2:7). You confess to him so God may grant you forgiveness and absolution (Jn 20:22,23), and (Mt 18:18). He would also give you permission to partake of Holy Communion, for which you will become worthy (1 Cor 11:27). It is also for spiritual guidance, as he will guide and help you in overcoming your problems. You also confess to the priest for a practical reason, as one often feels ashamed when he recalls his sins before a spiritual person, and especially before clergy. This shame will help him not to commit sin in the future. And the Bible says: "*Confess your trespasses to one another*" (Jas 5:16), that is, from one human being to another human being.

3. You confess to the one against whom you have trespassed with all offences done against him:

This is to wipe away any anger he may feel, or sadness because of your offence, so you will be able to partake of Holy Communion with a pure heart towards all. This is what the Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23,24).*

And so if you find that in every trespass against others, you will go to that person and reconcile with him, apologizing and confessing the wrong that you have done to him ... this no doubt will lead you to be more careful in your dealings with others, to stay away from offending others, and hence not feel obliged to apologize for it.

E E E

4- There is another type of confession, and that is confessing to yourself that you have sinned ...

This is because if you do not confess within your heart and your thoughts that you have sinned, you will never of course confess the sin before God. You will also be reluctant in confessing to the priest. And you will not go to your brother to reconcile with him ...

Then confessing the mistake or the sin starts within the person first, by having an inner feeling that he has sinned and that he is mentally convinced that he has done a mistake. He then feels the necessity of confessing it in order to receive forgiveness and achieve reconciliation with God and with people.

E E E

Many lack the inside feeling of being wrong, therefore they do not practise repentance or confession...

Maybe because their spiritual measures are not correct, or because they always justify their deeds. Their ego prevents them from confessing or admitting being wrong. They see themselves as being right, so what would they have to confess?! Many sinners even disguise their sins with the ap-

pearance of virtue and they boast about this sin ... just as the scribes and Pharisees used to see themselves right in their enmity towards the Lord Jesus Christ, defending the law of Moses and the traditions of their fathers!! And so they said in boldness and boasting of sin: “Do we not say rightly that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (Jn 8:48). They were insulting and reviling Christ as such and considered themselves righteous!

FEELINGS OF THE CONFESSOR

The confessor then must feel that he has sinned. He also must repent and have a contrite heart because of his sins.

David the Prophet, due to his great remorse, would cry bitterly over his sins and drench his couch with his tears (Ps 6:6). He felt that he needed to be cleansed from his sins, so he said to the Lord. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean ...” (Ps 51).

Many go to confession with no regret and no feeling of embarrassment, shame or disgrace because of their sins. Therefore they do not benefit from their confession. It becomes a mere talk, with no spirit!! As for you, as much as is your regret, so would be your repentance and your benefit from confession.

E E E

With regret, there has to be a firm determination to change your condition.

Insistence on leaving the sinful past and shutting all passages leading to sin. Because confession does not mean closing an old account to open a new one but to cut all connection with sin, confessing that it is a sinful way that prevents life with God and the dwelling of His Spirit in the heart.

E E E

The confessor must also be certain that he has sinned against God Himself ...

Sin is disobedience to God and breaking His commandments. It is rebelling against God, preferring the love of the world, the material and the flesh to the love of God. And as St James the Apostle said: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4). And St John the Apostle said: “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). Then sin is against the love of God. It is at the same time a rejection of the fellowship with His Holy Spirit, because: “What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?” (2 Cor. 6:14) ... And because sin is against God, then it is unlimited because God is unlimited ...

E E E

Therefore we find David the Prophet saying to the Lord: “Against You, You only have I sinned and done this evil in Your sight” (Ps 51). He did not say: ‘I sinned against Uriah and his wife Bathsheba’... And also when sin was offered to the Righteous Joseph he refused it saying: “How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen 39:9). Keep this then in your mind and you will know that you have sinned against God.

E E E

Also confession is not just a relationship between you and the confession father. It is before anything else a relationship with God ...

You confess to God through the priest, as it was said by Joshua, the son of Nun to Achan: “My son, I beg you, give glory to the Lord God of Israel and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done ...” (Josh 7:19). In the absolution also, you take it from God through the mouth of the priest. So you feel the presence of God during confession and you benefit spiritually from your confession. Many forget the presence of God during confession and so the reverence and benefit of confession are lost.

E E E

CONFESSION AND THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

There is also another important point to help you benefit from confession and that is understanding the meaning of forgiveness and how it takes place.

The sinner used to bring his trespass sacrifice (an animal) to the Lord for the sin which he had committed, put his hand on the head of the sacrifice and confess his sins (Lev 5:5). He would fully understand that this offering will die instead of him. He deserves to die but this slaughtered lamb dies in his stead. The placing of the hand on the lamb's head proved that the sinner agreed for this offering to replace him and by putting his hand on its head during confession, the sin is transferred from him to the animal...

How do we apply this to the sacrament of confession? It means that the sin has been transferred from you to Christ's account, to be blotted out by His Blood ...

E E E

Then confessing your sins means that you are asking Christ to carry it on your behalf. It is transferred from you to Him, and He will bear it for you ...

Here, you feel and understand the meaning of forgiveness. It does not mean that God has renounced His right. The Divine justice has to be fulfilled. But how? By having Christ carry your sin and blot it out by His Blood. This is what was said in the book of Isaiah the Prophet: *"All we like sheep have gone astray ... And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all... But He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities"* (Is 53:6-5).

With this correct understanding, your feelings should be towards confession and its seriousness; forgiveness and how it is achieved ...

E E E

Here, confession is not separated from Christ and His Blood ...

As if you are saying to the priest: 'I came, my father, so you can take all my uncleanness and transfer it to the head of Christ to carry it for me; all impure thoughts of the heart, tongue and the body... All my sins with no

exception. Then it is an act of transferring and without this transference there is no remission.

And so when David confessed that he had sinned, Nathan said to him: *“The Lord also has put away your sin, you shall not die”* (2 Sam 12:13). Put away to where? To Christ’s account. And why you shall not die? Because He will die instead of you.

This is the only way to achieve forgiveness. Because without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins (Heb 9:22). God hears your sins when you confess them before the priest. He transfers them to the account of His only begotten Son whom He sent to be the propitiation of our sins (1 Jn 4 : 10) ... *“And the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 Jn 1:7).

E E E

Then place the Blood of Christ before you in every confession and if you are ashamed, feel for Him...

Feel for Him who is all purity and is carrying your impurity. The Holy One who knew no sin but was made to bear sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21). This true shame in its theological understanding is what makes you ashamed to commit sin once more... And it is not only your shame before the priest when he listens to your sins, but also your shame for hurting the Holy Son who carries your sins.

E E E

Faith and repentance are the two ingredients necessary for Christ to carry your sins ...

Faith in His amazing redemption that He presented for your salvation. The Bible said about this: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (Jn 3:16) ... **Whoever believes in Him ...**

As for repentance that it is necessary for you to be worthy of forgiveness, the Lord said: *“unless you repent you will all likewise perish”* (Lk 13:3,5).

Do you think confession without faith or repentance will save you? No. Your confession then should be mingled with regret, repentance and true determination to change your conduct. In this way you will be worthy of the Blood of Christ which will cleanse you from all sins. And so you come out of your confession, washed with the Honoured Blood ...

ADVICES FOR CONFESSORS

1- You should consider the time, responsibilities and health of your confession father. You should also consider the rest of those who are waiting for their turn to confess after you. So do not expand more than is necessary and do not waste time in introductions and details that are not needed, or in trying to remember what you want to say: Be prepared for your confession beforehand, with full concentration during your confession.

E E E

2- You should know that your spiritual benefit will be as much as you are open and honest during confession.

E E E

3- You must keep the secrecy of the directions given to you by your confession father, as he keeps in secret whatever you say about your sins. Your confession may concern a certain person who is causing you to stumble; your confession father therefore may advise you to keep away from that person. This does not mean you then go out and say to others: "My confession father ordered me to keep away from this person." In so doing, you may cause embarrassment to your spiritual father .

E E E

4- Do not request from your confession father to agree on certain decisions you have already made, and thereby waste time in arguments, crying and pain if he does not agree with you. The right way is to consult him and ask for his advice but not to present to him your decisions without firstly discussing the matter. At the same time do not try to hide from him what you see as being unsuitable for you.

E E E

5- Do not ask your confession father about matters that are not right for you to know, or are not your place to know, such as issues relating to church policy and news.

E E E

6- You must have confidence in your confession father. Do not make it necessary every time he gives you advice, to have it supported by evidence so that he may convince you. This would be a waste of effort and time.

E E E

7- If you have a doubting thought concerning your confession father, do not mention it in an offensive manner, but in polite frankness.

E E E

8- Do not treat your confession father as an equal and do not harshly reproach him. Remember always that when you confess to him, you are standing before the Lord's delegate.

E E E

9- Do not be jealous from the way your confession father may treat others who have a special case. And do not try to pressure him to know what this case is, because by doing so you are interfering in the secrecy of their confessions.

E E E

10- Do not frequently visit your confession father to consult with him matters of triviality, lest others wonder why the priest meets with you more than them, and this may cause the priest embarrassment.

E E E

11- You have to be obedient. And let it be wise obedience.

E E E

12- If your confession father rebukes you for a sin, do not be annoyed, because he does it for your own benefit. And do not try to justify yourself in whatever you are confessing.

E E E

13- If you ask something from your confession father and he remains silent, do not take this silence as a sign of agreement. It could be that what you are asking for causes embarrassment or uncovers some people's secrets or that the answer would cause you more harm than good. Or maybe he has already answered the same thing before. Or perhaps he is silent because the question is inappropriate.

E E E

14- In your confession do not say half the story, but the whole story.

E E E

15- Do not use confession time as an opportunity to complain about others or to talk about their mistakes. Concentrate on your own mistakes.



HOLY COMMUNION

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLY COMMUNION AND ITS BENEFITS

Holy Communion is one of the divine sacraments, and the most important among the spiritual means. Its spiritual effect on man is the deepest and the most obvious for those who partake of it in preparedness.

E E E

1- The first important point for Holy Communion is abiding in God.

This is according to the Lord's saying in the Gospel of St John: "*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him*" (Jn 6:56).

E E E

2- Holy Communion is also the Spiritual Bread.

The Lord said in St John's Gospel: "*For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life... If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever... The bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world*" (Jn 6:33,48,50,51). Therefore, consider the word 'bread' in the Lord's Prayer: "...give us this day our daily bread", as the spiritual bread which is necessary for one's eternity. As the Lord said: "*Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*" (Jn 6:54)... "*He who eats this bread will live forever*" (Jn 6:58).

It is the bread of life because it gives spiritual life to man.

E E E

3- This Holy Communion is an act of grafting, as with the trees.

As it is possible to graft a specific tree with another better tree, so that it remains in its stead, our human nature- in the Eucharist- is an act of grafting which happens through the Lord's Body and Blood ...

The Lord gave us an example for the act of grafting, with the church of the New Testament (the wild olive tree) that was grafted with the original olive tree, that is, the Old Testament and became: “*A partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree*” (Rom 11:17) ...

Like the branches of the vine (Jn 15:5), we abide in the vine through Holy Communion and the juice of the vine spreads through us; some feed on it and live, “*and bear much fruit*” ...

E E E

4- We also refer to the blessings of Holy Communion when we listen to the Holy Mass and the last confession where the Priest says:

“...given for us, unto salvation and remission of sins and everlasting life for those who partake of it.”

Who of us can do without this threefold blessing: salvation, remission of sins and everlasting life?! The remission that we are worthy of after repentance and confession is received in the Holy Communion, because: “*Without shedding of blood there is no remission*” (Heb 9:22), and the Eucharist is the continuity of the sacrifice of Christ whose Honoured Blood we receive in Holy Communion: and as St John the Apostle said about this Blood: “*It cleanses us from all sin*” (1 Jn 1:7).

And as it cleanses us from sin, it promises us everlasting life.

E E E

5-Holy Communion is also a covenant with God.

We remember the Lord's saying, which we repeat in every Holy Mass: “*For every time you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you preach My death, confess My resurrection and remember Me until I come*” (1Cor 11:26). **So do we**, every time we partake of Holy Communion, enter into a covenant with God and remember Him until He comes?!

Would that you remember each time you partake of the Holy Communion that you are entering into a covenant with God, this special covenant between God and us, which He instigated on Holy Thursday, this divine sacrament to His saintly Disciples...

PREPARATION FOR HOLY COMMUNION

The most serious words said about preparing for partaking of the Holy Communion were said by St Reweis:

“It is befitting for the person who partakes inside him the Body and Blood of the Lord to be pure inside, as the Virgin who carried the Lord’s Body inside her was pure.” What a serious phrase that is?! Who can be like that?! Therefore I will talk to you about the simplest way to spiritually prepare ourselves to partake of the Holy Communion:

E E E

As much as we prepare ourselves for Communion, so would be our benefit from it ...

Many partake in Communion ... thousands, even hundreds of thousands ... But not all of them gain the same spiritual benefit!! Take for example the eleven Disciples who partook of Communion on Covenant Thursday from the Lord Himself..

Only one of them followed Christ to the Cross, that is St John the Beloved. He became worthy of the Lord talking to him and entrusting him with the Virgin Mary saying: “Behold your mother!” (Jn 19:27). And this disciple took her to his home and hence received a great blessing ...

And one of the Disciples who partook of Communion followed Christ till the courtyard of the high priest. He also, through zeal, cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, defending Christ (Jn 18:25-27), before turning and denying Him three times!!

The remaining nine Disciples ran away during the time when their Teacher and Master was being arrested!! And they all partook of Communion together ...

E E E

Holy Communion reminds us of the parable of the sower (Mt 13).

The sower was the same sower and the seeds were the same seeds. But the result differed according to the nature of the ground: some fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places but because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprang up and choked them ... Even the ones that fell on good ground did not give fruits in equal amounts, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Mt 13:3-9) ...

The same also with Holy Communion. It depends on the condition of one's heart and according to his spiritual readiness as to what his spiritual benefit may be.

E E E

It is one of the spiritual means but its benefit differs from one person to another, according to his readiness for it ...

Many partake of the Holy Communion very often, they may even receive it every day and in every Mass. But they do not benefit!! Perhaps because constantly partaking of it becomes a habit, rather than something very reverential and sacred. As a result, the holiness of this sacrament does not penetrate deep into their hearts. However, there are a few who are able to keep the reverence of the Sacrament and continue being prepared for it ... Therefore examine yourself and see: is partaking of the Holy Communion regularly enables you to be always prepared, or has it merely become a habit? It differs from one person to another...

Here we ask, what preparation is needed for partaking of the Holy Communion?

E E E

1- Preparation by humility and contrition of the heart.

One of the best parts in the Holy Mass about this contrition is a prayer which the Priest recites inaudibly before starting the Mass and while he is covering the altar. It is called 'The Prayer of Preparation' : "Lord who knows the hearts of all, who is Holy, and who rests amidst the saints; Who alone is without sin, and who is mighty to forgive sins; You, O Lord, know my un-

worthiness, unto this, Your holy service; and I have no boldness that I should draw near and open my mouth before Your holy glory; but according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, pardon me a sinner, and grant unto me that I may find grace and mercy at this hour ...”

If this is the contrition of the priest celebrating the Holy Mass, how much more contrite should the rest of the congregation be?!

E E E

2- Repentance and inner purity are necessary for Holy Communion.

We see the priest doing a number of things:

+ He and the deacons put on white vestments of service which are specially for celebrating the liturgy. They are a symbol of inner purity. It is like dressing the one who has been baptized in white clothes, symbolizing the clean and pure life which he received in the baptism, as he has put on Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27), and as the Lord says: *“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments ...”* (Rev 3:5). White also refers to the holy life in the eternal kingdom ... And it was said about the two angels of the Resurrection that each was *“clothed in a long white robe”* (Jn 20:12), (Mk 16:5) and (Mt 28:3)...

It is a symbol of the holiness and purity of the angels. And so should be those who are serving the altar and will partake of the Holy Communion ... The white robes become an example for the rest of the congregation ...

E E E

+ And as the priest wears white, he also washes his hands before celebrating Mass, and says: *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”*

He also says: “I wash my hands with purity and go around Your altar, O Lord ...”

It is a lesson that the priest presents to the congregation before partaking in Holy Communion, to clean their souls by repentance till they become whiter than snow ...

E E E

+ Repentance is very necessary to partake in Holy communion. We notice here that the Lord Jesus Christ, to Him is all glory, before He gave His Disciples to eat on Covenant Thursday, washed their feet first and said to them: *“You are clean, but not all of you” (Jn 13:10)*. And He meant by this Judas who betrayed Him, therefore He did not give him the Body and the Blood.

+ Consider the frightful phrase said about this matter during the Holy Mass, before Holy Communion:

“The Holies are for the holy,” which means that the Holy Sacraments are for holy people only.

Therefore the Mass, during which the faithful partake in Holy Communion, is called the ‘Mass of the Holies’. This is distinguished from the ‘Mass of the Catechumens in earlier times during which they would hear the readings and the sermon then leave before the ‘Mass of the Holies’ starts, in which those who are holy partake in Holy Communion ...

Then one needs holiness to be worthy of partaking in the Holy Sacraments. This reminds me of a beautiful phrase said by the Prophet Samuel to the family of Jesse the Bethlehemite when he wanted to sacrifice to the Lord, he said to them:

“Sanctify yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice” (1 Sam 16:5).

E E E

And so he “sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice” ... Would that you memorize these phrases and repeat them before Holy Communion. Phrases that are about the holiness of those who partake in Holy Sacraments ... And if we fail to reach this holiness in its positive spirituality, let us at least repent and confess before receiving them, with a firm will to leave sin and keep away from all the means that lead us to it. And when we confess our sins, our confession should not be mere words, but true regret and practical repentance. In so doing, our souls and our bodies become worthy of accepting these Holy Sacraments, so we receive them with pure hearts, worthy souls and spirits that are linked to God ...

And what else?

3- To partake in Holy Communion, one has to be physically prepared for it. How?

We sanctify the body by cleanliness and fasting. We remember, as an example, how the people of Israel prepared themselves to receive God's words in the Old Testament, I mean receiving the Ten Commandments: Then the Lord said to Moses, *"Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. And let them be ready for the third day"* (Ex 19:10,11) ... *"Then Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not come near your wives" (Ex 19:14,15).*

E E E

Therefore sexual relations, pubescence, bleeding and the like, are things that prevent us from partaking in Communion.

The person who is partaking of Holy Communion should be pure, physically and spiritually.

We also prepare ourselves physically by fasting.

According to the rites of our church, we abstain from eating and drinking for a period of not less than nine hours, which brings us to a new day (Communion day) which we should start while fasting.

Fasting is not only physical work, but also spiritual work. It is preparing for all the grace that we receive in each of the church Sacraments, except in cases such as serious illness. Currently, the Sacrament of Matrimony has been exempted, according to the Lord's saying: *"Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast"* (Mk 2:19). But when the Sacrament of Marriage used to take place after the Matins, the couple used to fast also ... How more deserving is Communion.

E E E

4- Another condition for partaking in Communion is Reconciliation.

And so before the 'Mass of the Holies' starts and before the Prosporphine is removed (the large cloth covering the altar), the priest says the Reconcilia-

tion Prayer: “Grant that we become worthy, O Lord, to greet each other with a holy kiss of peace, so that without being driven into condemnation, we may share in Your imperishable heavenly gift” ... We notice here the phrase “that we may share ... without being driven into condemnation” ... Partaking in Communion then, without reconciliation, is being driven into condemnation.

The deacon then calls out; “Greet one another with a holy kiss ...” This holy kiss means perfect love among the people. The word “holy” means pure, with no hypocrisy, as was Judas’ kiss, and for this reason people do not greet each other with a kiss during the Passion Week.

E E E

Before partaking in Holy Communion, we must be reconciled to God and to people:

To God through repentance, according to the saying of the Apostle: “ ... *Be reconciled to God*” (2Cor 5:20) ... **And to people, according to the Lord’s saying:** “*If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother*” (Mt 5:23,24). The phrase “**something against you**” means that you stand as being guilty. As for the one who hates you for no fault of your own, as Saul hated David, and as David said: “*those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head,*” (Ps 69:4) ... In that case, you are not expected to leave your gift and reconcile to him. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself was hated without a cause (Jn 15:18, 24,25) ... You also are not requested to go and reconcile with those who persecute you, envy you and offend you. But there is a rule:

If you were the offender, go and reconcile to whoever you offended. If you were the one offended, protect your heart from hatred.

Also, you are not requested to reconcile with those who cause you to stumble spiritually, morally or intellectually, for: “*Evil company corrupts good habits*” (1Cor 15:33), but the Bible also asks us to keep away from stumbling blocks, and not to have any dealings with those who may lead us to sin...

E E E

As well, you are not requested to reconcile with those who spread heresies and lies, those about whom the Apostle said: *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds”* (2 Jn: 10,11). **And do not greet the one about whom the Bible says: “Put away from yourselves that wicked person”** (1Cor 5:13) ... **And generally, your reconciliation with others should not be at the cost of your reconciliation with God ...**

We talked about preparation for Holy Communion. What else is left to say?

E E E

The Bible explains the outcome for those who partake in Holy communion in an unworthy manner:

The Apostle says: “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself ... For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s Body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged” (1Cor 11:27-31) ... **Serious and alerting words ... Therefore I would say before partaking of the Holy Communion:**

“Lord, it is not for being worthy that I partake of Your Holy Communion but because of my need. Not for my worthiness but for my remedy.”

I do not have the holiness for which I partake of the Holy Communion, but I do so to obtain help to live a holy life, as I receive spiritual strength and a push forward.

E E E

The one who partakes in Holy Communion feels the reverence of this sacrament and will be ashamed to commit sin because of the holiness of Communion. For example, if he partakes of the Holy communion once a week, for the following few days he will remain away from sin due to the holiness of the Sacrament ... And during the few days before the following Communion, he will be watchful, preparing himself to partake of the Holy Communion the following week ... Hence, he trains himself to always be prepared and watchful.

Due to the importance of Holy Communion, the Church makes you feel that the Communion day is not an ordinary day in many ways:

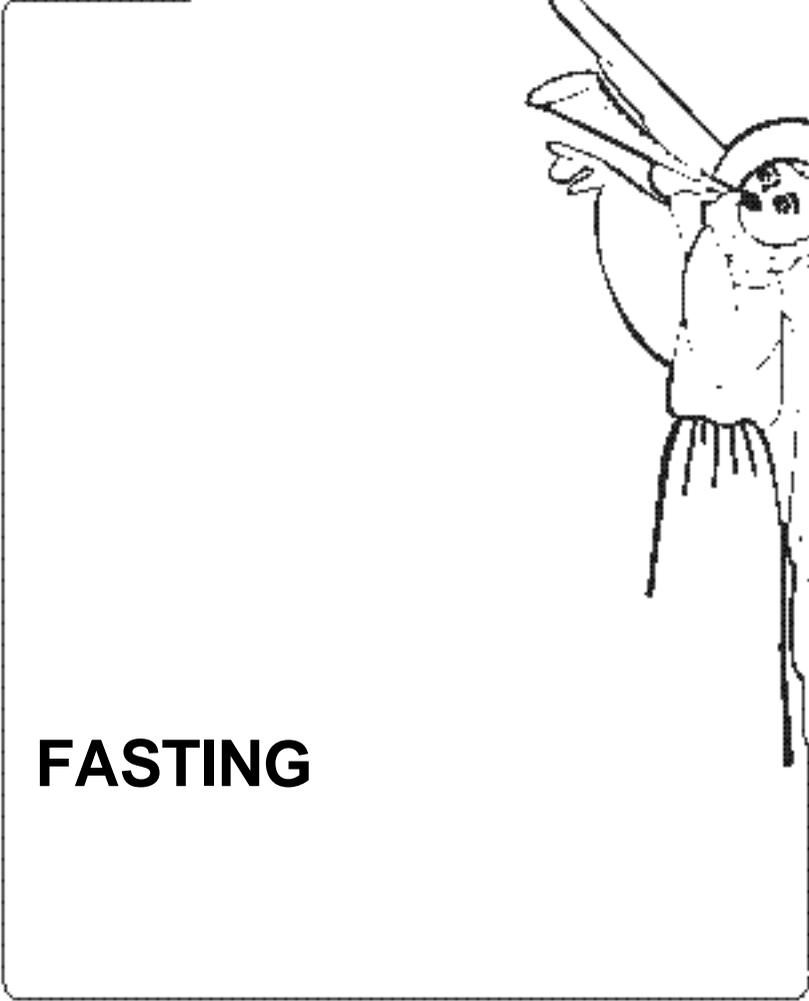
Preparing for it by fasting, cleanliness of the body, confession and repentance, reconciliation to people, entering with contrition, praying before and after Communion. The church also prepares the person for Holy Communion by more than one absolution for the remission of sins: absolution during vespers, another during Matins, absolution of the servants and another absolution which is recited inaudibly at the end of Mass. The mind is also prepared spiritually by many readings from the Bible, the spiritual rites and all the spiritualities of the Holy Mass.

And after Communion, one is warned to be careful about walking barefoot, or spitting, so that he may honour the Holy Communion which he received.

E E E

I remember that once, at the beginning of my monastic life, I wrote in my diary on the day of my Communion:

“This mouth that became holy by partaking in the Lord’s Body and Blood: one extra word would not come out of it and one extra morsel would not enter it.”



FASTING

THE BENEFITS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FASTING

Fasting is one of the most important spiritual means. But why?

First of all, because it helps us keep self-control.

As the one fasting abstains from eating and drinking generally for a period of time, he stops himself from eating whatever relates to animal fat. And so he learns restraint. In the process of restraining from food and drink, he will also restrain himself from committing sins.

E E E

God put this element of restraint from the beginning when He asked Adam and Eve to abstain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here, He put the principle of self-control from the beginning of the history of humanity, to make us fully realize that freedom does not mean lack of restraint. Although God was very generous with Adam and Eve and gave them permission to eat from “*every tree of the garden*”, but He put a rule, which was to refrain from eating from a particular tree (Gen 2:16,17) and (Gen 3:3).

E E E

Maybe we fully realize here the seriousness of the phrase that King Solomon said, expressing his unrestrained pleasure: “*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them*” (Eccles 2:10). So eventually he lost his wisdom and sinned. “*His heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David*” (1 Kings 11:4). And many desires caused him to stumble...

E E E

Fasting is also an evidence of being elevated above the level of the body.

In it, we do not give the body all that it asks or desires of food. By so doing, we are elevated above bodily desires. We are even being elevated above materialism in general. And so we give the spirit a chance to take its

opportunity, remembering the Lord's saying: *“Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (Jn 6:27).* **And the Apostle's saying:** *“For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” (Rom 8:6).*

E E E

The spirit becomes stronger during fasting.

During fasting, our prayers are also deeper and our contemplations are deeper. Our relationship with God becomes stronger, even our hymns also. There is a big difference between recording one of the Pascha hymns during the Passion Week and recording the same hymn at a non-fasting period. The effect of fasting on the spirit is not restricted to Christians only but the Hindus, the Yogies and the Buddhists find spiritual strength in exercises of fasting and asceticism. Their spirits become more pure...

E E E

Fasting then is not of benefit only to fight against the negatives but it also benefits positively in strengthening the spirit.

Therefore we find that most of the spiritual occasions are preceded by fasting.

The church sacraments for example, such as Baptism, Myron (Chrism), Holy Communion and Priesthood have to be preceded by fasting. Receiving the blessing of feasts is preceded by fasting. We fast for many long weeks before Christmas and Easter, before the Feast of the Apostles, the Feast of the Virgin Mary and for the Epiphany we fast the day before (the Baramoun).

How beautiful is the saying in the Acts of the Apostles, (before the laying on of hands on Barnabas and Saul): *“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said; Now separate for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2,3).*

E E E

Among the most beautiful words also said about the spiritual effect of fasting is:

The relationship between fasting and casting out evil spirits:

The Lord talked about this in the miracle of casting out a stubborn demon, the thing that His Disciples failed to do... The Lord then said: “*However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting*” (Mt 17:21)... **Because the prayer of the one who is fasting has its spirituality and its effect, the one who is fasting is closer to God and stronger than the demons.**

E E E

Fasting was used by the saints during times of tribulations.

We have a very clear example of that in the fasting of Esther and all the Jews when they were confronted by Haman’s conspiracy (Esther 4:16), and the Lord’s response was quick and amazing. We also hear about the fasting of Nehemiah when he heard the news that: “*The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down and its gates are burned with fire*” (Neh 1:3,4). The book of Nehemiah also tells about the Lord’s response and how it was quick and amazing... The Bible also tells us about how Ezra and Hobak fasted and the effect it had on cleansing and purifying the people. The Bible also tells us about the fasting of the Prophet Daniel and its effect (Dan 9:3,21) and (Dan 10:3,12).

E E E

Fasting also had its effect in the field of repentance...

The people of Ninevah repented. Their repentance was not only by turning from the life of evil, but it was mixed with great fasting and asceticism of both the king and all the people. God accepted their fasting and their repentance and forgave them their sins (Jon 3).

E E E

The most impressive saying about the mixture of repentance with fasting is what the divine inspiration said in the book of the Prophet Joel: “*Now, therefore,*” says the Lord, “*Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning*” (Joel 2:12) **and the Prophet David explains the depth of his fasting and says:** “*I humbled myself with fasting*” (Ps 35:13), and “*I wept and chastened my soul with fasting*” (Ps 69:10).

And many of the prayers of the fathers and the prophets, asking for forgiveness, were accompanied by fasting such as the prayers of Daniel and Ezra, asking forgiveness for the sins of the people.

E E E

Fasting also has its relation to the service.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the most outstanding model of that, as He started His service by fasting for forty days. And following His steps, so do all the fathers the bishops and the newly ordained priests, they start their ministerial service by fasting... The saintly Apostles themselves started their service also by fasting. In them it was confirmed what the Lord said: “*When the bridegroom will be taken away from them, then they will fast*” (Mk 2:20).

E E E

Fasting not only took place at the beginning of the service of our fathers the apostles, but it also took place during their service: “*...In fastings often*” (2 Cor 11:27). St Paul also says: “*But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God... In labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings...*” (2 Cor 6:4,5).

Have you tried, my brother, in your life to fast for the service and for solving problems in general?

THE ACCEPTABLE SPIRITUAL FASTING:

But maybe some would ask the Lord, as it happened at the time of Isaiah the Prophet: “*Why have we fasted and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls and You take no notice?*” (Is 58:3). And the Lord would reply as He did to those and say to them: “*Is it a fast that I have chosen?*” (Is 58:5).

E E E

You must know, my brother, that not every fasting is acceptable before God. The Pharisee who used to fast twice a week, was not justified like the tax collector (Lk 18:12,14). The same with fasting that does not have repentance. Likewise the fasting of the sinners at the time of Jeremiah the Prophet, about whom the Lord said: “*When they fast, I will not hear their cry;*

and when they offer burnt offering, I will not accept them” (Jer 14:11,12). The same with the fasting of the hypocrites, who want to appear to men to be fasting (Mt 6:16-18).

E E E

Do not say then: I fasted but did not benefit spiritually!!

If this happens, may be your fasting was not done in a spiritual way or atmosphere. Or maybe you fast but at the same time live in sin!! Then we have to learn how to fast? And what is the true meaning of fasting? And how do we benefit spiritually from it?

E E E

Many are concerned about the formalities of fasting, or they understand it as just eating vegetarian food and they do not care about the spiritual side during fasting!! I say to those: the definition of fasting with regard to the body is abstaining from food for a certain period of time, followed by food that is free from animal fat.

E E E

Do you practise this abstinence from food and drink?

And do you reach a stage of hunger and you endure it?

This is the first exercise, I mean enduring hunger... It was said about the fasting of the Lord Jesus Christ that: “He was hungry” (Mt 4:2) and (Lk 4:2). And St Paul the Apostle said about his fasting with his fellow apostles: “In hunger and thirst, in fastings often” (2 Cor 11:27). And about the fasting of St Peter the Apostle, it was said: “Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat” (Acts 10:10). So, do you experience hunger in your fasting?

When you become hungry, you feel your weakness so you do not show off your strength but rely on God’s strength to support you. And when you become hungry and endure hunger, you acquire the virtue of endurance and self-control. Therefore do not eat whenever you feel hungry during fasting but persevere and endure. Take the blessing of feeling hungry, persevering and enduring it. Also when you experience hunger, you will feel the pain of the poor who have nothing to eat, so you will be sympathetic towards them

and give unto them... This is what is meant by abstaining for a period of time during fasting.

E E E

Another advice is to abstain from whatever you desire...

Remember the saying of the Prophet Daniel about his fasting: "*I ate no pleasant food, no meat or wine came into my mouth*" (Dan 10:3)... I say that because many eat a lot of desirable vegetarian food and enjoy it. Therefore, they do not really feel that they are fasting, and then they do not benefit from their fasting, especially if there was a mother or a wife who is expert in cooking vegetarian food and makes it more appetizing than ordinary food.

Therefore, place before yourself two observations during your fast: the first is that you do not ask for specific types of food that you enjoy. The second is that if desirable food is placed before you, do not satisfy your desire and eat from it. Or else take a small amount and leave the rest and control yourself. Or mix the desirable with the undesirable, so that the desirable will not taste that good.

E E E

Would that you advance in your fasting till you reach, not only the hunger of the body, but the ascetic body.

In this way, your body renounces all the enjoyment offered by food. The element of abstaining comes first. But when you train yourself and get used to it, then it would not be a great effort to stop yourself, because by that time, you would have renounced what you used to long for. This ability to restrain yourself from food and drink will grow and develop in you until you renounce many other pleasures, such as those of the senses, and the various desires of the body... At that time, your spiritual level will be elevated...

E E E

The element of restrain comes into many fields.

As you train to restrain yourself from eating and drinking, you will gradually restrain your tongue from bad talk and from any talk that is not constructive. You also restrain your mind from vain and wrong thoughts.

You restrain your heart from all sinful feelings, all desires and impure emotions. And so you will progress from the fasting of the mouth to the fasting of the tongue, the fasting of the thoughts, and the fasting of the heart.

E E E

Not only would your body be fasting, but your soul also...

Fasting becomes a mere expression of the inner purity that you have reached and a spiritual period that you have lived... The more you practise, the more you will be used to it and its virtues for you will become a way of life. I mean that what you spiritually gain during fasting, you do not lose when fasting is over, but it continues with you. It is true that your food has changed by the end of fasting, but the virtues that you acquired during fasting would not change...

E E E

Here you differentiate between breaking fast and lack of restraint.

Many control themselves during the fast, but when it is over and it is feast time, they lose all that they acquired, thinking that breaking a fast means loss of restraint and self control!! Therefore, the one who takes fasting as one of the spiritual means, keeps in his heart, his soul and his will all that he acquired during the fast, and the benefit continues with him. If fasting helped him to get rid of a bad habit or a specific habit, he does not go back to it even after he breaks his fast.

MIXING FASTING WITH VIRTUES:

For one to benefit from fasting and to enter into the spirituality of fasting for his body as well as his soul, one has to mix his fasting with specific virtues that suit fasting and agree with him.

+ Fasting has to be accompanied by prayer. Why? Because when we fast, it is not only to discipline the body and bring it into subjection (1 Cor 9:27), but it is also to give the spirit a chance to be nourished by all the spiritual nutrition that is good for it: prayer, spiritual readings, contemplation and love for God. In the Fraction of the Holy Lent, during Mass, we repeat

the phrase: “With fasting and prayer...” And for sure, the spirit that has received its nutrition, would be able to sustain the body during its fasting so it would not get tired. We notice that during the Passion Week, we never feel the burden of fasting because during this period, the spirit is being fed by readings, hymns and holy memories. And so we can say about the spiritual fasting:

The fasting of the body is a chance to nourish the spirit.

And the fasting that is accompanied by God’s fellowship turns into a spiritual enjoyment so that the one who is fasting would tire if he stops his fasting. This is what used to happen to the fathers who lived in solitude and to the monks, to whom fasting became a spiritual nourishment that made their hearts rejoice and brought them closer to God.

E E E

+ Fasting also has to be linked to repentance.

Because what is important in spirituality is the pure heart and not just the hungry body. It also makes our fasting acceptable to God and we feel that we benefit from it.

And so says the divine inspiration in the Book of Joel: “Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15). Fasting then is a holy period. And how could it be holy without repentance?! And what we acquire from feelings of repentance during fasting should remain with us.

E E E

+ Fasting is also accompanied by humility before God.

And so the Prophet David said: “I humbled myself with fasting” (Ps 35:13). And in the fasting of the people of Ninevah, they put on sack cloth and sat in ashes (Jon 3). And as the body is crushed by fasting, so the spirit should be crushed. Therefore, fasting is accompanied by prostrations. It is not enough for your body to bend, but also for your spirit to bend. As the Prophet David said: “My soul clings to the dust” (Ps 119:25). He did not only say: “My head clings to the dust” ...

In this humility, the soul asks for God's mercy, for itself and for others. The soul also confesses its sins and asks for forgiveness. And as the Prophet Joel said: "... Rend your heart, and not your garment; Return to the Lord your God" (Joel 2:13).

E E E

+ Fasting is also accompanied by almsgiving.

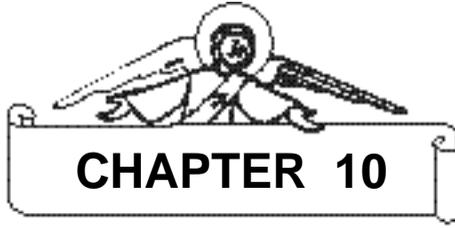
The one who asks for God's mercy during fasting must have mercy on others and give alms. How beautiful is the Lord's saying about this in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "*Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness.... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?*" (Is 58:6,7).

E E E

The topic of fasting and its spirituality is long.

If you want more details, you can read a book I published for you under the title "Spirituality of Fasting." May God grant us all a holy fast that brings our spirits closer to Him, that we may feel the enjoyment of fasting.

E E E



GIVING

**AND
GOD'S PARTNERSHIP IN OUR POSSESSIONS**

GIVING

One of the beautiful phrases said about this topic is that of St Paul the Apostle to the elders of the Church in Ephesus, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus Christ who said:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Why did the Lord bless giving? No doubt, for many reasons:

BLESSING THE ACT OF GIVING

In giving, you share what you have with others. But it is more appropriate to say that you share your money with God Himself. Not only when you give to the church, but also when you give to those who are in need. Didn't the Lord say: *“... I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and You visited me”*. And He explained this in all His sayings about those who are in need:

“... In as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Mt 25:35-40).

Then what you give to one of the needy, you actually give to the Lord Himself. Whether it was food for the hungry, clothes to the naked... or just a visit to a sick person or to one in prison... This visit is also a type of giving, where you give love and sharing of feelings. It is giving of the soul and not of the body...

E E E

Giving then is the sharing of yourself with others.

The one who is withdrawn within himself keeps away from others, does not want to take or give. A selfish person likes to always take but not to give. A sociable person takes and gives. But the selfless giver is the one who always gives without taking. He puts others before himself..

He always takes from himself to give to others.

That is how the virtue of giving is always mixed with self-denial. In it, the self is always placed last while others are given priority. One does not think about his personal needs and requirements but gives preference to others. That is what the widow of Zarephath did at the time of the famine when she offered the Prophet Elijah the handful of flour and the little oil that she had. Therefore God greatly blessed her home (1 Kings 17:11-19).

E E E

The widow who put two mites into the treasury did the same. The Lord blessed her more than anybody else. Why? Because:

“She out of her poverty has put in all the livelihood that she had” (Lk 21:4).

And it was not only out of her poverty, but also because *“she put in all the livelihood that she had,”* everything that she possessed. We see here the same principle that we mentioned before, which is giving preference to others... Let others live even if I die. I will satisfy others needs, or help in satisfying what they need, no matter how much I myself am in need. In the Lord's blessing of this widow, we notice an important rule, which is:

That God looks at the depth of giving and not at its amount.

Among the features of this depth is the linking of giving to love. You love to give and you love the one you give to. Therefore the giving which benefits you spiritually is that which you give without discontent, complaint or compulsion, but with all feelings of satisfaction and joy. As the Bible said:

“God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

You love the one who is in need and urged by this love, you give him. Your love shows in your treatment when you give. The needy would feel your love and that would make him more joyful than his joy with what he took. He takes from you feelings before he takes material things. And he would feel that your giving is not a type of formality but a sentiment and contribution. You too when you give him would not be less joyful, like the mother who rejoices when she gives to her son, a joy that precedes the giving, and accompanies it because of her son's joy..

The Bible gives us an example of the people's joy when they were giving to build the temple during the time of the Prophet David.

The Bible says : “ *then the people rejoiced, for they had offered willingly, because with a loyal heart they gave to the Lord; and King David also rejoiced greatly.*” David then blessed the Lord before all the congregation and said: “ *But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You... O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have prepared to build You a house for Your holy name is from Your hand, and is all Your own*” (1 Chron 29:9,14,16).

E E E

It is a beautiful phrase “Of Your own we have given You.”

We own nothing. Each of us should say what the Righteous Job said: “ *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there*” (Job 1:21). And all that we possess at present, we also say about it with Job: “ *The Lord gave*”, and with David, we say to the Lord: “ *Of Your own and all is for You.*” Therefore it is good for us, every time we give to the Lord, to say: “ *Of Your own we have given You.*”

E E E

Truly, it is humility from God who is Almighty and infinite, to take from us.

He is giving us a chance to express our feelings. Exactly like the father who accepts a gift from his son, so the son expresses his feelings of love towards his father, while the money paid for the gift is also from his father. As if he is saying to him: “ *Of Your own we have given You*” ... God, the source of all richness, “ *The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness*” (Ps 24:1). God who satisfies all the living from His goodness, due to His love, He likes us to share with Him in looking after His house and His children, and He rewards us for that...

E E E

He gives us what we give Him and rewards us when we give... And in all that, He trains us to give.

He gives us life and existence. Then He says to us: in every week that I give you, give Me one day which is called “*The day of the Lord*”... And I will give you possessions and in all that I give you, give Me the tithes... And in all that, we say to Him : Lord, of Your own we have given You... You who gave us and to those whom we have given. You also gave us the love of giving.

E E E

Give me health and strength and with them I will serve You.

Whenever I get tired in serving You and whenever I give in serving You, I do not ever consider that I have given anything... Because health is from You, strength is from You, the love to serve is also from You. Even I, myself, am from You. It was possible not to be born or to exist. You gave me this existence by which I serve You, and gave me the word to speak... In all my service and my labour for You, I say: “Of Your own we have given You.”

HOW DO YOU GIVE?

Therefore in all this, giving should be without glory.

Whether it be by the tongue, by the heart, by feelings from inside or by the thoughts... As if you have given from what is yours!!... I remember here the depth of the words that the Apostle said: “*What do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?*” (1 Cor 4:7)... And if all that we give, we received from God, would not our glory in giving be in vain?!

E E E

Therefore God commanded that giving should be in secret.

He said: “*Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*” And He said, “... *Your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly*” (Mt 6:1,4). And God does not mean to keep your deed secret from people only, but from yourself also. Do not count and check on how much you have given, but:

“Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mt 6:3).

Do not mention how much you have given and do not recall how much you have given... Do not count your gifts but try to forget them all, lest the devil of vain glory fights you with that and also lest you receive your rewards on earth by glorifying yourself...

E E E

It was told about St Milania at the beginning of her spiritual life, before becoming a nun, that she used to offer much to the monasteries and to the monks... It happened once that she put five hundred pieces of gold in a bag and gave it to Abba Bemwah to give to the monks who lived in the inner wilderness. The saint called his disciple, gave him the bag without opening it and asked him to distribute the contents among these monks... Here, Milania said: “But you have not opened it, father, to know how much is in it?” The saint replied: “If you have given this money to God, then God knows how much it is” ... And this was a lesson for Milania.

E E E

Another quality of giving is liberality.

The Bible says: “*He who gives, with liberality*” (Rom 12:8). He also commands us to be: “*Ready to give, willing to share*” (1 Tim 6:18), and says: “*He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully*” (2 Cor 9:6), and the Lord justifies that by saying: “*For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you*” (Lk 6:38).

E E E

Then it is not enough to give, but to be generous in giving.

We have a beautiful example in the Bible about Araunah the Jebusite, when King David wanted to buy the threshing-floor from him to build an altar to the Lord. Araunah rejoiced for that and wanted to donate the threshing-floor and whatever was on it. So he said to David: “*Let my lord the King take and offer up whatever seems good to him. Look, here are oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing implements and the yokes of the oxen for wood*” (2 Sam 24:22). Araunah offered everything to the King, but David said: “*No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with*

that which costs me nothing” ... Each of them wanted to pay cheerfully, joyfully and with liberality...

Let us remember the story of our father Abraham when three men visited him:

He said to our mother Sarah: “Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes.” And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender, good calf, gave it to a young man and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them” (Gen 18:6-8) ... Do three men need three measures of meal... and a complete calf, adding to that butter and milk? Or was it the liberality of our father Abraham?... It was his joy with the guests and he wanted for all to eat with them, his men and the shepherds to eat from the calf and the freshly baked bread...

E E E

With the same liberality in giving, so God treats us...

And so He said: “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be put into your bosom” (Lk 6:38). And also: “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse... and prove me now in this,” Says the Lord of hosts: “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it...” (Mal 3:10). It was also said: “Honour the Lord with your possessions, and with the first-fruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine” (Prov 3:9).

E E E

One of the verses that also call to liberality in giving is the Lord’s saying:

“...Go, sell what you have and give to the poor” (Mt 19:21).

And also: “Sell what you have and give alms” (Lk 12:33). The Lord said: “Give to everyone who asks of you, and from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back” (Lk 6:30). The Bible also says: “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none, and he who has food, let him do likewise” (Lk 3:11).

E E E

OTHER BEAUTIFUL QUALITIES OF GIVING:

+ To give without being asked to do so. This is what our Father in heaven does for us. This is also what the father and the mother do with their children. Have sensitivity towards people's needs without waiting for them to ask you.

+ Do not postpone giving. Delay may cause harm to those who are in need. The Bible says about this: *"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so. Do not say to your neighbour "Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it, when you have it with you" (Prov 3:27,28).*

E E E

+ **Train yourself to give from the best that you have.**

Many do not give except the old and torn clothes and what is out of order or rejected by them... They are in fact giving these to Christ, as well as to the poor. Would that in all this we remember the offerings of Cain and Abel, as it was said that: *"Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering" (Gen 4:4).* *"Of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat"* means of the best of what he had.

EXAMPLES

History gave us amazing examples of giving.

St Abraam, the Bishop of Fayoum and St Sarabamoun of the veil, the Bishop of Manoufia, and their many amazing stories of giving. Now however, time does not permit us to discuss their lives... and St John the Merciful who sold everything and gave to the poor. Then when there was nothing else to sell, he sold himself as a slave and gave the money paid for him to the poor. St Serapion also gave his tunic to a poor man who was naked, then sold his Bible also and gave the price to the poor. When his disciple asked him about that, he answered him saying: *"The Bible said to me go and sell all you have and give the poor. So I sold it, as there was nothing else in my possession."*

During the Apostolic period, it was said : *“All who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need”* (Acts 4:34,35).

Where is our giving then, compared to them!

GOD’S SHARING IN YOUR POSSESSIONS

God shares in your possessions to bless them, not to take from them, as He is the source of all riches. He shares in your possessions to make you share in the good deeds that He is capable of doing on His own. But, because of His humility, He loves to see good deeds being done by you.

E E E

The most ancient sharing of God in what He gave man was the sacrifices and burnt offerings.

It is a very old matter, older than the written law. It is even since the creation of man. The Bible tells us about the offering of the Righteous Abel and says: *“Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering”* (Gen 4:4). Maybe Abel took the idea of bringing sacrifices and burnt offerings from his father, Adam, who took it from God Himself. We see here how the tradition of bringing sacrifices and burnt offerings to God started, with the symbolism that they contained.

E E E

And so the idea of sacrifices and burnt-offerings continued in the human race.

We hear about the burnt offerings offered by our father Noah on an altar, after he got out of the ark. And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma (Gen 8:20-21). And we hear about the burnt offerings of our father Abraham (Gen 12), and the burnt offerings of the Righteous Job (Job 1:5) ... And the sacrifices and burnt offerings were organised in the written law, in the Book of Leviticus at the time of the Prophet Moses, and it contained much symbolism.

And although Christ's sacrifice replaced the lamb of the Passover (Ex 12) and replaced the burnt offering, the sin offering and the trespass offering, the peace offering was used to express thanks and gratitude to God from which the person offering it eats with his friends; many still offer it to this day in a manner that differs from that of the Old Testament in many details...

THE TITHES

We move to another point which is the tithes...

The tithes also are more ancient than the written law. We hear about our father Jacob when he saw a ladder set up on the earth and its top reached to heaven, that he said: *"If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God... And of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You"* (Gen 28:20-22).

Maybe Jacob took the idea of the tithes from his grandfather Abraham, who offered the tithes to Melchizedek the priest of God Most High: *"And he gave Him a tithe of all"* (Gen 14:20).

E E E

Then God commanded the tithes in the law at the time of the Prophet Moses.

He said: *"You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year"* (Deut 14:22) *"And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord..."* (Lev 27:30), *"You may not eat within your gates the tithe of your grain or your new wine or your oil"* (Deut 12:17) and (Deut 14:23), *"And concerning the tithe of the herd or the flock, of whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord"* (Lev 27:32). **Generally, the tax collector summed up all this in one sentence: "I give tithes of all that I possess"** (Lk 18:12), **or the saying of our father Jacob, the father of fathers: "And of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You"** (Gen 28:22).

Even the priest who took the tithes from the people, used to offer its tithe to the Lord, a heave offering to the Lord. And the tithe of the tithes was called heaves (Num 18:26,28).

The one who did not pay the tithes was considered to have robbed God.

That was openly said in the Book of Malachi, when the Lord said: “*Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings... Bring all the tithes into the storehouse,... And prove Me now in this,*” says the Lord of hosts, “*if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it*” (Mal 3:8-10).

E E E

What you do not pay in tithes is unrighteous mammon.

Because you have robbed the Lord, were unjust to the church and the poor, the righteous owners of this money... Therefore the Lord said: “*Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon*” (Lk 16:9). Those friends are the poor who pray for you, so: “*They may receive you into everlasting habitations.*”

Even if you were in need, pay the tithes, taking the widow who put in all her livelihood as a model (Lk 21:4). Maybe some will ask here:

E E E

May we give to our relatives from the tithes?!

Yes, give them if they are in need. As the Apostle said: “*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*” (1 Tim 5:8)... Then give them, but do not give to them alone. Lest it is thought that it is just a duty or blood-relation that made you pay. If you paid the whole to them, then you would have withheld the due of the poor who deserve it too or who may be in more need for it than relatives...

E E E

All the money that you receive, set aside its tithe for the Lord...

Whether it was your fixed pay or other additional resources, or unexpected gains. Whether it is cash or in assets that you know their value then you pay the tithe... Set aside the tithe of all, put it separately in a box especially for the Lord. Do not fall in the error where many do fall: as they spend from their income first, then check to see if there was anything left for God or not!! They put the Lord's due at the end of the list, or they may even forget it! Or they may consider their other expenses under the title of necessities. As for the Lord's due, it is considered as luxuries or left over! As for you, set it aside from your income immediately, just like other official deductions.

E E E

You should know that the tithes are the minimum in giving.

It comes under the Jewish giving and not the Christian. As for Christianity, the Bible says: "*Give to him who asks you*" (Mt 5:42). The Bible also says: "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven*" (Mt 6:19,20). Then you should not be satisfied with paying the tithes, without giving those who are in need while you have what you treasure.

E E E

When you pay the tithes, do not say that you have given God His due!! Or that He has received all His dues.

Then your conscience will relax, and you will close your heart to the requests of the needy! As the Bible says: "*Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard*" (Prov 21:13)... Let love be firm in your heart, and do not deal with God, the church or the poor mathematically, without a heart!! And whenever you get a chance to do a merciful deed, do not close your heart, using the excuse that you have already paid the tithes...

E E E

In your giving, elevate yourself above the level of the tax collector...

As the Lord Jesus Christ, to Him is the glory, said: *“Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Mt 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees, no doubt, used to pay the tithes. Then you must pay more. Do not be a lawyer taking the law literally. But in your giving, deal with your heart and your love. Do not be neglectful of the poor with your possessions. Remember the Lord’s saying: *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”* (Mt 19:21), and when you hear these words, do not go away sorrowfully like the young man who was first to hear them...

But the tithes are not all God’s sharing in your possessions.

There is also the commandment of the firstlings:

THE FIRSTLINGS

We hear about the firstlings in the offering of the righteous Abel who: *“Brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat”* (Gen 4:4), which meant the best he had. That was of course before the written Law... But in the Law of Moses, God organised the firstlings in everything, whether man or animal or fruits of the trees. About the first-born, the Lord said:

“Sanctify to Me all the first-born, whatever opens the womb both of man and animal; it is Mine” (Ex 13:2).

And the first-born among all the people used to be for the Lord to serve Him, till they were replaced by the house of Levi and the house of Aaron. They are symbolically and spiritually the first-born... Even after choosing the house of Levi, the first-born kept its place as holy to the Lord, and a sacrifice was offered for him in the Temple. And so it was said about the Lord Jesus Christ that on the fortieth day of His birth: *“They brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord”* (Lk 2:22,23).

E E E

What then do we offer the Lord of our children?!

Does not giving include children also?! If not every first-born, then at least some of the children... If not the only son, like our father Abraham when he took his only son Isaac to offer him, then at least one of the sons... whether he be required for the Lord as a priest, a monk or for the service of consecration, whatever it may be...

Offering the firstlings is stronger than the tithes...

Because it is all one possesses at that time, as when Hannah offered her only son Samuel to the Lord, and also John the Baptist, the only son of Zacharias and Elizabeth. The Lord Jesus Christ is also the first-born of the Virgin and also her only son, not only at the time of His birth, but all through her life... The first-born has his great status and has his joy. Offering him to the Lord means giving priority to the Lord over oneself, in respect of the giver.

E E E

The commandment of the first-born was not restricted to the first-born son, but included all that is first-born. So the Lord asked for the first of :

The seed of the land and the fruits of the trees.

And He said about that: *“The first of the first-fruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God” (Ex 23:19), and, “You shall bring a sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf” (Lev 23:10), and, “You shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground... put it in a basket... And you shall go to the one who is the priest in those days... Then you shall set it before the Lord your God” (Deut 26:2-10).*

E E E

The Lord also commanded concerning the first-born of the animals.

He said: *“You shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb, that is, every firstling that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the Lord’s. But every firstling of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb” (Ex 13:12,13)... “All that open the womb are Mine, and every male firstling among your live-stock, whether ox or sheep. But the firstling of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb” (Ex 34:19).*

And also the first of the ground meal...

Even when they used to bake the ground meal for bread, it was said in the Book of Ezekiel: *“You shall give to the priest the first of your ground meal, to cause a blessing to rest on your house”* (Ezek 44:30).

And so the Lord takes from the firstlings of all that you possess. You make the Lord first in everything. He is the first to take from your trees, your land, your sheep and your cattle and also the first in your children. So the Lord blesses all. And even when the Levites replaced the first-born, it was required to offer a sacrifice for their first-born to redeem him, so the Lord said: *“And all the first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem”* (Ex 13:13,15).

E E E

How do we then fulfil the commandment of the firstling these days?

Not all people's possessions are of the produce of land, sheep or cattle. In our present time:

+ You give to the Lord the first pay that you receive from your job, preferably the first month of your pay.

E E E

+ You also offer the Lord your first pay rise and the first increase when you are promoted and the first allowance and the first pay for over-time work. For a doctor, that could be, for example, the fees of the first patient or the first surgery. For the teacher, it is the first private lesson... And so on with all the other vocations.

Adding to the tithes and the firstlings, God has another sharing in your possessions, that is:

God's right in vows:

THE VOWS

The vows are different from the tithes and the firstlings. It is your promise before God, in case something good is being granted to you by God, or support in a specific manner or being saved from a hardship. One of the most beautiful and comprehensive sayings about the vows in the Bible is what is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 5, as it includes:

Paying the vow without delay and without change...

It was said: "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed. It is better not to vow than to vow and not pay" (Eccles 5:4,5). "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God..., nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?" (Eccles 5:2,6).

E E E

When we talk about vows, we mean either a vow about money or a vow about life...

Do not rush and make a vow to God about something that later on you might not be able to carry out. For example, do not vow your virginity while in a state of spiritual excitement then realize that you are unable to live this life. Instead of the vow, offer your desire as a prayer. Say to Him: "Lord, this is my heart's desire. If You see that it is good and possible for me, grant it and give me the strength to carry it out. Let it be according to Your will in my life."

Another point in God's sharing in your possessions is:

THE OBLATIONS

The oblations, by which you come closer to God:

The church remembers all these gifts in the "Prayer for the Oblations"... Those who present to the church the wine, the oils, the incense, the coverings of the altar, the books of the readings and vessels of the altar, and asks

the Lord to give them things incorruptible in place of things corruptible, heavenly in place of earthly, eternal in place of temporal, those in abundance or those in scarcity. The church even prays for “those who desire to offer to You and have none,” which means those who have the intention of offering.

E E E

So, do you have a share in the Prayer for the Oblations?

Some, for example, like to offer pure flour for the “Offertory”. Some ask first about what the church needs then offer them, instead of people offering tens of Prospharines (altar’s veil) while the church needs other items that are necessary. Or others offer many icons that the church has no need of and with no artistic harmony.

E E E

The Bible presents to us other examples of caring about the poor.

For example, the Bible says: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger” (Lev 23:22), and the Bible also says: “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove” (Ex 23:10,11). How do we apply this spiritual principle in non-agricultural life?...

E E E

What sums up the words of the Bible about giving is the Lord’s saying: **“None shall appear before Me empty” (Ex 23:15) and (Ex 34:20).**



THE SERVICE

AND ITS SUCCESSFUL CONDITIONS

THE SERVICE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SERVICE AND ITS GENERALITY

Service is not restricted to those who work in the field of education, but it is necessary for all and of benefit to all. It is considered as one of the general spiritual means. It is a general spiritual principle that is required from all the faithful: the old and the young, the married and the celibate. The saying of the Bible is sufficient:

“ To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas 4:17).

Sins are not only what is negative in one’s actions, but the lack of doing good is considered a sin. Therefore the spiritual person is the one who always does good, as an image of God whom we describe as “*The Beneficent*”, and as it was said about the Lord Jesus Christ that He: “*Went about doing good*” (Acts 10:38). Are you like that?

E E E

The spiritual person does not live only for himself...

There is a well known saying: “He who lives only for himself never lived.” Then in the service, you must get out of your shell to meet others. You must get out of the “I” sphere to spread your love among all. You feel that your message in life is to do good to all those whom God send in your way. The more you gain experience in life and broadness in the heart, the circle of your service will get bigger. It would not be limited to your house and your family, and not only to your relatives, neighbours, friends and colleagues, but it will reach to a range that is wider and wider...

E E E

The service, in its essence, is an expression of love that is stored in the heart towards God and people...

It is required from each faithful to love God with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his might. This is a commandment since the Old Testa-

ment (Deut 6:5). And it was repeated in the New Testament also (Mt 22:37-39). Love is not just a theoretical thing, because the Bible says: *“Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth”* (1 Jn 3:18). Practical love shows in the service. Because you love God, you express your love for Him by spreading the word about His Kingdom, by serving the church and serving the Word. And because you love people, you serve them by all means that are available for you and useful for them...

E E E

The important thing is that the element of sacrifice and giving is present in everyone’s life, everyone.

And so you find that the service has given you a spiritual virtue, that is love, giving and sacrificing. By that, you would have benefited from your service... You may serve the poor and find that due to their need, some of them turned to lying, stealing or cheating to obtain what they need. Do not get weary of them or give up. Do not get annoyed and let your reaction leads you to treat them badly... Maybe God allowed you to meet those people to learn patience and long-suffering and also wisdom in your way of acting. Or maybe to serve them spiritually and help them to get rid of such bad behaviour. Then you would have gained spiritual virtues while serving them...

TYPES OF SERVICE

There are various types of service: some are social and others are spiritual...

About the spiritual service, the Bible says: *“He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins”* (Jas 5:20). Also: *“Take heed to yourself and save both yourself and those who hear you”* (1 Tim. 4:16). Then it is a service that concerns saving the soul. How glorious!! And the Bible also says: *“...Receiving the end of your faith - the salvation of your souls”* (1 Pet 1:9).

E E E

As for the social service and because of its sublimity, God made it a scale for judgment in the last day:

As He says to those on His right side:” ... *For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me” (Mt 25 : 35-40). Then He explained this by saying: “... Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” Considering all those needy people exactly as Himself...*

And the Bible also says: “ *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas 1:27).*

E E E

We have seen types of services that include the whole society and have exceeded to an international level...

World organizations such as the Red Cross and ambulance societies, world organizations for aid and the like, they offer help to those who are in need wherever they are, whether in countries where natural disasters, such as floods occurred, or military disasters or famines. Relief comes to them from far away countries that maybe they never knew before and never had any relationships with them. But it is the humanitarian feeling and the love towards all that automatically rushes to help those who are in need.

E E E

These secular world organizations have no relation to the church to do such things, so how much more appropriate for us ?

Your are required to do something for your brother, the human being. God gave us the example of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 30-37) who helped a man on the road, although there was animosity between his people and this man’s people. But it is the love that does not know discrimination.

Nobody should say to himself : “ I am not called for service”! No, you are called to love all and to express this love by serving. As for the educational service, it needs you to be sent by the church (Rom 10:15), because not everyone is suitable for preaching and teaching...

E E E

Then there are many types of service and each one can serve according to the grace given to him from God.

Nobody can ever say that God did not grant him any abilities for service. He must be able to do something... The serving person, I mean the one who has the spirit of service, you find him serving in all fields: at home, at the work place or at school, at church, on the road... with everyone and everywhere; he is a giver and whoever meets him has to receive something from his giving.

E E E

Ask yourself then : what is the share of others in my life?

Consecration needs a call. As for the general service, it needs only love and the desire of the heart to serve others. This in itself is a call from the heart... I remember once that a surgeon asked me what could he do for others. I said to him : At least one tenth of the fees you receive for the operations that you perform should be given to the poor and the needy. And so God would have a share in your knowledge and in your work. And you express your love for the poor by reducing your fees when you charge them...

THE SPIRITUAL BENEFITS OF THE SERVICE

The service strengthens the spirituality of the servant. And the spirituality of the servant strengthens the service. By serving, you give and take.

Therefore we consider service as one of the spiritual means. As you give those whom you serve love from your heart, your heart will also be satisfied by this service. There is no doubt that the one who serves the orphans, the sick, the disabled, the poor or the needy in general, his heart is enriched by deep feelings that will elevate his soul and make him in no need of the world's vain emotions. The feeling that one acquires from facing pain and suffering is stronger than the feelings offered by places of entertainment and pleasure. And so you take from your service much more than what you give. Just the mere feeling that you made somebody happy, or you solved a problem, will make your heart overflow with deep feelings.

There are other types of service that are not educational.

I used to know a colleague from Sunday School who was about forty five years old. He had no class to teach but his service was visiting and solving people's problems before they get complicated, and sometimes he would solve complicated problems. He used to find great happiness in this service. He used to see God's hand in all the problems that God solved through him. He used to tell us about God's work; a very enjoyable, spiritual talk...

E E E

Service benefits your life in giving you spiritual experiences.

It is a great honour for you in the service to work with God. As St. Paul the Apostle said about himself and his fellow Apostles: "*We are God's fellow workers*" (1Cor. 3:9). In the service, you work with God, and God works with you, works in you and works through you. In all that, you see wonders from His work and you feel how God's hand interferes and solves all complicated matters, or He may open for you closed doors, or offer you solutions so that you will then glorify God in all His works. As for those who do not serve, they deprive themselves from all these experiences and from God's fellowship in the service..

E E E

The service also benefits you by being a school for prayer:

The more you serve, the more you feel that there are matters that need divine help, so you train yourself to pray for them. You also pray that God may bless the work, enter it and not leave you alone. You also pray that your service may be spiritual and not just an activity or a routine, or mere social work. You also pray much with the ones you serve with, and so you train yourself in the work of prayer.

E E E

The service generally elevates one into a spiritual atmosphere.

There is no doubt that service offers much benefit, as one finds himself in a spiritual atmosphere with spiritual persons, committed to spiritual principles and values. In the service, one may also find himself committed to

meetings and Masses. He finds himself also committed to a special, spiritual life in order to be a role model to those whom he serves, or at least not to be a stumbling block for them. But he repeats the saying of the Bible:

“And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth” (Jn 17:19).

The Lord Jesus Christ said this phrase with a specific meaning, and we too repeat this phrase to mean that our lives may be sanctified in the service, and to be a role model for those whom we serve, in all good deeds.

E E E

You may say to God in your prayer: those people, O Lord, need me to be always in touch with You for their sake. Grant me to have this relationship with You. Care for me and care for them, protect me and protect them. Would that I become a good bridge through which they reach You and in my heart I carry them before You...

In this way you will find that the service has created for you a special relationship with God, and this relationship becomes a necessity for the service. Gradually, the service also becomes a necessity that will always connect you to God. Therefore I can say :

E E E

That most of those who left the service, have become lukewarm.

They lost the warmth that they used to have while serving. No prayer, no depth and no commitment... They also lost the holy zeal that they had before and the social virtues that accompanied the service.

The service also very often gives greater opportunity to read the Holy Bible and gives spiritual knowledge in general with what accompanies this of contemplation and commentary, especially for those who serve a spiritual or educational service.

E E E

And so the growth of spiritual knowledge and maybe religious knowledge in many aspects, become among the benefits of the service.

This knowledge comes from many sources: such as reading, whether reading the Holy Bible or lives of the saints or spiritual books. It also comes from attending religious meetings concerning the service... And also from what one hears in Masses from chapters of the Bible and also from sermons.

This knowledge contributes to one's practical and spiritual exercises. And if he leaves the service, he may leave all these blessings ...

E E E

Nevertheless, one may gain other types of knowledge.

He will become aware of people's problems and learn many details about the human nature and its feelings, and also learn about the devils' wars and enticements.

He will also learn the practical solutions, if his service is the type that deals also with solving people's internal and external problems.

If he fails to handle this, he will at least see the part played by the spiritual guides or the priests in these problems and how they solve them. His experiences in life, accordingly, will increase.

UNSEEN SERVICE

There are types of people who would serve servants, and offer their facilities for the service.

Many women used to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and : *"Provided for Him from their substance"* (Lk 8:3). At the outset of the first church, Mariam, the mother of St. Mark the Apostle, left her home so that it may become the first church where the faithful would meet together and pray, St Paul the Apostle also told us about Priscilla and Aquila that : *"The church that was in their house"* (Rom 16:5), and also of the church that was in the house of Nymphas (Col 4:15). History also described for us the many services done for the churches and the monasteries by the two well known benefactors : Ibrahim El Gohary and his brother Girgis...

Also some people may not serve the villages but donate a car to take the servants to these villages.

Or they may prepare a place to be used for the service or buy Bibles, Gospels, Agpias, pictures, prizes or whatever the priest distributes from crosses and icons, or they may help in the administrative work of meetings such as writing the names of those who are present, prepare lists of those who are absent so that they may be visited later on and such services that seem simple but are necessary and of benefit.

E E E

And there are those who serve by praying for the meetings and their fruitfulness, and for problems and their solution.

Their prayers which are said in secret may be of greater benefit than those which are heard. The important thing, my brother, is to serve....

CONDITIONS OF THE SUCCESSFUL SERVICE

THEY PERISHED IN THE SERVICE

Not each service is a spiritual means. There are those who perished in the field of service and fell and were troubled ...

For example, the older son who did not rejoice for the return of his lost brother. He refused to enter the house and when his father came out and pleaded with him, he said to his father: *“ Lo these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends...”* (Lk 1: 28-30).

He was in the service for many years, but still his will was different from his father’s will and his heart towards his brother was not pure.

The sayings to the angels of the seven churches are another example.

Although they were shepherds of churches, the Lord said to one of them, *“ You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”* (Rev 3:1) . **And said to another,** *“ Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot , I will spew you out of my mouth”* (Rev 3:16) . **And to a third , the Lord said,** *“You have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent”* (Rev 2:4,5).

Others who were among the helpers of St Paul the Apostle, completely perished.

Those about whom he said: *“For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction... and whose glory is in their shame - who set their mind on earthly things,”* (Phil 3:18-19). Maybe one of those was Demas who forsook St. Paul, *“having loved this present world”* (2Tim 4:10). All these were lost, and others have fallen and repented.

The service was not the cause of their loss, but they forgot their spirituality in the field of the service, so they fell and some perished...

What then are the conditions of the spiritual service?

LOVE:

You love God, love the kingdom and love the people.

Love brings forth love. But if you serve and annoyance and weariness are involved, or if you feel obliged to give and serve without feeling joy, then do you think you will benefit spiritually ?!

It happens sometimes that some people can start the service without having the correct spiritual goal. But when they see the needs of those whom they serve and notice their pain and hardships, their hearts are touched by kindness and sympathy, so they'll serve them with a loving heart. This love is a result of the service. Love is intermingled with their service and hence teaches them to serve with feeling.

Some serve the poor and find that those who are in need turn to lying and stealing. Their requests involve tiring insistence and raised voice... So in turn, servants sometimes become fed up with them. They may even send them away and treat them cruelly...

As for the loving heart, it endures their troubles...

Because love bears all things (1Cor 13:7).

So if you serve and feel that your nerves begin to tire, and you become angry and impatient with those who stir trouble, you should know that there is something inside you that needs to be treated and that the service has uncovered in you a defect that needs correcting...

Do not say that the fault is in the service, but it is in you...

Say to yourself: I must be more tolerant, more patient and bearing of others, no matter how wrong they are. My endurance will be an example for them to follow.

Or you may say: service showed me that those who are poor are not only in need of money to cover their needs but they are also in need of spiritual work to lead them to repentance, to know God and to behave correctly... And so you start a spiritual service with them so they'll benefit both materially and spiritually...

The same thing with problem students or those who do not keep order during meetings...

Thus, spiritual service requires endurance.

ENDURANCE

Each service has troubles and each servant, as the Apostle said, will receive his own reward according to his own labour (1Cor 3:8). Our fathers the Apostles laboured much in their service. St Paul the Apostle says about his service and those who laboured with him: *“But in all things we commend ourselves ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in sleeplessness, in fastings... By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report...”* (2Cor 6:4-8).

He also says: *“We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2Cor 4:8,9). And the Apostle endured many hardships, *“In labours more abundant...”*, but he endured all things and gained glorious crowns because of his endurance.

And as we refer to St Paul the Apostle, we also refer to many personalities in the Bible.

For example, the suffering endured by St John the Evangelist during his exile on the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation : "I, John, both your brother and companion in tribulation" (Rev 1:9), and also the Prophet Daniel who was cast into the den of lions (Dan 6), and the three youths who were cast into the burning fiery furnace (Dan 3). Yet, we should not forget the saying of the Lord Jesus Christ to His Disciples: "Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves... They will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. And you will be brought before governors and kings for My sake... And you will be hated by all for My name's sake" (Mt 10:12-22). The Apostles endured all things in patience.

E E E

Perseverance gives the servant spiritual strength from God.

It gives him strength in hope so he would not despair. It also strengthens him in hope, believing that God will intervene and solve everything. He also acquires another virtue, which is to 'wait on the Lord', as the Psalmist said: "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say!" (Ps 27:17). He also described his deep spiritual experience: "My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning" (Ps 130). Another point which characterizes the successful service is :

Spirituality and depth.

SPIRITUALITY OF THE SERVICE

For many people, the service is just an activity that consumes all their energy; they are like a moving flame of production and work, but with no spirit. Such a service does not benefit you spiritually because God has no share in it... It is quite common for the dynamic activity to hinder the spiritual work.

You will find, for example, a Sunday School supervisor who has great energy in compiling programs and preparation books, arranging for servants meetings, youth-group meetings, looking after the library and the club, summer activities... But you ask him about his spiritual life, and he will respond that he has no time for it! His spiritual life is lukewarm and consequently his service becomes lukewarm. It becomes a giant collection of organizations, without spirit. It does not benefit his life and it does not benefit others.

The service turns into purely administrative matters.

This may also happen in areas of social service, the service of orphanages, old people's homes, strangers and church committees... And in this administrative work, there are many discussions, arguments, noise and shouting. There could also be competition and partiality. The spirit of the servant gets lost in all this because the service did not contain any spiritual characteristics. God was not a partner in it. Prayer and applying the word of God did not take place.

Try then in any service you are involved in to keep away from routine and formalities and bring God into it. Let it have spiritual characteristics... Even in administrative tasks, let them have "the spirituality of administration." This phrase needs a special topic to explain its details...

There is a big difference between a man of God when he administers and men of the world in their administration.

E E E

Therefore, in your service, keep away from spiritual errors.

Keep away from ordering and prohibiting. Have the spirit of humility and good manners when addressing the young just as when you address the old. No matter how much authority you are given in the service, do not talk to people in a superior manner or become haughty. Do not let the spirit of control and domination enter your heart. Remember the Lord's saying: *"...He who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt 23:11). And also, "...The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).*

Therefore do not let the service make you lose your gentleness and humility.

If you find that the tone of your voice is getting loud and sharp in the service, beware and examine yourself. If you find that you talk about yourself and the great tasks that you do, beware also, lest the devil of vain glory gathers all that you have sowed in the service. If you look with despise to another, comparing his standard with yours, then you should know that pride has entered within you... Place before you the Apostle's saying, *"Take heed to*

yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim 4:16). Always tell yourself, I did not enter the service to fall into new sins but to grow spiritually!

E E E

In the service, beware also of the Ego

Do not use the service as a means to boost your ego and dignity. You are a servant of the Lord, and so together with John the Baptist say, “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (Jn 3:30). And also what was said in the Psalm, “*Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory*” (Ps 115:1).

Beware of the Lord’s warning to the irresponsible shepherds who feed themselves (Ezek 34:8-10), and let your aim in the service be the kingdom of God and the salvation of people... and not the puffing up of your ego and your dignity.

E E E

The service that is of benefit spiritually is the one in which you forget the word “I” ...

The servant who forgets the word “I” also forgets his own comfort and his time. He does not seek praise or dignity and he does not mourn for the lack of them. He also prefers others to himself in all the matters of the service, as the Apostle said: “*...In honour giving preference to one another*” (Rom 12:10). If the servant does this, he will be loved by all and at the same time, he will not lose his humility in the service...

E E E

The service that is of benefit spiritually is also the one that is far from policies.

Many enter the service and after a while, neglect themselves and their spirituality and involve themselves in managing the service. They then clash with the church, the priest, the committee and all those who are involved. They start talking about the behaviour of others; what they do - the right and the wrong - but they tend to concentrate on the wrong! This in turn results in their continuous gossiping about others, judging and defaming others, and ultimately destroying others.

Yet the amazing thing is that they do all this in the disguise of defending the truth!

And in the name of defending the truth they fall into countless sins. Quarrels and divisions can also occur as a result, and in order to win their wars, they try to gain as many as possible on their side, to join in on the judgment and defamation. The atmosphere of the service becomes troubled, losing its spirituality, losing the spirit of love and losing gentleness and simplicity! Is all this for the sake of defending the truth?! Yet in all this, does anyone stop to ask himself : do I have the right to say that? Or, am I creating a spiritual atmosphere in which to defend the truth?! How many were lost and caused others to become lost, as a result of this negligence in “the service”!!

E E E

To benefit spiritually, pay more attention to the positives and not to the negatives in your service.

Place before yourself the proverb that says: “Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle.” Be an example for all and be certain that this, in itself, is a message and a service... You must know that positive work is constructive and will always remain. No one will criticize you for it, and in this way you will do harm to no one. As for being occupied with negative thoughts in the service, they will trouble your thoughts and your spirit and may lead you to the way of destruction and cause you to fall into many sins.

E E E

It is then better for you not to serve, than to serve in a manner that causes you to fall into sin!

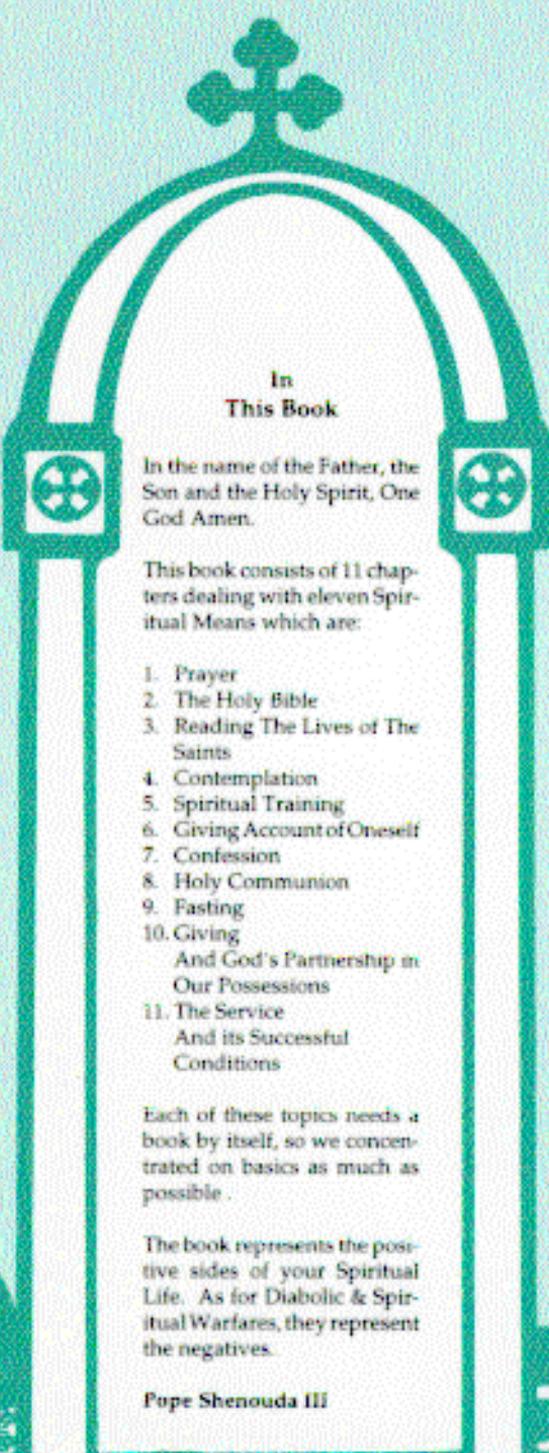
For in this case, you will become a stumbling-block for others, and the Lord said: “*Woe to him through whom offences come*” (Lk 17:1).

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**In
This Book**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God Amen.

This book consists of 11 chapters dealing with eleven Spiritual Means which are:

1. Prayer
2. The Holy Bible
3. Reading The Lives of The Saints
4. Contemplation
5. Spiritual Training
6. Giving Account of Oneself
7. Confession
8. Holy Communion
9. Fasting
10. Giving
And God's Partnership in
Our Possessions
11. The Service
And its Successful
Conditions

Each of these topics needs a book by itself, so we concentrated on basics as much as possible.

The book represents the positive sides of your Spiritual Life. As for Diabolic & Spiritual Warfare, they represent the negatives.

Pope Shenouda III